

Parental involvement in the musical education of violin students: Suzuki and ‘traditional’ approaches compared

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Abstract

This article investigates parental involvement in the musical education of violin students and the changing role of the parents’ across the learning process. Two contexts were compared, one emphasising the Suzuki methodology and the other a ‘traditional’ approach. Students learning ‘traditionally’ are typically taught note reading from the beginning of instruction, and sit independent music examinations. Two case studies were carried out involving a student and parent from each approach, with recollections spanning up to fifteen years. Despite parental involvement in ‘traditional’ approaches not being defined, the parents interviewed undertook a very similar role regardless of approach. Results appear to indicate that across all approaches, students and their parents may benefit from proactive parental involvement in musical learning.

Key words: Instrumental tuition, parental involvement, music learning.

Australian Journal of Music Education 2009:1, 19-28

Parental involvement in instrumental music education has long been common practice. Throughout history, highly regarded musicians, such as Mozart, received guidance and support from their parents in their musical pursuits (Wagner, 1998). Some approaches to learning, in particular, the Suzuki Method, specifically use the known benefits of parental involvement to their advantage, making it an integral aspect of the method (Peterson, 2001).

The Suzuki Method was devised by Dr Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) in Japan. The method is based on the understanding that most young children learn to speak their mother tongue simply by interacting with the people in their environment, and in particular their parents. Suzuki used this natural learning pattern as the foundation of the Suzuki Method of violin instruction, which is also dubbed the ‘mother tongue method.’ The parenting role prescribed by the Suzuki Method is individualised to parent and child. However,

there are some crucial points to which all Suzuki parents are expected to adhere: parents must recognise their integral responsibility in the music-learning process, and wholehearted involvement is absolutely necessary (Johnstone, 2000). The parent is expected to attend all the child’s lessons, taking notes on what and how to practise. In the home environment, listening to the Suzuki recordings is considered vital to the success of the method. It is also important that the parent supports the child regularly during practice. This supervision may decrease as the child matures.

In ‘traditional’ learning the parents’ role is not defined or stipulated by any authoritative organisation as it is in the Suzuki Method, and will depend greatly on individual teachers and parents as to the level of parental involvement in each case. It is commonly understood that students learning ‘traditionally’ in a Western paradigm of instrumental instruction are taught note reading from the

beginning of instruction (which is delayed in the Suzuki Method) and sit for music examinations. Various examination boards exist, with the most common in Australia being the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB).

This research investigates the parental involvement of Suzuki (defined) compared to 'traditional' (not defined) learning in the musical education of violin students. The article also explores how the parents' role changes over the developmental learning process. Significant principles for proactive parental involvement in the musical education of violin students are outlined forming a summary of responses by participants in this study.

The research context

Previous research on parental involvement in instrumental music has shown that a strong relationship exists between musical achievement and parental attitudes toward music and musical involvement with the child (Brand, 1986; Davidson, Howe, Moore & Sloboda, 1996; Howe & Sloboda, 1991a, b; Kemp, 1996; Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Sosniak, 1985a, b; Zdzinski 1992, 1996). According to Davidson, Howe and Sloboda, (1997) "it appears that parents do have a crucial influence on their child's progress in musical skill acquisition" (p. 198).

However, despite this plethora of information, research which critically explores parental involvement within the Suzuki Method does not exist. This is surprising considering the parent is one of the key components of the method. Generally, information available on the method is written by expert teachers or parents and therefore cannot be deemed unbiased.

It could be argued that a minimal level of parental support is beneficial in all cases if a child is to learn a musical instrument. Parents are generally responsible for:

- paying for instrumental music lessons
- buying and maintaining the instrument
- organising the logistics of the child's lessons
- allowing the child to practise at home

- not making derogatory comments about the quality of the child's playing
- being prepared to accompany the child to activities outside of school hours (Hallam, 1998, p. 10; Tait, 1998, p. 5).

In addition to this basic support, "parents of the most successful young musicians have been shown to invest enormous personal energy in their children's musical learning" (Davidson & Pitts, 2001, p. 161). This article is concerned with this 'additional' level of parental involvement.

