

Cultivating Students' Sense of Ownership in Learning a Musical Instrument

By Katherine Baird

In a previous blog post I wrote about the importance of students feeling ownership over their playing and their lessons. This is something I think about a lot as I reflect on teaching because I feel that students' sense of ownership in education is key to progress and motivation. The best learning takes place when the student feels as equally invested as the teacher in the process. As a private music teacher, I want to get better at fostering this in my own students.

Children experience so much of "being told what to do" in life: when to get up, when to go to school, what homework to do, when to show up for their sports team, and what and when to eat. Of course, children must be guided in all these endeavors for them to learn how to manage their own time and activities as they mature; children need the structure, the roots, to thrive. (One of my favorite quotes is: "The two things parents can give their children are roots for growing and wings for flying".)

How do we do this? To begin with, we need to acknowledge that we cannot make any child do anything. We can bring them around to doing it, what one of my colleagues, Beth Goldstein-McKee calls "going through the back door" (which all educators and parents have to do at times).

Recently a violinist friend and colleague of mine told me about an experience she had with one of her families that exemplifies the powerful outcome of a student

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feeling ownership in their musical study. One of her students, Sam, is seven years old and struggles at times with the grips of very strong emotions, as well as anxiety and feelings of pressure; he's a very sensitive child, his moods easily swayed. Sam would sometimes announce at his lesson that he "wasn't up to it" (having his lesson). This kind of declaration could well cause alarm and concern for a teacher as well as the child's parents. What if a child said this once, twice, or more times per month? My friend is particularly clued into the feelings of others, so she responded with characteristic empathy. At a subsequent discussion with the parents (without Sam being present) my friend wisely suggested that if this were to happen again that there be some sort of agreement as to how the lesson would be handled, given that the family pays for the weekly lesson and my friend has it scheduled on her calendar. She worked out with the family that when Sam wasn't up to having a lesson, the father (the parent who accompanies Sam to lessons) would have a lesson instead.

The next time Sam declared he couldn't take his lesson, he said he would like to take notes for his father who would have the violin lesson instead. Sam watched as his father took instruction and constructive criticism and worked with it. He watched his father try what the teacher asked him, sometimes struggling and not being immediately successful.

The following week the family reported that whereas a typical practice week included 3-4 days, Sam practiced seven days! Something occurred when he watched his father's lesson and took the role of Suzuki parent and could experience the lesson as viewed through the parent's eyes. This was a powerful learning experience for the child that created motivation and inspiration.

Choice, genuine praise, enlisting the child's help, and asking questions are four ways in which we can foster independence and ownership. Here are some suggestions for planting the seeds of ownership early on:

Choice

- For the younger child, if your schedule allows, give them a choice of two times they can practice (e.g., after school or before bed) and follow through with their chosen time.
- Let the child choose the order of practice (unless the teacher has specified otherwise).

Genuine praise

- With younger students whose parent practices with them, make a habit of pointing out small successes at each practice, such as beautiful posture, ease of movement, a well-formed and maintained bow hold, intense focus and the like.
- For older students (who practice on their own), find opportunities to express pride in their progress or their skill at managing their time. Specific comments such as, "I am really impressed with how you've balanced your daily practice with your academics and [sports]. I love hearing your music; I'm so pleased with your efforts."

Enlisting their help

- Teach them to unpack and pack their instrument. With young children this can take longer, but it is an important skill they will need so it's worth it.
- Go over a list of practice or lesson accessories and enlist their help in gathering them (music, footstool or cello rock stop, rosin, pencil, etc.).
- If a young child benefits from using a practice chart or practice drill cards, ask them to help you create them.

Asking questions

- If you practice with a young child at home, ask them questions that foster their discriminating listening, such as:
 - ✓ Was that easier than the last time?
 - ✓ What was improved from the previous time?
 - ✓ How many repetitions shall we do for drilling down that phrase?
 - ✓ Did all the notes in that passage sparkle?
- With a young or older student, asking questions about a performance or recording has the same effect:
 - ✓ What did you enjoy most about that concert?
 - ✓ Did you see how the performer interacted with the audience?
 - ✓ I wonder if you noticed like I did how the string quartet seemed to play as if they were one instrument

And the like...

These strategies ultimately also foster a sense of camaraderie between parent and child, and teacher and child, which boosts the positivity factor and likelihood of success. When there is a shared sense of purpose and accomplishment the process of lessons and practicing are more enjoyable, too!

We all need roots and wings. Happy practicing!