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Exploring Collaborative Insight through Reflective Partnership Teaching

By Merlin B. Thompson

Take a look at the following Suzuki Piano lesson formats for a student playing Twinkle Variations A, B, C, and Theme.

Format A: The Suzuki Piano Teacher hears the repertoire in order, guides the student on various instructional points, and assigns appropriate home practice strategies.

Format B: The Suzuki Piano Teacher hears the repertoire in a spontaneous order each week selecting from the student's favorite choice, student's most difficult piece, or teacher's choice. The teacher alternates between guiding the student on various instructional points and having the student lead the instructional points. Teacher and student collaborate on home practice strategies.

Each format may be used to generate successful student development. Each format has its own distinct selling points. What's remarkable about Format A and B is that they both come from my own teaching. Over my forty-year career, I've used both formats to assist students with successful musical development. That said, these days, I have a definite preference for Format B because there's something I want to incorporate in my teaching at all levels. It's what I refer to as Reflective Partnership Teaching - an instructional approach that builds on the collaborative input of students and teachers.

Defining Reflective Partnership Teaching

As a Suzuki teacher, how often have you experienced the following? You provide an exemplary musical demonstration. Your student responds with a nearly flawless replication. You ask the student to explain what's going on. The student replies with an explanation completely other than what you had in mind. It's a perplexing situation, to be sure, not all together uncommon that succinctly demonstrates the relevance of Reflective Partnership Teaching. When students reflect on what they've done and communicate with teachers, their reflections help teachers develop a sense of what they've achieved, how students might follow through on their insight, and what teachers might do to assist them with doing things better.

Reflective Partnership Teaching is an instructional approach that may be easily understood by defining each of its terms. *Reflection* is defined as the

process of giving serious thought to ideas and actions, making meaning from experience. We define *partnership* as the collaborative efforts of two or more people who cooperate to achieve mutual goals. *Teaching* may be defined in terms of the strategies teachers employ to fulfill learning in their students. Teaching is the fuel for learning. Put all the terms together and we get an instructional format wherein teachers and students are reflective partners in figuring out what's going on and what to do in order to successfully move forward. Reflective Partnership Teaching uses the combined insights of students and teachers to generate musical and personal progress.

How does it work?

The good news about Reflective Partnership Teaching is that it's not rocket science or brain surgery. It's based on simple principles like those I've noticed in constructive discussions with teacher colleagues. For example, when we get together, a colleague has a particular situation on their mind. Something has occurred in a lesson or series of lessons and they've grown concerned. They describe the situation. However, before other colleagues can respond, we ask for as much background information as possible. We also find out how our colleague has already responded. Only when we feel we've got a clear sense of what's going on - as in where our colleague is coming from and what our colleague is doing currently - do we offer our thoughts. We know it's easy to jump in or give advice prematurely without hearing the complete story. The more information we have, the more we understand our colleague's perspective, the more meaningful connections we're able to offer. What makes this model so productive? It's the framework of background information, current considerations, and future possibilities that pulls everything together - a practical example of how Reflective Partnership Teaching works.

Step One - background information. It all starts with teachers understanding where students are coming from. Because students' musical development is fluid and constantly evolving, they have good weeks and bad weeks. They experience plateaus, confusion, celebrations, forgetting, internalization - sometimes completely across everything they practice, sometimes with random inconsistencies, sometimes beautifully dependable. By asking students to share reflections on aspects of their home practice, teachers send an important message to students - that students' home practice isn't an unrelated or separate activity from their music lessons. Students' home practice is where the bulk of students' development takes place and during a week of practicing, lots can happen - forward, backwards, sideways, stuck in place. Also, by making inquiries or requests like "Please tell me about..." before each lesson component, teachers may gather the most up-to-date information. What students worked on and whether students have concerns or confidence is important for teachers to know about.

Step Two - current considerations. This step is all about teachers facilitating pre-performance goals and post-performance evaluations that match students' age and level of mastery. When students set goals, they indicate their readiness to incorporate developments from their home practice. On occasions when they're completely prepared, everyone may anticipate a confident performance. When students indicate they're not well-prepared, teachers may offer encouragement with statements like "Let's see how things turn out" or "Give it your best shot". They support students no matter the anticipated outcome.

With post-performance evaluations, teachers confirm how much they value students' reflective input - no matter how brief. When students point out the successes in their performances, this step takes the pressure off teachers to find glowing things to say about students. When students point out their failures, they open the door for teachers to assist with resolving rather than identifying failures. When students indicate they're not sure what's going on, teachers may offer encouragement with statements like "Thanks for that, I see where you're coming from" or "That's what you've got me for". Once again, the information gathered will influence how teachers proceed.

Step Three - future possibilities. Teachers combine students' reflections with their own reflections to determine meaningful followup. Teachers recognize that, no matter how elementary or incomplete, students have their own awareness, knowledge, and creativity. Teachers may also broaden students' viewpoints with various strategies from their own expertise. For example, when teachers collaborate with students on how to practice, teachers expand students' tool kit, while students learn which practice tools they may rely on and when those tools are appropriate. Or when teachers use students' knowledge and creativity as catalysts for expanding their musical boundaries, teachers may bring to life ideas that students have never heard of and offer them a musical encounter with something that brings students to life as well.