It appears most parents realise that practice is an activity which requires support (Davidson et al., 1996; Howe & Sloboda, 1991b; Tait, 1998). Parents need not have any musical background to provide beneficial supervision of practice. Barry (1992) concluded that the presence of an adult encourages adherence to practice routines assigned by a teacher. However, in research undertaken by Sheila Nelson (1985) in her Tower Hamlets String Project she recognised that "the requirement of the active involvement of a parent was not easy to ensure" (Swanwick & Jarvis, 1990, p. 8). Parents of accomplished young musicians tend to be adamant about practice, yet cautious to avoid being overbearing (Duke, Flowers & Wolfe, 1997; Howe & Sloboda, 1991b). Research confirms that parents of most successful students draw a link between lessons and practice (Davidson et al., 1996; Howe & Sloboda 1991a, b; Sosniak, 1985a, b, 1990). Many parents sat in on lessons and took notes so they could understand what was required of the practice for the week. Those parents who were not present in lessons still spoke regularly with the teacher and received feedback on their child's progress (Howe & Sloboda, 1991b).

Studies suggest that, as students get older, parental involvement in music makes less of a difference in the child's musical achievement but has a greater influence on attitudes and motivation toward music (Kemp, 1982, 1995; Zdzinski, 1996; 2004). This affects whether a child will continue musical study. Davidson et al. (1996) discovered "the effect of parental involvement is greatest at the earliest stages of learning, assisting the child to

establish self-structured working patterns.” (p. 400). Some Suzuki literature also deals with the parents’ role change over the learning process (Clemson, 1995; Dorman, 1995; Kendall, 1959; Peak, 1996; Way, 1995). This literature notes that teenagers still often need to be reminded to practise, and may need a small amount of guidance during practice. Suzuki students possibly have their parents attend lessons until they are much older than ‘traditional’ students, and may also be more involved in practice.

The studies mentioned in this section have shown that parents do have a large impact on their children’s education. However, little research has compared parental involvement in ‘traditional’ versus Suzuki approaches of instrumental learning. Descriptive data is intended to provide insights into this issue.

Research methodology

According to Howe and Sloboda (1991a), descriptive data is necessary in the field of musical learning before explanatory theories can be formulated about various facets of becoming a musician, including parental involvement. In order to facilitate descriptive data, one-hour semi-structured interviews were used. There were four participants: one university violin student who learnt through the Suzuki Method, and the parent who was most involved in the musical learning; and another university violin student who learnt ‘traditionally’ but also had parental involvement, and their parent. Participants were found through advertising at a Melbourne tertiary music institution. The students were considered successful as they have studied music at a tertiary level. Each participant was interviewed by the researcher separately at their homes. Questions focused around the following areas, which were identical to a study by Davidson et al. (1996):

- (i) “Parental involvement in lessons at different ages.
- (ii) Parents’ role in the initiation of practice.
- (iii) Parental involvement in supervising the child’s practice at different ages.

- (iv-v) Parents’ own involvement in music.
- (vi) Parents’ own change in musical involvement over the music learning period of the child” (p. 402).

This research was chosen as a basis because it was a sizeable study which investigated many different aspects of parental involvement in instrumental music.

The interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in which transcripts of semi-structured interviews are “subjected to a systematic textual analysis, with emergent themes and like concepts being grouped and categorised” (Davidson & Borthwick, 2002, p. 126), and then expanded to more general themes across cases. IPA research “typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants” (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 103).

The interview data was transcribed by the author to gain familiarity with the participants’ responses. Once the interviews were transcribed, each participant’s data was made into a separate table with three columns: the interview transcript, summary and themes. The first level of analysis was then conducted through re-reading, summarising and identifying emergent themes. After this process was carried out for each interview, the transcript summaries were then sorted into subject areas as indicated by subheadings used in the findings section of this article. This was due to the fact that the interviews, being semi-structured in nature, were not neatly divided into themes, but often followed tangents and revisited topics. Therefore, for ease of analysis, summaries were collated into general themes omitting repetition of material and placed in two columns, one with responses from the Suzuki parent and student, and the other for the ‘traditional’ parent and student. This allowed for a comparison to be made between Suzuki and ‘traditional’ responses in order to illuminate similarities and differences.

