

# ***Involving parents: a review of the literature***

***Jenny Macmillan***

The question of whether or not to involve parents when children learn a musical instrument is a contentious one. There are many teachers who do not involve parents in the learning process, and who have good reasons for their views. Other teachers allow parents to get involved, or even encourage active parental participation in lessons and/or practices.

Many music teachers have themselves learned an instrument on a one-to-one basis with their teacher, with no additional parental involvement. It is a relatively new idea to involve parents in education generally, and in instrumental learning in particular.

I recently undertook a research study into the attitudes of teachers, pupils and parents towards parents being involved when children learn the piano. In this article, the first of two, I review the existing literature on the subject. In the second article I shall report on my own research findings.

## ***Parental involvement in general education***

### ***Parental influence on children's learning***

Numerous studies have reported that parental involvement improves student achievement. For instance, Hornby's book *Improving Parental Involvement* concludes that evidence that parental involvement improves student achievement is beyond dispute, and that parents are critical to children's successes during their school years. According to the Irish National Teachers' Organisation:

Parental involvement in the education of their children cannot in today's world be viewed as an optional extra for professional teachers and effective schools. It is clear that parents want to be positively and productively involved in the life and work of their children in school and that positive parental attitudes to education are an important influence on children's educational development and subsequent life chances. Teachers therefore have a professional obligation to create and nurture

structures that will support and develop positive parental involvement and participation in the life and work of schools.

Studies involving children at all levels, from infancy to secondary school, show that parental involvement makes a difference. For example, in her book *Parents as Partners in Education*, Berger says that

Reading specialists stressed the importance of parents reading to and with their children, encouraging, eliciting questions, and setting realistic goals for their child's learning.

Other studies of reading skills have argued that parental involvement – reading to their children, having books in the home, and hearing their children read – is vital for reading attainment (National Literacy Trust).

Ballantine (cited in Hornby) states that “parents are critical to children's successes during the school years”. Sussel identifies the benefits of increased parental involvement as:

- more positive parental attitudes towards teachers and schools;
- more positive student attitudes and behaviours;
- improved student performance;
- improved teacher morale;
- improved school climate.

Research by Cairney & Munsie has shown that virtually all parents are interested in their child's education and that parents know far more about language and learning than most teachers realise. However, they say, “it seems that the ability of parents to support their children is often impeded by the ‘schooling’ of literacy”: parents feel teaching is a specialised subject from which they are excluded. Many parents are unaware of the real improvement that even a relatively small effort on their part may bring about. They are conscious of their own limitations as teachers, and feel they do not know what to do, or how, in order to give effective help and encouragement. According to Howe in *The Psychology of High Abilities*, the most important qualities required are “sensitivity, patience, enthusiasm, common sense and perseverance, rather than particular instructional skills or teaching techniques”. Bandura found that “parents who doubt their efficacy to help their children learn, turn over their children's education entirely to teachers”, while

parents who are confident in their ability to help “guide their children’s learning and participate actively in the life of the school”.

Government reports such as that by Plowden have indicated that parental involvement in educational and community-based programmes is an entirely positive influence on the child. Bedi & Castleberry (cited in Long) suggest that the Plowden Report may be seen as a starting point in the process of involving parents:

It has been proved that parental involvement improves children’s school performance, and anything that does so must merit close attention.... The success of any parental involvement venture depends very largely on the attitudes of the teachers putting it into operation.

### ***Teachers’ attitudes to parental involvement***

A Gallup Poll in 1993 concluded that “teachers intuitively know that children are far more likely to do well in classes if parents play an active role in their children’s education”.

When asked “How important do you think it is to encourage parents to take a more active part in educating their children?”, 96% of those polled responded “Very important”.

