

Reflections on the Suzuki Triangle; Empowering the Student

by Katherine Baird, October, 2021

As a Suzuki teacher and a former administrator tasked with educating and preparing parents for their role in their family's Suzuki journey, I've had to think more deeply about the "Suzuki triangle" - the three-way relationship between teacher-parent-child that ensures the student's success on their instrument - and its implications for the role that each member plays.

As an instructor, I believe that the student learns best when given a distinct role of self-advocacy that supports the Suzuki triangle. When we remember that Dr. Suzuki's most ardent passion was to develop noble character through his approach to music education (as opposed to creating professional musicians), it seems essential that the adults in the Suzuki child's world focus on empowering the student to own their musical journey and participate as an agent in this voyage.

I cringe slightly with regret when I look back on my earlier years of teaching; my inexperienced view of the triangle was of the teacher and parent more or less directing the lessons and practice, with the child going along for the ride. In hindsight, I saw that this was leaving out the third arm of the triangle: the student.

Fortunately, as my teaching has evolved and I've reflected on how to empower students themselves to gain the skills needed for comprehensive musicianship (listening, feeling and sensing, managing their time, working, and collaborating with others).

Nowadays, being a more awakened music teacher (and there's always room for further growth!), I like to communicate to new parents that from the very beginning we are striving to develop independence in the young student: we want them to listen to themselves and self-monitor, to recognize less-than-optimal tone, body balance, and notes that aren't actually in the music (one important reason for listening to the repertoire they're learning!). These aspirational aspects of teaching are the essential spirit of the Suzuki triangle.

We want students to gradually become their own teachers. I let parents know that as the child grows, the adult's role will change, from that of daily "practice initiator" and guide to cheerleader, fan, and "remote coach."

I especially appreciate the definition of the Suzuki triangle as explained by late Suzuki guitar pedagogue Frank Longay of San Jose Talent Education. Mr. Longay wrote: "Goals and Expectations are the realm of the teacher and parent while this realm is translated for the child as needs." He outlines the role of each member of the triangle in this way:

Teacher

- 1. Posture development, continuous work towards stability*
- 2. Commitment to the development of a strong, beautiful tone*
- 3. Flexibility of learning, the ease with which the child absorbs new material*
- 4. Constant commitment to review*
- 5. Desire to create and develop musicianship through the use of phrasing, dynamics, and form*
- 6. Commitment to parent education, listening, home practice, and lesson attitude*
- 7. Commitment to the growth of philosophical ideals and personal fulfillment through teaching*

Parent

- 1. Motivational ideas for continued growth*
- 2. Enjoyment of the learning process - the cultivation of the enthusiasm for learning*
- 3. Awareness of a child's great potential. Expectation principle*
- 4. Commitment to the development of a good working relationship with the teacher and child*

5. *Organize the weekly material into appropriate practice parcels and balance with motivational ideas*
6. *Understanding the balance of discipline and freedom in music*
7. *A strong sense of the value of a musical education*

Child

1. *The need to enjoy the learning process*
2. *Continued need for a feeling of success through positive reinforcement*
3. *The need for a strong emotional support system from parents and teachers*
4. *The need to be creatively motivated to higher musical development*
5. *The need for the balance between freedom of learning with the structure of discipline*

I think Mr. Longay's third point under the child's role is key here: "The need for a strong emotional support system from parents and teachers." To me, this indicates the importance of teachers and parents reflecting on how their communication affects the child, what activities and assignments inspire the daily practice, and asking the child themselves how they can be included in the creative process of practicing. This can include questions such as, "Shall we practice right after school or right after dinner today; Which order shall we practice everything on our practice list (if the instructor has not given instructions otherwise); What are some goals and aspirations you have for your progress this semester/year?"

We can also check in with children to inquire how they are feeling about lessons and the routine of daily practice. Asking questions throughout practice helps the student develop ownership over their playing and their relationship to the instrument.

It is my hope that as my journey as a cello teacher continues to evolve, so, too, will my skills in supporting the blossoming of my students' empowerment in their learning, and my skills in supporting families to do the same. I also hope these ideas are a catalyst for further self-reflection. I especially welcome your comments and ideas.

Here are some resources that you may find helpful, as I have:

1. *Helping Parents Practice: Ideas for Making it Easier*, Edmund Sprunger (2005)
2. *Your Musical Child*, Jessica Baron Turner (2004)
3. *Teaching From the Balance Point*, Ed Kreitman (1998)
4. *First Class Tips for Parents; A Collection of the Best American Suzuki Journal Articles for Parents from the Past 20+ Years.* (2007-2014)
<https://suzukiassociation.org/store/first-class-tips-for-suzuki-parents/>
5. *Intelligent Music Teaching, Essays on the Core Principles of Effective Instruction*, Robert Duke (2005)