Although case-study research, including IPA employed here, cannot hope to answer general

questions, it may provide many insights. Direct quotations from the interviews will be used to illustrate the emergent themes under discussion. The majority of descriptive comments used here are those of the parents. However, the students also provided insights and were comparable in content to the parents' remarks.

The participants

Coincidentally, all four participants in this study proved to be very similar in family upbringing and learning circumstances. Firstly, all subjects are female. Both the Suzuki and 'traditional' student began learning the violin at four years of age, with both students instigating the initial request to learn. Both students attended elite girls' secondary schools, and grew up and still reside in their family homes in adjacent suburbs in Melbourne's inner east. The parent who was interviewed in each case was the mother as they were the most involved in their children's musical education. Both mothers in the study are secondary school teachers and have very similar musical backgrounds, learning the piano for only a few years in their youth, gaining rudimentary music skills.

Findings

Parents and musical environment

Both mothers made a conscious effort to play 'classical' music around their children, particularly when they were young. The 'traditional' student recalls being surrounded by only 'classical' music until the age of six or seven. The 'traditional' mother's listening has not decreased over the learning period. However, the proportion of 'classical' music is now less, with more eclectic musical tastes prevailing. Music is still played at dinner time, as it was when the student was younger. In the Suzuki household, music was also played during dinner and was often a Suzuki repertoire CD. Whilst listening patterns initially increased over the learning period, they have since

decreased. The Suzuki mother also identifies her own increased knowledge through having music playing around the children.

At the time of interviewing, both students took more responsibility for their listening. The Suzuki student "is in the habit of putting on things that she wants to listen to, you know, so it will often be something that she's learning" (Suzuki mother). Interestingly, the 'traditional' student used recordings of current repertoire even early in the learning process. This is not a feature of 'traditional' learning approaches that usually emphasise note reading over aural recognition. "If I'm learning a piece I find it easier if I listen to it beforehand or when I was little, umm you know, them [the teacher] playing something" ('traditional' student).

Parents and teachers

The Suzuki mother in this study previously had older children learning the piano 'traditionally'. This teacher suggested that the mother attend the lessons of these children. When her youngest child, the participant in this research, began learning the violin at a private music studio, the mother assumed the same role. The Suzuki teacher did specify what the mother's role entailed, which was to attend lessons, take notes, supervise practice and encourage her daughter. On the other hand, the 'traditional' private teacher did not specify the mother's role. The teacher "just engaged very personally" with the student and "didn't give me a specific role" ('traditional' mother).

In some respects, the teacher also influences the amount of parental involvement possible, particularly in lessons. This was more notable with the 'traditional' teacher. When the 'traditional' student reached about 13 years of age, the teacher stated that it was no longer necessary for the mother to attend lessons. The mother agreed, "I began to sort of think, well, I don't need to be here any more." The teacher continued communicating with the mother: "if she thought there was something that I needed to know ... she would make a point of letting me know that. ... We had a very nice, friendly relationship so

there was that sort of role but not actually during the class time" ('traditional' mother).

There was another change of 'traditional' teacher in late secondary school, in which the new teacher requested no communication with the mother or presence in lessons: "I had no contact at all, so my role ... really was over. This particular teacher didn't actually want to communicate with me. He felt that it was a relationship between he [sic] and [the student]. ... He was fairly specific about there not really being a role for me at that point" ('traditional' mother). The mother's role was deliberately restricted by the teacher.

