

A Question of Independence

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Has someone ever asked you a question that took you outside your normal thought process, away from your usual way of thinking about things, a question that really made you consider *how* and *why* you do things a certain way? Well, many years ago, in my days as a novice Suzuki Piano teacher, I encountered such a question. Truthfully, it was an amazingly transformative question, one that helped me to figure out the *how* and *why* elements of my own teaching approach. It was a question with an immense impact way back then. And it is a question that has continued to inform and inspire my instructional approach ever since. It might possibly be a question that you've encountered, that parents inquiring into the Suzuki Method might have brought forward – "So, just how long will it be before my child is able to practice on his own?"

When I encountered this question for the first time, it appeared this question was concerned with the parent's role in the Suzuki triangle. However, when I looked more deeply, I realized this question was all about my own role as teacher. More particularly, this question wanted to know how my teaching approach addressed the fundamental and highly relevant dynamics of student independence and ownership. Somehow, intuitively, I replied, "Well, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised to see how many things your child can do on his own even after the very first lesson!" And with that statement, my adventure into student independence and ownership was underway. What I'd like to do in this brief essay is to delve into independence and ownership in terms of three distinct but overlapping dimensions:

1. independence as embedded in a Western cultural context,
2. independence as trademark characteristic of the child's natural growth, and
3. independence as reflected in teachers' instructional gestures.

Independence in a Western cultural context

From 1983-86, I had the pleasure and honor of being a *kenkyusei* (teacher apprentice) under Dr. Suzuki's mentorship at the Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan. Of course, studying with Dr. Suzuki was an amazing experience, but I was also deeply affected by the experience of living in Japan and developing close relationships with my Japanese neighbors.

As a very visible foreigner living in Japan, it was interesting to note the subtle and not so subtle differences between the Asian cultural context and my own Western cultural heritage. One difference that stood out in particular was evident in Asian and Western

approaches to parenting. Asian parenting, it seemed to me, was noticeably indulgent and tolerant of children, whereas my own Western background seemed to emphasize self-determining children charged with taking responsibility for their own lives. It was intriguing to distinguish the overarching element of interdependence in Asian culture in contrast to the unmistakable Western preference for independence – a theme that cultural analyst Richard Nisbett took up in his book *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why*. Interestingly, Nisbett came up with conclusions similar to my own informal observations. Having conducted studies in North America and Asia, Nisbett's research revealed a recognizable difference between Asians and Westerners, especially in terms of the individual's sense of self. He concluded that Asians intrinsically consider the individual as a part of a larger whole, while Westerners view the individual as what Nisbett calls "a unitary free agent". It appears my informal conclusions were surprisingly accurate. Furthermore, in terms of cultural influence on my teaching approach, the Western preference for independence would have an immense impact on how I responded to "So, just how long will it be before my child is able to practice on his own?"

Responding to this question, I realized, would require going beyond parental commitment or the practicalities of scheduling in order to address the influence of cultural dynamics. As a Canadian living and working in a Western culture, the above question of challenged me to consider how my teaching approach would accommodate and appreciate Canadian parents' nonnegotiable connection to personal independence as an established social and Western cultural value. Teaching in the Canadian cultural context, I understood that my instructional approach would thrive best when it synchronized with the surrounding Western cultural landscape. So, I replied with confidence that the Western preference for independence would be present from the very first lesson. I made it clear that independence was an essential dynamic in my instructional approach, and parents enthusiastically joined the Suzuki process, confident in our shared understanding and language of independence. With independence and ownership as the cultural anchor for my teaching approach, I now turn to examine how independence and ownership play out as the natural dynamics of children's growth.

