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Final Paper

### **The Suzuki Method: More Than Just Listening**

Imagine an arena where thousands of children are each holding a string instrument. They all face the center, looking at an adult holding a violin. With a motion of his arms, the children begin to play in unison “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”. None of these children are reading music, and each is about three years old and older. Meet the product of the Suzuki method. Children all over the world have learned and are learning to play a musical instrument using the Suzuki method. How does a three-year-old Suzuki student learn to play a string instrument when traditional students typically don’t start until they are eight years old or older?

The Suzuki method was created by Shinichi Suzuki in Matsumoto, Japan shortly after World War II. One day, Suzuki observed that “Japanese children all speak Japanese” (Suzuki, 1983). Any child speaks the language they were born into with fluency and without difficulty. This demonstrates a capacity to learn and intelligence inherent in every child. Suzuki theorized that if children can learn their own language fluently, then we can understand how learning takes place by observing how a child learns his or her own language. Suzuki originally called this the “Mother-Tongue Method” or “Talent Education”; it has since been labeled by others as the Suzuki Method.

According to Suzuki if students fail at math or music, yet speak their own language fluently, his or her failure is due to lack of proper education, not a lack of intelligence. This theory is similar to the concept of everyday cognition which states that if a person can do something fluently in one situation and not in another that shows that the person is more intelligent than we think. If environmental factors are the key, then every child has the potential to learn how to play a musical instrument, given the correct environment. Children learn to speak by listening to people speak around them and then learn to talk themselves. Suzuki believed the ability to learn music must be nurtured from birth, in much the same way that language is learned.

Thus the Suzuki Method is structured in the same way that a child learns their native language. The student listens to classical music on a regular basis – especially music that they will play. The child begins by observing other students and then beginning as early as age three. While the child is listening to recordings and observing the first lessons are given to the parent. When the child is ready they announce their desire to play music. At first the child learns without reading music by imitating the instructor and listening to recordings. Songs are practiced at home with the parent reinforcing what was taught at the lesson. After songs are learned the child continues to review them. Music reading is introduced later. The Suzuki method books consist of around 10 volumes for each instrument such as the Violin, Viola, Cello, Bass, Guitar, Harp and Piano.

Although Suzuki developed a graded repertoire of music used by many non-Suzuki teachers use, his method involved much more than just the music he had students practice. His theories emphasize the importance of creating an environment where students have a desire to learn rather than being forced

Suzuki stated that from birth, a child should listen to “good” music and the future repertoire that he or she will learn. They develop an understanding of what the song should sound like and only need to learn how to make the string and bow move in the right way to replicate the song. The student plays without music at first until technique is automatic and tone quality (sound) is adequate.. The parent teaches the child at home and can refer to the music to help the student progress Thus the child relies on the parent when not at the lesson and listens to recordings of the music to learn effectively. The child also participates in group lessons on a regular basis.

Suzuki’s original ideas were aimed at teaching music to children, however adults can learn to play an instrument using the Suzuki method, it takes much more time and effort than a child requires.

As Suzuki’s main philosophy of learning to play the violin is the same as learning a language, Vygotsky and Bruner’s theories of social interaction are arguably the most important and congruent theories. Piaget’s theories of development and cognitive information processing will also be addressed. There are some similarities between learning a native language and the Suzuki method that should be noted. A child starts listening from birth; the parent does not wait until they are older start communicating

with them. A child hears his or her own language constantly, with parents being the greatest influence. A child forms sounds before words and repeats these syllables or words many times to make out the correct sounds. A child also learns to speak before he can read. A child learns more and more by interacting with others. A child then learns formal grammar and writing through attending school or from their parents. Each of these concepts of learning a native language have some pedagogical implications for the Suzuki method. Let's address each one of them and identify which learning theories support each claim.

### **Listening from Birth**

First, a child starts listening to music from birth just as a person listens to people talk from birth. Throughout history, great musicians have come from parents that were also good or great musicians. These claims imply that learning potential would be increased in proportion to the extent that a child was exposed to music and how early in life they were exposed.