Parents and lessons

Both mothers were involved in lessons at the start of the learning process. Their roles at this stage were fairly similar. They attended every lesson, which were held at private music studios, and observed what was happening. In both approaches, the teacher made sure that the mother understood the content of the lesson so they could guide the student at home during practice. The major difference in roles at lessons in the beginning of the learning process was in taking notes. The Suzuki mother actively took very detailed notes when the student first began learning. As the student was not reading music at this stage, the mother would also write on the music which sat on her knee during lessons. In contrast, the 'traditional' mother did not take notes during lessons, rather that was the responsibility of the teacher. "I just watched. The teacher did always write things down though so that I could reinforce anything that needed reinforcing ... as the lesson proceeded she wrote in it [a notebook] each time." The 'traditional' mother then took the book home to refer to during practice.

There was a change over time in the lesson involvement of the mothers across both approaches, some of which was due to the teacher's decisions as mentioned before. Eventually, both the Suzuki and 'traditional' mothers did not attend lessons. For the Suzuki mother this was due to circumstances beyond her control as lessons were held at the student's school from Year 7 to the

end of Year 9. When lessons were again scheduled after school with a change to a private teacher, the mother began attending lessons as before, again taking notes: "just like I always used to." At this stage the student would read the notes taken by the mother during lessons. The 'traditional' mother did not attend lessons again after she stopped, when the student was about 13 years of age.

In the Suzuki family, the role of the mother in lessons began to change when the student was eight or nine years old because the student began reading music: "and that's when it changed because then I would be taking more general sort of notes, not so many specific things" (Suzuki mother). During the time from Year 7 when the Suzuki mother was not attending lessons as they were held during school, she still asked her daughter about the lessons. The mother also continued to attend weekly group lessons, which were held outside of school hours, even though she was not attending the private lessons. She kept in contact with the teacher about progress at this time, as was the case with the 'traditional' mother and the second teacher.

There was also a change in the 'traditional' mother's involvement in lessons. During primary school her involvement was "just making sure she was organised and had her things there" ('traditional' mother). When there was a change of private studio teacher in late primary school, the mother "just sort of sat there," before eventually ceasing to attend lessons. "You feel you need to be there but there was no need for that so I stopped doing that in about Year 8" ('traditional' mother). However, the mother would still come into the lesson if she arrived early to collect her daughter.

As previously stated, there was no contact at all with the 'traditional' teacher and the mother during late secondary school, which gave the student a greater sense of responsibility in the learning process. In hindsight the mother felt that, "I think it was a very useful thing to have more contact. I mean I can understand why there might have been less towards the end, but ... it would have been useful to have known more fully what was going on."

Parents and initiating practice

Both mothers commented that, at the beginning of the learning period, encouraging the students to practise was never an issue. The 'traditional' mother states that the student "would always willingly get started." The Suzuki mother recalls: "When she first started learning, 'cause she was not at school yet, she used to want to play it quite often." The Suzuki mother would initiate the practice if it had not been done, making sure it was done daily but not at a set time. In contrast, the 'traditional' family had a more regimented routine: "I tried to make a specific time of day when that [practice] would happen and a place" ('traditional' mother). Each mother mentioned that, although the students did not mind practice being initiated, they felt that practice sessions were never as long as they should have been throughout the learning process.

The mothers' role in initiating practice did not change dramatically over the learning period, with both mothers still initiating practice right up until university. However, the initiation became more of a reminder as the students matured. "Right up to the end of her school days I think I was saying 'have you practised? [or ...] don't forget to practise'" (Suzuki mother). Even when the 'traditional' student had a set practice time in the morning before school during primary school, practice would still need to be initiated by the mother. During secondary school there was no set practice time: "it was a bit more variable then, it was more a case of 'have you done any practice today?' So she was sort of setting the time that she wanted to do it. But ... I think that she needed reminding still or just a little." This parental initiation or reminder to practise occurred even when the mothers were not attending lessons at various stages during secondary schooling.

Parents and supervising practice

The mothers' role in supervising practice at the start of the learning period was important to the students' progress, as a four year old has not yet

learnt correct practice procedure. The 'traditional' mother states: "they were fairly heavily supervised initially," and the Suzuki mother notes: "when she first started I would tell her everything to do." The Suzuki mother describes her early supervising role as including reminding the student of the fingerings when she was not yet reading music. The mother's detailed notes and explanations from the teacher during lessons assisted her in supervising the practice at home: "She'd [the teacher] be explaining to me and showing me on the music and I used to write the fingers on and all the notes on the book, on her actual music 'cause, and that was really for me, 'cause she wasn't reading it. I was reading it when she was practising." The 'traditional' teacher also specified in lessons what needed to be watched in practice.