Independence in the child's natural growth

Philosophers, educators, and child experts have long identified independence as a natural dynamic in the child's growth from infancy to adulthood. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), to Maria Montessori (1870-1952) and

such current parenting professionals as Barbara Coloroso, child independence is acknowledged as an unavoidable and necessary element of every child's natural growth. We all recognize the two-year old' child's penchant for the word "No", the child's ongoing and irrepressible drive to do things "My way", the sulking and rebellious teenager's need to separate one's self from family and eventually from peers as the inevitable signs of child independence. When it comes to learning to play the piano, the challenge with children's natural inclination to independence is that frequently they take ownership of things that impede their mastery of the instrument, simple impediments like a low wrist position or stiff fingers. As a consequence, teachers face the dilemma of figuring out how to create an environment that recognizes children's independence and ownership without getting permanently stuck with a low wrist position or stiff fingers. Fortunately, in my own teaching approach, the solution to this dilemma came many years ago – on May 10, 1986 to be exact – the day following my graduation from the Suzuki Piano Teacher program at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute, the memorable day when I sat down with my esteemed mentor Dr. Shinichi Suzuki for his final advice.

Having been in Dr. Suzuki's presence nearly every day for three years, I eagerly joined him in his office for a conversation. Gradually, we moved through the comfort of predictable Japanese pleasantries until Dr. Suzuki shared his pivotal words of counsel. Eight transformative words would propel my teaching for the decades to come. "Teach only what the student wants to learn" was what he said.

It's impossible to miss the intent of Dr. Suzuki's statement. Clearly, he is a purposeful advocate of student independence and ownership, deliberately emphasizing "what the student wants to learn", rather than what the teacher wants to teach. His vision of teaching is that of a process in which teachers consider "what the student *wants*" before focusing on what the student *needs*. Concentrating teachers' efforts on the student, Dr. Suzuki sets up a powerful teaching strategy that prioritizes student *wants* over *needs*, that advocates student *wants* as the precursor or prerequisite to student *needs*.

In my own teaching approach, Suzuki's final words of advice have had great significance because his strategy inspired me to take on the role of recognizer and validator, rather than eliminator or restrictor. Recognizing and validating what my student *wants* to do confirms the trusted environment I need in order to introduce what I estimate the student *needs*. Consequently, my teaching approach always moves back and forth between recognizing and validating what

the student *wants*, followed by introducing or revisiting what the student *needs* in order to assist student mastery of the instrument. For example¹, when a student plays with a low wrist position, both student and I participate in recognizing and validating the performance for what it is – a performance with low wrist. It might even be the best low wrist position we've ever seen! Next, I introduce or revisit performance tools that facilitate a more appropriate wrist position, and once again, both student and I participate in the active recognition and validation of the performance. (Engaging the student in this evaluative process sows the seeds for future development of critical self-assessment.) Continuing with a one-point lesson format, I might treat every piece in exactly this same way – recognizing and validating the first line of every piece with a low wrist, followed by introducing or revisiting student performance of the entire piece with an appropriate wrist position. So, while in the course of one lesson I might encourage a low wrist for 20% of the time, more importantly, I recognize and validate the student's independence and ownership of an appropriate wrist position for the remaining 80%. Acquiring performance skills in this manner is simply a matter of mathematics – the skill receiving the most repetition being the skill with the greatest longevity. In this way, my teaching approach stimulates success not by eliminating student *wants*, but by constantly anchoring student *needs* in the dynamic of student *wants* including independence and ownership.

What I appreciate about Dr. Suzuki's insightful strategy is its resonant undercurrent of reciprocal trust – trust that I have in my students' independence and ownership, and trust that my students have in me. It means that I can witness a low wrist position or listen to an unpleasant tone without anxiety, because the natural consequences of a low wrist or an unpleasant tone are "not life-threatening, morally threatening, or unhealthy" as Barbara Coloroso so eloquently summarizes in her book *Kids Are Worth It*. Low wrist and unpleasant tone are unfortunate consequences of students' efforts in self-expression and my students can trust that I won't eliminate or restrict their self-expression in order to satisfy the demands of mastering piano performance. Rather, I'll continue to use students' *wants* as the trusted foundation for expansion of students' *needs*. I make the most of their natural independence and ownership in order to generate the repetitious practice along with the critical self-

¹ While this example is taken from a typical Suzuki Piano Volume 1 lesson, the teaching strategy of recognizing, validating, introducing, and revisiting has practical applicability for all aspects of musicianship including tonal, dynamics, beat, rhythmic, creative, and interpretive considerations no matter the level of study.

evaluation, creativity, and imagination necessary to develop tonal and technical consistency. As a teacher, it's all about being organized and ready to recognize, validate, introduce, and revisit student *wants*, *needs*, independence, and ownership. That said, I am completely aware that many teachers do not share my enthusiasm for student independence and ownership.