One of the main tenets of the Suzuki method is that children listen to the music they will play on a regular basis. To concur with the idea that learning to play music should occur in the same manner that a child learns their native language, the child listens to music all the time much like listening to people speak around them. This listening creates models or schemas of what the music should sound like. This *accretion* of music builds a foundation for the music, which then goes through the process of *tuning* as interaction and teaching happens with the teacher. The final stage of schema acquisition, structuring would happen when the student learns how to read music.

One of the goals of the Suzuki method is to have the child develop the best possible sound or tone that they can. Without knowing what a good tone sounds like, the child lacks a clearly defined goal or end result to work towards. Thus, when the child first listens to music they create their own schema of how the music is structured, which must occur for the student to learn how to play an instrument without reading music. Schema theory doesn't adequately account for the learning of motor skills it only talks about mental models and their structure.

The child has an existing knowledge of music learned through listening to it continuously and thus when they learn the actual song they practice it until it becomes a part of them. Vygotsky said that all

“good learning” must take place in “advance of development.” Children listening to the pieces many times before playing them are learning the music before actually developing their skills.

Jerome Bruner’s idea of Discovery Learning is the process by which interactions occur between a student and their experience. He claims that it is important that the student have a “well-prepared mind.” In other words, the child must have some idea of what they will be discovering. In listening to music from an early age, especially the Suzuki repertoire, a child discovers what their goal or end result should be. Thus the act of discovery comes from learning how to make sounds, like the ones they heard on the recording.

### **Speaking before Reading**

One of the main goals of Suzuki music education is for the student to develop the best sound quality possible. To achieve this Suzuki taught that a child should not be introduced to reading music until they had the ability to play with correct technical facility and ease. This is so the student can focus on technical semantics at first and be able to adapt easier to reading music later.

In many ways, postponing music reading is congruent with the theories of Jean Piaget. According to him, the learning of abstract concepts like music notation wouldn’t be able to occur until a child reached the Concrete or Formal Operational stages, between the ages of 7 and 11. It would make sense then to postpone the linking the complex operation of a musical instrument and reading music notation. Suzuki said that the student should wait until they developed good posture and sound, never specifying an age that this should take place. Suzuki also believed that environmental factors helped the student progress, and that the only inherent trait that a student possessed was the rate at which they responded to the environment. Suzuki emphasized that music teaching cannot be forced by parents, competition or the teacher; the child will develop at his or her own pace.

Jerome Bruner agreed with Jean Piaget that development occurred in stages but differed with him on the question of age. Bruner stated that “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (Driscoll, 2005). Bruner believed that children progress linearly through different stages of cognitive representation of knowledge.

In explaining how learning and development occur, Bruner proposed three stages of representation. These include Enactive or learning that is shown in motor responses, Iconic that are representations of the world and Symbolic that are linked together arbitrarily. Enactive Representation in playing music would include remembering songs by playing them on the instrument, or remembering patterns by thinking of them in terms of the instrument. Iconic representation would include the sounds and structure of the music, whereas Symbolic representation would be musical notation. Children have difficulty progressing to the symbolic phase until they have a firm grasp on the enactive and iconic phases. Thus Bruner would support the notion of waiting until the student had gained a firm knowledge of the Enactive and Iconic stages to begin reading music. He would also agree that attempts to accelerate learning unnaturally by having the child move to songs they are not ready for should be avoided.

Vygotsky would say that instead of introducing reading music after a certain stage, it would be better to introduce it according to the level of interaction that a student made with learning the technique. Vygotsky claimed that by interacting with the environment, learning would occur. Vygotsky disagreed with both Bruner and Piaget that development would have to occur according to age or stages, rather he focused on the mechanisms that facilitate development. Vygotsky said that if a student had already reached the developmental stage, they would have to wait for the next one to come along. Vygotsky saw development more as a process that pushes or pulls the individual student.

### **Repetitive Practice**

In the Suzuki method, children at first play simple folk songs, that are familiar to the children and progressively play more difficult songs from the traditional classical repertoire. These songs are practiced repeatedly until the student has gone well beyond the point of just learning the notes. Suzuki had his students continually review each of their pieces for about three months, so that they could play any of the songs they had learned easily with other children. Suzuki stated that “any skill can be acquired by constant repetition.”(Suzuki, 1983). Suzuki would have his students play a repeatedly until the playing of it became automatic. The belief is that learn something once is *not* enough it must be mastered. Suzuki

also believed that as a student memorized songs they acquired the ability to memorize, and thus each piece, while more difficult, became easier to memorize.