Both mothers had fairly comparable role changes concerning supervising practice. The Suzuki mother stopped being in the same room during practice sessions when the student was eight or nine years old as she began learning to read. However, the transition was gradual as the music was not always on the stand and often alternated between mother's knee and stand. As a result, the student gradually started practising alone, but with the mother supervising while making dinner by about the end of primary school. The Suzuki student recalls: "I was probably just practising myself, but with her kind of still yelling out stuff at me" from the kitchen. By that stage, the mother was not so familiar with the music so consequently, the mother's comments were more general. These comments during practice were equivalent to the more general notes taken in lessons after the student began reading.

When the Suzuki student was young, at the beginning of the learning process, she just trusted what her mother said and took her advice. As the student became older and took more responsibility for her practice, there was more discussion about the teacher's direction. When the 'traditional' mother stopped attending lessons she found

supervising practice more difficult, emphasising the link between lessons and practice. Consequently, the mother ceased supervising practice, however she maintained contact with the teacher: "Once she got to the stage that I wasn't in there [at lessons] anymore then that became much more difficult ... there was much less of a role really for me and she [student] was just increasingly taking responsibility" ('traditional' mother).

Discussion

Parents' role change over learning process

As discussed previously, the mothers' role changes considerably in different key areas over the learning process, which covered up to fifteen years. The data section examined the mothers' role in musical environment, teachers, lessons and practice. Davidson and Pitts (2001) concur, stating that parents of successful musicians were very involved through supervising practice, communicating with teachers, providing performance opportunities, and creating an appropriate environment for practising. Duke et al. (1997) and Howe and Sloboda (1991b) discovered that parents of successful musicians are adamant about practice, but try to avoid being overbearing. Barry (1992) found that simply having a parent or adult present is enough to encourage a child to practise effectively. The mothers in this research gradually gave their children more responsibility during practice sessions, but were still close by enough for the students to realise they were listening. They also gave feedback and directions to keep practice on track.

One of the parent's most important roles in the Suzuki Method is creating an optimal learning environment. This may be largely achieved through listening, which is noted as a vital aspect of the Suzuki Method. In this study, the Suzuki family did place a high priority on listening, but interestingly, so did the 'traditional' family. The Suzuki literature also notes that adolescents still often need to be reminded to practise, and may need a small amount

of guidance during practice. This observation corresponds with the findings of this study, which found that students of both approaches needed reminders to practise until tertiary study in music. Mothers provided feedback during or after practice throughout the learning process. However, comments became more general particularly when mothers had not attended lessons, and were unaware of specific tasks set. Translating weekly targets into daily practice routines may not come easily to children. Therefore, it is important that parents attend lessons early in the learning period, as was observed in this study. Parents need to comprehend what the teacher requires in order to help structure effective practice. Davidson et al. (1996) found that parents of the most successful children were those who attended at least some lessons, and also provided support or supervision during practice sessions.

Many studies, as discussed earlier, have confirmed that parents of successful students perceive a link between lessons and practice, with parents attending lessons and taking notes in order to understand what was required for the week's practice. Howe and Sloboda (1991b) found that even parents who were not present in lessons still regularly communicated with the teacher, receiving feedback on their child's progress. The mothers in this study fitted this mould, understanding the association between lessons and practice and still communicating with teachers when not attending lessons to monitor progress and set practice tasks. The only exception was with the 'traditional' student's teacher during late secondary school who insisted on no communication with the mother, relying solely on the relationship between student and teacher. This was the decision of the teacher, not the mother.

Teachers' impact on parental involvement

Teachers may have an impact on the level of parental involvement over the course of the learning period.