When it comes to children and their natural inclination for independence, there is widespread teacher diversity in acknowledging children's independence and ownership. Some teachers treat children's independence as a kind of distant destination, something that children will "eventually" be able to take on as their own. Others regard independence and ownership as things that can only be bestowed or granted by the teacher. Both of these perspectives seem to be embedded in teacher control and a fear that trusting students' independence or ownership will result in teachers' loss of control. Considering these perspectives, I wonder how the weight of teacher authority will avoid fostering students' blind complacency and disciplined obedience. Such perspectives seem to ignore the evidence that all children come with their own personal history of independence and ownership. By the time children begin piano lessons, it appears obvious to me that children are already equipped with an abundance of independence and ownership whether or not teachers choose to recognize or acknowledge students' existing knowledge and mastery of skills. Further empowering students' natural inclination for independence and ownership seems like the most meaningful and appropriate thing to do.

Looking at my own students upon their completion of Suzuki Piano Volume 1 and beyond, I am always impressed by the broad scope of their musical independence and ownership. Volume 1 students can easily demonstrate a plethora of postural and technical variations – slouching back, feet misaligned, standing on one foot, stiff fingers, boneless fingers, pinching, flicking, swiping, and most assuredly a competent and appropriate piano technique and body posture. In terms of tone production, they are masters of banging sound, caressing sound, full tone, small tone, legato, and staccato. They have a keen understanding of performing too fast, too slow, and just right. They even know what kind of performance I most enjoy, although I don't ever recall having indicated what that might be. By attending to the back and forth of students' *wants* and *needs*, students not only exercise a sophisticated level of musicianship, they also practice the requisite skill of self-evaluation. Because without critical evaluation, independence can easily turn into blinders that prevent students from recognizing where ownership is taking them.

In this way, student independence and ownership serve as powerful motivational drivers in supporting what the student *wants* to learn and what teachers know the student *needs* to learn. Students don't need to relinquish their own voice in order to make room for competent technique or tone production. And teachers don't need to downplay the importance of technique or tone production in order to accommodate the student's voice. It's not about throwing out independence because it might take students down an undesirable route, or putting off ownership to some "eventual" date. It's about acknowledging how independence and ownership, *wants* and *needs* are necessary companions on the journey of learning to play the piano. Having examined independence and ownership in terms of student *wants* and *needs*, in the next section I delve into the contribution of various "instructional gestures".

Independence through instructional gestures

When I talk about "instructional gestures", I'm referring to the interpersonal activities, actions, and language that teachers utilize in working with their students. The following exploration examines "instructional gestures" by comparing two similar but distinct scenarios. The goal is to consider how "instructional gestures" contribute to or deny independence and ownership. Have a look at the first set of scenarios –

Scenario One: The Suzuki Piano lesson time arrives. Student and teacher bow. The parent hands the student's notebook to the teacher. The parent sets the chair and appropriate footstool in place. Student slides onto the chair and parent gently prompts student's back. The student sits up straight and looks at the parent. The teacher plays the first piece...

Scenario Two: The Suzuki Piano lesson time arrives. Student and teacher bow. The student hands the notebook to the teacher while the parent gets settled. The student sets the chair and appropriate footstool in place. Student slides onto the chair and looks to the teacher. The teacher sits up straight and the student follows suit. The teacher plays the first piece...

Interestingly, both of these scenarios share three significant commonalities. Each scenario demonstrates student-centered, teacher-led, and parent-supported characteristics. Furthermore, I think it is fair to say that both scenarios would successfully develop competent student performance skills. Yet, when the lens of student independence and ownership is applied to these two scenarios, it is clear that Scenario Two trumps Scenario One. Scenario One is all about parent ownership, while Scenario Two is all about students

experiencing independence and ownership. Let's look at another aspect of the two scenarios –

Scenario One: The lesson continues... The teacher identifies student's successes and points for improvement, following up with appropriate assignments. The teacher explains to the parent the assignments' importance and asks the parent to follow through on the assignments at home.