Ramirez conducted a survey on *Teachers’ attitudes regarding parents and parental involvement*. His questionnaire replies from 203 teachers in two American high schools elicited contradictory responses. Almost all teachers in the survey (99%) report that parental involvement is important for a good high school, a similar proportion (98%) think parental involvement can increase student effectiveness, and most teachers (94%) agree that parental involvement increases student achievement. At the same time, over half of the surveyed teachers (54%) believe it is not their responsibility to involve families, and only a few (14%) had conferences in the previous year with 50% or more of parents. Interestingly, although very many teachers (81%) feel that parents do not know how to speak to their children about schoolwork, most teachers (92%) feel that parents could learn how to assist their children with schoolwork.

The study does not discuss why the teachers act and feel as they do, except that just over half the teachers (53%) report they do not have time to involve parents. However, 44% say they do have the time. It seems that the teachers in Ramirez’s study know in theory that

parental involvement is beneficial to pupil progress, but are unwilling to put these ideas into practice.

Yet more than thirty years before Ramirez' research in 1999, the Plowden Report in 1967 stated:

What matters most are the attitudes of teachers to parents and parents to teachers - whether there is genuine mutual respect, whether parents understand what the schools are doing for their individual children and teachers realise how dependent they are on parental support.

## ***Parental involvement in instrumental learning***

### ***Provision of musical environment***

Many research studies have demonstrated that musical achievement is linked to high levels of parental involvement. For instance, in the 1990s Davidson, Howe, Moore & Sloboda studied 257 children and their parents and found that "overall, the most musically able children had the highest levels of parental support". Studies also show that

parent involvement, in the form of encouragement, support, supervision and participation in lessons, in the early stages of instrumental learning, is a better predictor of student achievement than other factors such as musical aptitude test results or parent's musical literacy (Creech).

It is the quality of the nurturing environment that is critical, and the onus for this is placed firmly on parents and teachers who need to provide not only a musically stimulating environment but also one in which "the child's enthusiasms are noticed, listened to, and responded to with sensitivity and imagination" (Kemp & Mills).

Sloboda identifies high levels of appropriate family support as one of five factors which contribute to high levels of musical achievement. But support must be of a particular kind - non-threatening to the child's self-esteem. All children in his sample reported periods of low motivation for practice, and claimed that had their parents not pushed them to practise during these periods, they probably would have done none at all. Most parents provided high levels of time and material resources.

Davidson, Sloboda & Howe found that the highest achieving children received the most support from their parents, up to the age of 11. Thereafter parental support diminished as the children were increasingly driven by intrinsic motives to practise regularly by themselves. Indeed, Zdzinski's study of 406 instrumental music students found that at elementary level children's *musical performance outcomes* were significantly correlated to parental involvement, whereas at junior high and senior high levels parental involvement had more effect on pupils' *motivation and attitude*.

Once children start learning an instrument, Davidson and her colleagues believe parental involvement is often critical as to whether the child persists or gives up. They believe that high levels of musical achievement are likely to be unattainable without such supportive parental involvement. They also claim that the more crucial determinant of the musical achievement of children is not the musical literacy of the parents, but rather the level of support and time commitment which the parents are willing and able to make. Likewise, research by Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Romer on the role of practice concludes that elite performers have received continued parental and environmental support. Sosniak studied the musical development of 21 concert pianists and found that talent development involves many people working for the achievement of just one. Unusually successful learning seems to be a group effort involving the child, parents, teachers, other family members or family friends.

Biographies of outstanding musicians studied by Manturzevska show that family environment and intrinsic motivation for musical activity are the factors which most influence musical development. Among the characteristics of the outstanding musician's home environment, Manturzevska mentions the deliberate organisation and channelling of the child's interests, time, and activities; a positive emotional atmosphere for musical activity; and a willingness to invest considerable time and effort in musical activities.

### ***Attendance at lessons and supervision of practice***

The teacher-parent interaction was found to be of critical importance in the research undertaken by Davidson, Sloboda, Howe and Moore. They found that the most successful children had parents who took notes during lessons, spoke to the teacher at the end of the lesson, and supervised practice, often for up to 15 years; and that almost all children

selected for entry to a specialist music school had parents who took an active participatory role in music lessons and daily practice. They suggest that, as the child's skills begin to develop, a more autonomous practising strategy can be promoted, but regular encouragement of, and listening to, practice activities can help enormously.

