

Pictures of Suzuki Parents

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The adage “A picture contains a thousand words” might be an appropriate starting point for this article. It’s a simple statement that reminds us how the vision of a single moment can capture a wealth of stories, meanings, conversations, and memories. In this article, I take a look at three memorable pictures – two that emerged early in my teaching career and one I brought home from my apprenticeship in Japan. These pictures have a lot to do with Suzuki parents, or rather, what it’s like to develop an understanding of who parents are and what they bring to their child’s learning to play a musical instrument. There are stories and conversations behind these pictures, questions and concerns that surfaced in the evolving interactions of my studio. What I’d like to do in this article is to consider the impact these pictures have had on my teaching – to figure out what these pictures have to say about teaching as the simultaneously familiar yet delightfully uncharted journey of musical exploration.

Picture #1: Parents are Busy – A month after her five-year old daughter Angela started lessons, Mrs. Johnson informed me that for health reasons she would be unable to attend Angela’s lessons for one year. So, every week, Angela’s cousin drove her to lessons, and Angela practiced on her own at home, completing Suzuki Piano Volume One while Mrs. Johnson’s health improved. Years later, Angela informed me that her Mom offered her an irresistible incentive for a five-year old – computer video games! Angela went on to finish all the Suzuki repertoire and RCM Grade 10 piano before heading off to university.

In another family, Mrs. Robinson’s heavy work schedule made it impossible to regularly attend her two children’s lessons. So, she enlisted her husband’s and the children’s Grandmother’s assistance. Every week, I never knew who would bring the children for their lessons – Mother, Father, or Grandmother? However, as the children’s piano teacher, I was the consistent conduit, making sure Mother, Father, and Grandmother could appreciate what was going on in the children’s lessons. It was an extraordinarily motivational situation for these students to have the support of three keenly interested individuals. After five years, I was deeply disappointed when Mrs. Robinson’s work transferred her to Northern Ontario.

Working with the Johnson and Robinson families, I learned a lot about teaching and learning. More specifically, I learned that parents could depend on me to create a successful and meaningful learning environment. Parents could rely on me to sensitively and practically respond to their family's potentials and limitations because I recognized clearly what was going on. I recognized that parents have multiple obligations. They have jobs, partner needs, laundry, making meals, housekeeping, planning for next year and the next ten years. While parents have astounding amounts of life experience to draw from in organizing their child's practice sessions and setting up the home musical environment, unfortunately at the same time, the distractions and conflicts of daily life can easily disrupt both practice sessions and a stimulating home musical environment. Consequently, parents may show up for lessons exhausted, with a million things on their minds.

Recognizing that parents are busy, I realized early in my Suzuki career that parental involvement in the Suzuki Method doesn't take place in some kind of idyllic fantasy setting. It takes place within the stability and instability of daily life complete with celebrations, setbacks, and more. As a result, I welcome real life parents into my studio, along with their strengths and obstacles – rather than attempting to mold them into a teacher's dream version of parents. Helping the Johnsons and Robinsons was all about figuring out what they needed from me, finding out what worked, and drawing from what was already there rather than trying to reconfigure their family structure. I remember asking myself – What would Dr. Suzuki do under such circumstances? Would he have turned away the Johnson and Robinson families? I rather doubt it. In working with these extraordinary families, I came to the realization that similar to Dr. Suzuki, I also possess the creativity, passion, and flexibility necessary to meet the Johnson's and Robinson's needs. In a certain sense, it feels as if these families came to me for lessons because they knew they could depend on me to make it work. And so, that's what I did – I made it work.

Picture #2: Parents have questions – While six-year old Christine is having her Suzuki Piano Volume 2 lesson, her father, Dr. Li, watches enthusiastically. Everything seems to be going as anticipated until Christine falters at Happy Farmer. Inexplicably, she cannot find the first note. Dr. Li turns with exasperation to the teacher, "She played the entire piece perfectly yesterday! What on earth is going on?"

Questions such as Dr. Li's are powerful, emotional, eruptive, and compelling interrogations that can completely consume any parent's thinking process. Often, such questions arrive much like a bolt of lightning and the ensuing roar of thunder – catching everyone off

guard. And yet, there is legitimacy to Dr. Li's question that deserves thoughtful and purposeful deliberation. So, what do I do with Dr. Li's question in the course of his child's lesson? How do I respond?

Through my teaching, I've come to understand that parents have a lot of questions concerning their child and their child's process of learning to play a musical instrument. And, on occasion, those questions flare up during the child's lesson. Parents want the best for their child, and because of the powerful emotional bond with their child, they often can't stop themselves from asking questions – hoping that the teacher's insight into such questions might shed light on what their child's learning process is all about. This means that I always respond to questions like Dr. Li's during my students' lessons, knowing that if I don't respond or if I put off my answer to a later date, Dr. Li will turn his question to the next available person – his six-year old daughter Christine. And it's not hard to imagine that during the car ride home following Christine's lesson, Dr. Li would waste no time before grilling his daughter on what had just happened during her lesson.

Basically, there is an entire classification of questions that plague educational processes like learning to play a musical instrument. Questions such as – “Why do people play perfectly at home and make mistakes during their lessons?” And, its counterpart – “Why do people play with mistakes at home and play perfectly at their lessons?” Questions that connect with the conundrum – “Why is it that people sometimes play perfectly without ever practicing, when on other occasions, they completely fall apart?” Admittedly, the answers to these questions are complex. That's why I'm not fond of answers such as “Don't worry. It happens to everybody.” Because dismissing the question is not an answer – and knowing that it happens to everyone is of little benefit when parents like Dr. Li are genuinely searching for a solution.