Scenario Two: The lesson continues... The teacher identifies student's *wants* and *needs*. The teacher engages the student in the process of recognition, validation, introduction, and revisiting as appropriate. The teacher asks the student for permission to invite parental assistance with assignments. The teacher explains to the parent how assignments fit in with student's independence and ownership.

Again, the similarities between these two scenarios are significant. Both are attentive to student development and explaining to parents the rationale for assignments. However, Scenario One comes with an underlying expectation that parents have the primary task of making things work, not the teacher or student. Whereas in Scenario Two, both teacher and student have already worked out a strategy for making things work. Here, the empowered student takes ownership of the instructional activities. Student (and teacher) invites the parent to be part of the process, and the teacher encourages the parent to appreciate the "big picture" and the "details" of the student's independence and ownership. Now, have a look at a final set of scenarios –

Scenario One: The end of a Suzuki Piano lesson arrives. Student and teacher bow. The teacher reviews the lesson's key points for the parent, itemizing details as necessary. Teacher hands the student's notebook to the parent. The parent reminds the student to thank the teacher. Another student's lesson begins.

Scenario Two: The end of a Suzuki Piano lesson arrives. Student and teacher bow. The teacher reviews the lesson's key points for the student, revisiting the details as necessary and incorporating appropriate parental support. Teacher hands the student's notebook to the student as the student thanks the teacher. Another student's lesson begins.

Once again, Scenario Two trumps Scenario One, not because it guarantees a higher level of student performance but, because the Scenario Two "instructional gestures" support and empower the independent student's ongoing ownership of the learning process. Here, the teacher engages in active and deliberate interactions that solidify the relationship between teacher and student. In Scenario Two,

the lesson is all about appreciating students' contribution during the lesson and preparing them for what will happen next at home.

As an instructor, I have found that "instructional gestures" make me pay attention to how I attend to the student's *wants* and *needs*. For example, if the student sets the chair and footstool in an inappropriate position, do I tell the parent to fix the seating, or do I invite the student into the learning process? Either way, there will be an adjustment to the seating arrangement with important and relevant outcomes for the student's independence and ownership. As a consequence, my role as teacher isn't just to find the fastest way to get the parent to solve student challenges. My role is to find the most deliberate way for students to take ownership of their learning process in addition to how I want to involve parents as student advocates, rather than as teacher assistants. Does that mean lessons always go according to the student independence and ownership plan?

Unfortunately, lessons occasionally have a tendency to go in directions I least expect, like when I ask the student for permission to invite parental assistance and the student says, "No, I don't want any help." So, on the one hand, the student might be saying "I don't need any help". The student might be confident of handling things without assistance, so I respect the input. After all, there is nothing to lose by seeing what the student can independently accomplish in one week. On the other hand, the student might be saying "My Dad makes me nervous when he helps out". Here's a signal the parent might benefit from either the teacher's or student's input.

What about parents who interrupt Scenario Two lessons with questions or complaints? I have only one response when parents have something they need to share with me: listen attentively. Ultimately, whether or not the student shows up at the next lesson is the parent's decision, and while the student always receives my primary attention, I make it a practice never to underestimate parental concerns. Not listening to the parent's apprehensions is a good way to turn a minor misunderstanding into a major disturbance. Given that student, parent, and I are most likely to be involved with each other for a period of several years, asking parents to bottle up their concerns is self-destructive and completely contradictory to caring personal and professional relationships. Consequently, I pay attention to the parents of my students, knowing they play a vital role in their child's life and in the child's learning to play a musical instrument.

Closing thoughts

This exploration started with the question "So, just how long will it be before my child is able to practice on his own?" My goal, in the preceding pages, has been to respond by informally examining the

idea of student independence and ownership as related to cultural influence, as affected by student *wants* and *needs*, and embedded in “instructional gestures”. In closing, my hope is that something of what I’ve written here will resonate with teachers, will act as an invitation to meaningful reflection. I hope my thoughts will confirm, inspire, and empower the professional and personal ideologies teachers bring to their teaching and to their daily lives. Cheers!