Sloboda and Howe (1992) found that musical success is achieved through contributions of the child, teacher and parent, which also concurs with the fundamental tenets of the Suzuki Method. Although this study involves a very small subject sample, the results indicate that Suzuki students have their parents attending lessons until they are much older than 'traditional' students. There was a period when the Suzuki mother ceased attending lessons, but this was due to circumstances beyond her control when the lessons were held during school hours at the student's school. However, with a change of teacher and lesson time, the mother resumed attending

lessons until the student reached university. The 'traditional' mother stopped attending lessons when the student was in her early teens, and it was largely the mother's decision, although the teacher also made the suggestion. In contrast, as pointed out by Clemson (1995), Suzuki parents do not ask if they are no longer required at lessons. They assume that they will attend right through the learning process, as would have most likely been explained to them when their child first began lessons. Otherwise, this would contravene the Suzuki philosophy of the supreme importance of parental involvement throughout the learning period.

Significant principles for proactive parental involvement in the musical education of violin students.

Area of parental involvement	Significant principles
Musical background	Prior musical background is not necessary in order to assist the child, but the parent should be willing to increase their own knowledge and interest over the learning process.
Musical environment	<p>Try to create a home environment conducive to learning by surrounding the child with 'classical' music, especially when young.</p> <p>Provide the child with opportunities to perform, either at home, with organised concerts within the teacher's studio or other ensemble performances.</p> <p>It is important that the child is supported by the parent attending any of these performances, especially when young; attending other professional concerts may also provide inspiration.</p>
Teachers and lessons	<p>Create a social-support network with other students who learn an instrument, and their parents.</p> <p>Praise and encourage the child's achievements throughout the learning process, no matter how small.</p> <p>Attend the child's lessons especially when they first begin learning, in order to know what is expected of practice and to offer help at home. It may be unnecessary to attend lessons as the child matures, but regular communication with the teacher will keep the parent informed of progress.</p>
Initiating practice	<p>It is not uncommon for students to need prompting to initiate practice throughout the learning period.</p> <p>It is important that they practise regularly; and the child should be reminded positively if practice has not occurred.</p> <p>Establish from the beginning that practice is a daily occurrence; having a set time for practice may be useful.</p>
Supervising practice	<p>Children are generally more alert in the mornings, so practicing before school may be more effective.</p> <p>When the child first starts learning, supervising practice requires undivided attention, especially if they are very young; children do not yet know how to translate lesson content into practice routines.</p> <p>As the child matures, gradually give more responsibility to them for their practice sessions.</p>

The parenting role prescribed by the Suzuki Method is as individual as each child, and further to this, 'traditional' approaches do not have a defined level of parental involvement. Whilst the following significant principles (see table) cannot provide a definitive account of ways in which parents should be involved, it may prove helpful for prospective and current parents who have a child learning a musical instrument, regardless of the learning method. This in turn may assist the teachers with whom these parents interact. Outlined in the table opposite are ways in which parents may be actively involved in the learning process, as was illuminated through responses by participants in this study.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that 'traditional' approaches do not define the role of the parent, some parents instinctively assume a very similar role to that of Suzuki parents. In this small study generalisable conclusions cannot be drawn, but both parents interviewed placed a high importance on creating a home environment surrounded by music consistent to the style being studied, and provided ongoing support and encouragement. The relationship between parents and teachers was considered significant with parents realising they needed to know what the teacher was trying to achieve in order to help at home, signifying a link between lessons and practice.

In this study, the mothers' role changed over the learning process with the involvement greatest at the start. Both mothers attended lessons initially and heavily supervised practice. The Suzuki mother was still attending lessons until the student reached university, with the 'traditional' mother present only until the student's early teens. However, there was still communication between mother and teacher. The mothers' role in initiating practice did not change significantly, with both mothers reminding and checking on practice until university. Conversely, there was a greater change in supervising practice over the learning period. Practice went from entirely supervised to more

general, occasional comments as students became more independent.

In conclusion, it appears that parents do have an important role to play in the musical education of violin students and this role continues, in different ways, throughout the learning process. Students, and their parents, across all approaches, may benefit from proactive parental involvement in musical learning.

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