Gembris & Davidson suggest that

The Suzuki approach and the Pace Method are excellent ways to promote very early engagement and to encourage practice and creativity.... These programs provide the children with the key adult support necessary to engage and sustain their interest in music. In both cases, teachers take on roles of a parental nature, gently coaxing the child, but within a structured framework.

In these programmes parents are encouraged to learn themselves, to attend their child's lessons, and to take note of what should be done in home practice. However, so far as I am aware, no research has been published investigating whether children learning by these methods either enjoy or achieve more highly than other children.

Learning to practise effectively is a skill in itself. Lehmann and Ericsson suggest that "the highest levels of performance ... require optimal training conditions and learning environments". They note that "in contrast to many sports in which the coach is often present during practice, music students typically retreat to the practice room and work by themselves". Indeed, music students often have individual instrumental lessons, reflecting the fact that practising and performing are very often solo rather than group or team activities.

Supervised practice, preferably by a live-in teacher, can create excellent conditions for deliberate practice and resulting skill acquisition. Home instruction and supervised practice may lead to better use of time spent practising (Lehmann). In Gruson's study of rehearsal strategies of musicians at different levels, she found that beginners are more likely to repeat individual notes, which teachers consider an inefficient method of practising, while experienced players are more likely to repeat musically coherent sections of a piece.

Brokaw studied the relationship between the amount of parental supervision of practice and the achievement of 25 wind instrument students. He found that the amount of time

spent by parents in supervising music practice was a better predictor of student achievement in the early stages of development than the total amount of time spent practising. A study of adolescent instrumentalists (Barry; cited in Barry & Hallam) compared the improvement in musical performance of students who followed a structured practice programme under adult supervision with that of students who practised with no supervision. The supervised group achieved greater gains for melodic accuracy, rhythmic accuracy, and musicality. Barry also found that while supervised practice can be helpful for some individuals, it can be detrimental as students become more mature and seek greater independence.

### ***Parents' musical background***

Parents of musically successful children typically have broad interests in music rather than performance expertise, and parental involvement in music increases over the child's learning period, that is, parents follow rather than lead their child's growing sense of musicianship (Davidson *et al*). The parent may view musical ability as something admirable, yet difficult to achieve, and that therefore requires special attention. Treating the child as a 'special' person and providing musical support, may provide the child with the essential external motivation for a high investment in musical activity (Sloboda & Davidson).

Many of the highest rated children in Sloboda's sample from 1993 had developed a very strong sense of themselves as 'musical'.

This seemed to come about through the way in which their early musical achievements were praised and 'made a fuss of' by the immediate family. Such praise came most naturally from parents who were not highly proficient musicians themselves, and who were, therefore, genuinely impressed by their child's modest accomplishments. Even though the notion of 'talent' may have little scientific foundation, belief in one's own talent can be a powerful motivator for the continuing, sometimes gruelling, long-term engagement with practice. Unfortunately, belief that one is not 'talented' can have an opposite negative effect on motivation and effort.

Typically, parents of high-achieving children are strict, demanding, active, hard-working individuals with a work-ethic that prevents waste of time and excessive leisure (Lehmann). An unspoken theme runs through all observations by Howe & Sloboda, that of the quiet, dogged perseverance of these parents to help their children get the work done.

### ***Parents' attitudes to parental involvement***

Addison (cited in Creech) suggests that “many parents see instrumental tuition for their children as desirable”. Georgiou (cited in Creech) suggests that where parents have high expectations and attribute possible success to effort rather than to ability, they are themselves motivated to become highly involved in the learning process, and, conversely, where parents attribute success to ability, they may be discouraged from participating in learning. Alternatively, if parents feel their child has ‘talent’ they may be more willing to do everything possible to nurture this talent than if they feel their child shows little talent: “Parental perceptions of children can become prophecies to fulfil, an expectation becoming a fact” (Davidson & Borthwick).