As with any skill playing a musical instrument requires that the students develop their skills to the point where they don't have to think about everything that they are doing. Cognitive Information Processing theory refers to this as automaticity, which is the process by which a task is performed extensively that it becomes natural and automatic.

This is similar to Piaget's concept of assimilation in which a person will assimilate new knowledge to an existing behavior in a self-motivated fashion. When children learn to talk, they will repeat themselves endlessly. Suzuki observed this and theorized that if they will repeat words continuously then they should not have a problem playing a piece of music many times. Thus, the assimilation phase helps the student to move from one stage to the next.

Vygotsky would claim that this repetitive nature of practicing is actually the process of internalization. When children play music, which is an outward social practice, they progressively form inner concepts and structures for the music. All the listening and coaching from parents and teachers aid in this process of internalization.

### **Social Interaction**

All music can be claimed to be a social interaction. Like language, music is seen as a communication between the performer, other performers and the listener. Suzuki had all his students memorize all the same repertoire so that they could play together. Students participate in weekly or monthly group lessons in which students perform for one another and with each other. These peer interactions help move the student in thinking beyond just their own playing to playing within a group. Children help out each other progress and learn. Suzuki claimed that group lessons are what the children enjoy the most. The motivation to succeed comes from their interaction with other students. Cooperation is the motivator more than competition.

These peer interactions are just part of a larger community of practice that includes parents and teachers. Wenger claimed that there are three parts to a community of practice; mutual engagement, joint

enterprise and shared repertoire. Students participate equally with parents and teachers in learning. In the Suzuki method, each plays a vital role and without one of the parts the whole would not function. They all have a common goal and thus engage equally in the process. Next, they all are accountable to each other in the joint enterprise, through specific responsibilities and individual accountability. Suzuki taught that students are to be given respect and are not taught in a coercive or condescending way. This dynamic changes thinking from a parent/student/teacher paradigm to thinking about a peer-to-peer apprenticeship paradigm. In peer interactions and group lessons, there is an emphasis on cooperation instead of competition. Vygotsky stated that children are more likely to engage in “a free and active exchange of ideas” (Driscoll, 2005) with each other.

Finally, the shared repertoire of the Suzuki method was developed so that children all over the world would learn the same music. In group settings this knowledge enables each student to teach each other. More advanced students already play songs that the younger students are learning, and so they can become mentors to the less experienced students. This form of cognitive apprenticeships, only happens with these group classes where there is a shared repertoire. They are a joint enterprise and there is a mutual level of engagement between learners.

### **Parent’s Influence**

Vital to a child’s success in the Suzuki method is a parent’s involvement in teaching the child from the beginning. Suzuki believed that children needed more than one lesson a week and so the parents should become “home teachers.” Suzuki claimed that when a parent states that their child does not have a certain ability they are confessing that *they* didn’t teach them properly.

As a “home teacher” the parent must create an environment where the child will succeed. This includes playing music for the child to listen to, encouraging group practice, and interacting with the child in a positive and non-coercive manner.

Suzuki said that violin training begins with the parent. The parent is taught how to play the first song while the child listens. Then the parent knows how to help the child when they begin to play the instrument. This also motivates the child with a desire to learn and play the instrument because the child

will want to imitate the parent. Playing the instrument is seen as fun rather than something they are required to do.

The child learns by being an apprentice to the parent. The Suzuki student is reliant on his or her parents to know what music they must learn, because the child has yet to learn music. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development gives a good explanation of how this occurs. According to the Zone of Proximal Development, children and parents/teachers must have a difference in the amount of information that they know. The parent if not knowing anything about music, must be instructed sufficiently to be able to teach the child in the moment that they need the instruction. If a parent does not have more information than the student when first starting to play the instrument, the growth of the child takes much longer. The parent attends lessons with the child to understand more of the processes of music making. The parent acts as a support until the child can act on their own, giving just in time instruction.