In this way, the steps involved in Reflective Partnership Teaching are more than just asking about students' practice at the beginning of their lesson and thinking that's enough. Teachers interweave students' efforts and awareness with their own expertise as a matter of looking back at what happened (home practice), examining what's currently going on (lesson activities), and brainstorming future directions (homework) in order to assist students in making meaningful musical progress.

Normal Interactions, Pressure, Apprehensions

For many Suzuki teachers, Reflective Partnership Teaching may genuinely fit with how they think teaching and learning should take place as this approach matches the way they normally interact with others. They are naturally

curious about other people's experiences, so of course, they initiate meaningful discussions that draw on students' thoughts. They also recognize that students have a lot going on behind the scenes and it's important for teachers to gather pertinent information on an ongoing basis. Music lessons are opportunities to share their expertise with students and, with equal importance, to make strong connections to students' own day-to-day personal and musical context.

Other Suzuki teachers may find their knowledge and expertise overshadow certain aspects of Reflective Partnership Teaching. With pressure from students, parents, colleagues, and themselves to constantly demonstrate their musical expertise as proof of their teacher status, they feel an enormous professional responsibility to do what they were trained to do - teach students. While they routinely engage their students in developing observation skills and setting goals (Steps Two and Three), these teachers may feel it's unnecessary to gather background information (Step One) into students' context because they assume everything is going according to the teacher's plan. They have confidence the strategies they assigned last week are sufficient in meeting students' needs, so they continue with the next step in their delivery without missing a beat. However, without the reflective connection to students' real life personal and musical experiences, a vital component is missing.

Some Suzuki teachers may feel apprehensive about Reflective Partnership Teaching. They worry about situations like - What if students reveal they haven't practiced consistently since their last lesson? Or what if students say they're having trouble with everything? Or conversely, what if students indicate everything is going well, after they just played a one-page piece with something wrong in every bar? To be sure, these situations may seem daunting - even undesirable - at first glance. Yet when we look more closely, we see that with this information teachers have a better sense of what to do next. Without it, our intentions may be severely compromised. Situations similar to those indicated above may be resolved by seeking out appropriate resources. For a more current understanding of practicing, I suggest Benedict Carey's book *How We Learn*. Based on recent neuroscience research, this book goes a long ways to dispel many long-held but not entirely accurate conclusions on practicing. (I guarantee teachers will think differently about practicing after reading this book.) As for students' impressions of what's going on - positive and negative - their awareness is a powerful starting point, not endpoint. I suggest Karin Hendrick's book *Compassionate Music Teaching*. Her chapter on empathy emphasizes listening, responding with kindness, and engaging students in dialogue - all aspects of safe learning environments where partnerships of teachers and students come together to contribute their reflective insights.

Concluding Thoughts

In October 2020, I celebrated my fortieth year of Suzuki Piano teaching. No big announcements. No fanfare. Just the quiet realization that forty years had gone much quicker than I could ever have imagined. Looking back on this rather lengthy trajectory, I marvel at how certain moments stand out in my teaching like the following conversation with my student André.

“What would you say is the one thing you’re most interested in?” I inquire. There’s momentary silence as fifteen-year-old André scans the room, as if somehow his eyes could sum up his thoughts. “Freedom,” he replies. Not sure where he’s going, I prompt, “Freedom to...?” Without missing a beat André continues, “Freedom to be the person I really am.”

What I’ve come to understand from André’s insight into freedom is that everyone shares the fundamental desire to be accepted and valued. Everyone - students, parents, teachers - wants to be recognized for who they are. People want relationships with others who appreciate them for who they are and what they do, rather than for whom others might want them to be or what others might want them to do. Everyone wants to be valued for who they are and what they do.

As I bring this exploration to its concluding lines, I’m amazed at how the simple acts of recognition and appreciation provide anchors for Reflective Partnership Teaching. Week after week and year after year, Suzuki teachers appreciate their students as persons, what students have to say, and how they think things through. Suzuki students experience what it’s like to be valued and understood for who they are. Suzuki teachers have at their fingertips the resonant tools to exercise our fundamental humanity.

At the time of writing this article (November, 2021), the unprecedented challenges of a global pandemic along with social unrest, environmental concerns, and economic instability loom large. We may well ask - What will it take to make the world a better place for all of us? What can Suzuki teachers do to make a difference? My impression is that our potential to overcome challenges and realize dreams starts with each of us as individuals and continues over time as we build communities of valued, caring, and thoughtful persons. Such endeavours take listening, curiosity, collaboration, and reflection - strategies Suzuki teachers possess in abundance. My hope is that through music teaching we may realize a future for ourselves and generations to come that reflects the very best of humanity. The time to contribute is now.

Bio: SAA teacher trainer Merlin B. Thompson (PhD, MA, BMus) is the author of *More than Music Lessons: A Studio Teacher’s Guide to Parents, Practicing,*

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