[This idea that high expectations motivate parents to become involved is supported by Power (cited in Creech) who, in a study of maternal attitudes to their children's piano learning, concluded that:

Mothers' and teachers' expectation levels play a significant role in children's achievement. Mothers' high achievement expectations influence their interactions with their children, which in turn influences the children's achievement.]

Parents may need to be reassured of their ability to help their children, and this is clearly a role for instrumental teachers to play.

It is parents' own values and sense of efficacy with respect to their children's musical pursuits which influence their level of participation.... In order to achieve optimal success, it is crucial for parents to have confidence in their own efficacy (Creech).

But teachers themselves need to feel that even those parents without musical expertise can help if shown how to give appropriate support and how to create the right nurturing environment.

## *Children's attitudes to parental involvement*

Children's motivation and enjoyment are affected by many factors, including the repertoire they study, their view of ability and effort, their teachers, and their parents. High levels of support and challenge have a positive effect on teenagers in all talent areas and, according to Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Creech & Hallam), parents of accomplished children typically:

- devote great amounts of time and energy to meeting the needs of their children;
- set high standards;
- encourage productive use of time;
- provide challenging opportunities;
- make sure lessons and materials are available;
- set aside areas of the home where the child can work privately.

In her research for *Parental Involvement: Who wants it?*, Crozier found that children in all age groups, including secondary school students, welcomed the above parenting practices as being effective. "Overall, the majority of the students in all year groups seemed to value their parents' help, interest and support". She found that 62% of Year 7 students (aged 11-12) and 50% of Year 10 students (aged 14-15) always or usually received help from parents with homework. Year 7 students expressed appreciation about parents' help although a minority felt guilty at having help or did not agree with the advice given. Year 10 students said they were glad their parents helped: it increased their confidence and helped them get a better mark. Some said the help improved their understanding, although others said that sometimes they got confused. However, it seems to be important that parental involvement is based on negotiation and that both parties regard it as optional rather than obligatory.

O'Neill studied 832 children in Year 6 (age 10-11) and again in Year 7 (age 11-12). She found that "children who stay involved in learning to play an instrument believe that their parents are supportive of this activity far more than children who give up".

## ***Conclusion: Effect on children of teachers' attitudes to parental involvement***

From the literature, it seems clear that parental involvement is important for children's achievement both in general education and, additionally, in instrumental learning. Many parents want to be involved in their children's education and children generally welcome support from their parents. Even in instrumental tuition, parents need not be musically trained – it is more important that they provide time and support for their children's musical activities. To be successful, parents must have confidence in their own abilities. So teachers need to value parental input, learn how to work with parents, and show them how they can best assist. They need to motivate parents and convince them their help will make a difference. Therefore, teachers' attitudes to parental involvement are critical. However studies suggest that, while teachers in general education are usually aware of the importance of parental involvement, they are rarely willing to make use of parental assistance. They may feel, or actually be, untrained in how to involve parents successfully.

Having studied the literature, I found various areas that required further investigation. For instance, although numerous research studies have concluded that parental involvement improves student achievement, my experience is that many instrumental music teachers prefer to teach on a one-to-one basis without involving parents. If parental involvement is indeed critical to children's progress, one might ask what effect teachers' attitudes have on how parents actually get involved. And finally, previous research on parental involvement has concentrated on pupil *achievement* but not on *enjoyment* which, arguably, is also important.

So I formulated four research questions:

1. What are instrumental teachers' attitudes to parental involvement in children's music lessons and practices?
2. What do those teachers who promote parental involvement actually encourage parents to do?
3. How do parents support their children musically?
4. Does increased parental involvement raise pupil enjoyment and achievement?

In order to investigate these questions, I interviewed a sample of piano teachers, pupils and parents. The findings of this study will be reported in the next issue of *Piano Professional*.

*Jenny Macmillan is a Suzuki piano teacher in Cambridge. She is Regional Organiser for EPTA Cambridgeshire. The research project of these two articles formed part of her studies for an MA in Psychology for Musicians at Sheffield University.*

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