### **Teacher Influence**

The mantra of the Suzuki method is that "Every Child Can." The Suzuki method is not intended to make every person a virtuoso violinist or cellist. The purpose is to allow children of all situations the opportunity to participate in creating music by enhancing the environment of the learner. Since most everyone has the ability to learn their own language fluently, the Suzuki method focuses on environmental factors instead of presumed innate characteristics.

Since the idea is that every child can learn to play an instrument, Suzuki strived to make learning to play a musical instrument as natural as possible. He focused more on playing and enjoying the instrument rather than forcing the child to learn. Suzuki would play games with the children to help them learn certain techniques. Both Piaget and Vygotsky would agree that children learn through play. In accordance with Piaget's theory, through play children would engage in self-discovery and be self motivated. Vygotsky added that play also helps develop abstract thought.

The way the Suzuki Repertoire is structured helps students progress from one skill to the next. The Suzuki books are designed in a way that they teach simple pieces and familiar songs to the children

such as “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” These are songs that the children enjoy and recognize. The teacher waits to introduce etudes, technical drills, scales and other abstract concepts as they are not as enjoyable as playing actual music. Piaget claimed that abstract problems (scales and etudes) are unnecessary until the Formal Operational stage because they have little meaning and use until they can think more independently.

As students progress from piece to piece they review all the pieces they have learned, rather than just moving to the next one. This is similar to Bruner’s notion of a Spiral Curriculum where ideas and teachings are first taught in the way a child would learn them, next as an adolescent, and then as an adult. For example, a child first plays “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” in the first Suzuki book; they focus mainly on playing the notes correctly. Later on when they are in the second or third book they will review the piece, focusing on producing a beautiful sound and tone. Then years later they may play it again gaining new insights into playing the song.

### **Learning theory not present**

Behaviorism is one theory that on the outset would have high relevance, but in taking a closer look the views of each theory are different. In the Suzuki method, like in behaviorism, it is the environment that plays the biggest role in shaping the learner. However, Behaviorism doesn’t have a clear definition of how language learning occurs. The process of learning music is inherently a intrinsically rewarding experience and thus reinforcing it extrinsically could have a negative effect. Suzuki claims that a nurturing environment has the most significant effect on a child’s learning and that the student shouldn’t be forced or hurried through this process. Children are praised for the effort or process they went through rather than the ultimate end of their thinking. The motivating factors in learning an instrument are not to receive some reward unrelated to playing the instrument. Development is seen to come from social motivators and not behavioral terms.

Instead of punishment or negative reinforcement for notes that are played wrong the student is shown a new way to do it. Suzuki believed that someone should be taught a new way of doing things and then for them to do it a thousand times to replace the old habit rather than trying to fix the old habit. The

child is motivated by social factors and not by coercion or being told what to do. Reinforcement comes in the way of smiles or social approval and not unrelated factors. Children learn through the Suzuki method by engaging in social practices and through the environment.

### **Summary**

It is difficult to say how much of the Suzuki Method is based on actual learning theory or Suzuki's own experiences and observations. Whether Suzuki was aware or not of these learning theories is secondary to the fact that there are many theories that are incorporated in this method. Probably the most relevant theories would have to be Social Interactionist and Cognitive Information Processing. The Suzuki method emphasizes the role of creating a community of practice where the child, parent and teacher work with each other that the child can develop. As children listen to music, they develop schemas or mental models to identify their goals in music making and to facilitate the learning process. Music reading is postponed until the child is cognitively ready and as to not interfere with the development of technical facility on the instrument. Parents act as a support and in a scaffolding function to their child until the child is able to learn the music on their own. Even then parents encourage their child to continue. Children not only learn through repetition and review but they learn in group classes from other students providing motivation from social factors. The Suzuki curriculum is developed in a way that each song builds upon another and introduces new skill while reinforcing old ones. Teachers most importantly approach each child with respect and in a non-coercive manner.

I think the title of one of Shinichi Suzuki book's sums up the whole approach. The title is "Nurtured by Love". In the nature vs. nurture debate this takes a very strong stand toward nurturing in a positive way.

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