What I find extraordinary about the Suzuki Method is that Dr. Suzuki intuitively recognized the immense value of student, parent, and teacher coming together in the Suzuki triangle. In this interconnected way, students, parents, and teachers learn from each other. They support and contribute to each other's growth and understanding. That's why I welcome parents into the lesson environment and I respond to questions like Dr. Li's. It's also why I'm consistent in proactively addressing parents' concerns regarding note reading, technical development, ownership, and the transition from parent-assisted practice to independent student practice. I take the time to listen to and respond to parents' questions and concerns during their child's lessons – even though I know some Suzuki teachers will argue that parents should never interrupt the teacher's focus on students.

But, I disagree, especially given that a five-minute conversation can go a long way to working through parents' concerns. Does that mean I spend all my time talking to parents during their child's lessons? Not in the least! However, it does mean that because I pay attention to parents' questions and routinely anticipate their concerns, I am able to offer advice to parents as a natural occurrence, rather than as an intrusion into their child's lesson. In this way, parents' questions never get in the way of the child's learning process. More significantly, parents' questions contribute to everyone in the Suzuki triangle's understanding of what's involved in learning to play a musical instrument.

Picture #3: Parents in Kataoka Sensei's studio – During my three year apprenticeship at the Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan, I had the honor of observing Kataoka Sensei's teaching on a daily basis. One afternoon soon after my arrival in Japan, the following conversation took place when the Mother of one of Kataoka's newest students brought a tape recorder into the studio.

Kataoka Sensei: What's the tape recorder for?

Mother: I want to be sure we can follow your instructions to the letter when we get home.

Kataoka Sensei: That's admirable, but there's no need for you to worry. I'll make the notes for you to take home. And if by chance, there's anything missing, I'll be sure to include it next time. Anyway, you'll soon discover that I basically say the same thing week after week. So, just be here and appreciate your child.

Through generosity and thoughtfulness, Kataoka Sensei underscores the teacher's personal responsibility in setting up a trustful and empowering learning environment. As the teacher, Kataoka Sensei makes the notes for each of her students. She assures her student's Mother that parents can rely on teachers not just in today's lesson, but week after week.

It's easy to see why this conversation has remained in my memory for three decades because it reinforces just how much teachers need to understand what parents are going through. For me, it's a great example of how teachers provide guidance and support for parents, not by asking parents to adopt the teacher's viewpoint, or rattling off a list of tasks parents need to do. Rather, it's all about teachers taking the time to consider parents' viewpoint and responding in a way that acknowledges parents' well-intentioned worries and concerns. It's about recognizing the incredible impact parents' involvement – their attitude and their input – will have on their child's learning to play a musical instrument.

Joyful Journeys – Looking at these pictures of parents from my own career and from Kataoka Sensei’s studio, what stands for me out is how teaching within a Suzuki triangle environment isn’t just about teachers telling parents what to do. As a Suzuki teacher, my teaching begins with accepting parents as real life individuals whose involvement necessarily includes a wealth of experience and the unavoidable obstacles of daily living. Under such circumstances, the relationships I develop with parents are all about understanding, acknowledging, and welcoming parents for who they genuinely are, rather than trying to fit parents into some kind of cookie cutter format or idyllic version of parental involvement. I take on the role of recognizer and validator wherein it’s my responsibility to support and empower parents as their child’s most vocal and immediate music learning advocate. Accepting parents as real life genuine individuals is a liberating experience for me, because how parents participate in the Suzuki triangle is based on their own lives, priorities, and background – not mine, even though we may share innumerable commonalities.

Furthermore, these pictures of parents reveal how important it is for me to be the teacher parents can depend on – a teacher not bound by precast models or inflexible teaching regimes. As a consequence, it’s important for me to pay attention to what’s going on in my studio, to observe the interactions between parents and their children, to listen to parents, and acknowledge their concerns. Here, my responsibility is to open doors for parents, to gently introduce parents to meaningful ways of thinking about teaching and learning. It’s up to me to make personal connections with parents’ ideologies, attitudes, and philosophies – to link with the expansive resource that is what parents already know about life. In this respect, I become a conduit for generous and open explorations into the meaning of relationships, the fundamentals of learning, the impact of music, and more.

Ultimately, these pictures of parents remind me that my goal is to welcome parents into richly satisfying and joyful journeys of learning to play a musical instrument – much as Dr. Suzuki would – with the intention of building on what is already there. While recognizing at the same time, it’s my responsibility to figure out the best way to introduce, coax, and coach parents through the many necessary explorations, twists and turns, challenges and celebrations that come with their child’s learning to play a musical instrument. What I most treasure about working with parents is that this experience has pushed me and challenged me to question what I do as a teacher, as a musician, and as a human being. Knowing that parents depend on me has inspired me to look deeply, to reflect with purpose and criticality,

to avoid becoming complacent and unaware, and to uphold Dr. Suzuki's vision of the teacher as someone who embraces personal change and refinement without becoming blinded by self-inflation. To say the least, I feel honored, privileged, and grateful to parents for inviting me to join their family's journey with music. A journey that is simultaneously familiar yet completely and delightfully uncharted! Cheers!

Dr. Merlin B. Thompson is one of Canada's leading authorities on the Suzuki Piano Method. As the first Canadian to complete the three-year teacher apprenticeship program at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute (1983-1986), Merlin studied under the mentorship of Drs. Shinichi Suzuki and Haruko Kataoka — co-founders of the Suzuki Piano Method. Merlin has worked with hundreds of children, their parents, and teachers in workshops, institutes, conferences, established programs, and mentorships throughout Canada, U.S.A., Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. He was Artistic Director of the Mount Royal College Suzuki Piano Program in Calgary, Alberta from 1988-2004. His academic achievements include a Ph.D. in Education (University of Calgary), Maitre es Arts in Musicology (Université de Montréal), and Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance (University of Regina).