

Working together

Following last month's article in which Ruth Bonetti provided a personal view of relationships between teachers and parents, **Jenny Macmillan** presents the results of a more wide-ranging research project on involving parents in instrumental learning

The question of whether or not to involve parents when children learn a musical instrument is a contentious one. Many teachers do not involve parents, and have good reasons for their views. Many have themselves learned an instrument on a one-to-one basis with their teacher, with no additional parental involvement. Other teachers allow parents to get involved, or even encourage active parental participation in lessons and/or practice sessions. But 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. I found that numerous studies in general education concluded that parental involvement improves student achievement, that parents are critical to children's successes during their school years, and that parents want to be positively and productively involved in the life and work of their children in school. For example, a study by the

Irish National Teachers' Organisation found that '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'. (1)

In music education, a large-scale survey by Jane Davidson (2) and her colleagues demonstrated that musical achievement is linked to high levels of parental involvement, and that teachers' attitudes are vital. They found 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, and that parental involvement is critical as to whether the child persists or gives up.

From the literature, it seems clear that many parents want to be involved in their children's education and that children generally welcome support from their parents. 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. Yet their attitudes are critical to children's development, according to the Plowden report on primary education: 'What matters most are the attitudes of teachers to parents and parents to teachers – whether there is genuine mutual respect, whether... teachers realise how dependent they are on parental support.' (3)

It is clear that the issue of parental involvement, which, in my experience, is not commonly practised in music, is a subject worthy of further study.

What are teachers' attitudes to parental involvement?

Teachers in my research sample were equally divided in their views on parental involvement in children's music lessons and practices. They put forward convincing arguments for encouraging or discouraging the involvement of parents.

Although strong evidence exists that parental involvement is beneficial, even crucial, for high



Taking note: Rather than reading a book in another room, parents can follow the lesson in order to help their child more effectively with practice sessions

achievement on a musical instrument, some teachers in my sample prefer to work on a one-to-one basis with the pupil, with minimum contact with the parent. Even when the parent wishes to be involved, these teachers deliberately exclude the parent. None attempts to show the parent how to assist positively, even though parental involvement is reported to be welcomed by those children who have experienced it.

What do teachers encourage parents to do?

In my sample, the teachers' promotion of parental involvement varied, even among those who encourage it. At the end of lessons, some teachers discuss how it has gone. Some teachers invite parents to follow the lesson with a view to helping with practice, or they draw the parent's attention to good achievements. Other teachers are not specific about what parents should do during lessons.

Only one of the ten teachers in my sample instructs the parents (of her younger pupils) how to supervise their children's practice on a moment-by-moment basis. Other teachers ask parents to encourage practice to take place, help if the child asks, read the notebook, act as an appreciative audience, and engage in ensemble playing with the child. Again, teachers are often not specific about what they wish parents to do. Often they don't even mention parental involvement.

How do parents support their children musically?

Parental support varies from family to family. Some parental involvement occurs without the teacher being aware of it. Where there is very little communication between teacher and parent, there can be differences between the teacher's and the parent's perception of the parent's role in practice sessions.

For instance, one parent, whose son's teacher discourages parental involvement with practising, says: 'I listen to the CD of his exam pieces so I know how they should sound, and listen to his performance, and try to help him make it sound the same... Oh no, my son doesn't listen to the CD... No, the teacher doesn't know about this, but I find it useful.' So here is a parent who does not herself play the piano, wishing to help her son, given no guidance from the teacher, surreptitiously doing what she can to help.

Similarly, another mother herself started piano lessons (with another teacher) when her son started, and learns his pieces so she can help him. She likes to sit in on lessons and do what she can in practices. The teacher does not seem to be aware of this arrangement.

Involvement at lessons among my

respondents varies between never attending, reading a book during the lesson and not talking to the teacher at all, not attending but discussing the lesson with the teacher when collecting the child, and listening to the lesson and discussing it with the teacher at the end. None of the 20 parents interviewed reported being encouraged to do anything in particular during the lessons.

Although teachers often speak to parents at the end of the lesson, no parents reported taking notes to help with practice at home. Parents say they may encourage practice to take place, ensure everything gets practised, instruct their child, engage in ensemble playing, listen when asked, or encourage their child. Several parents say they would like to make music with their child but consider they are not good enough. However, I found that many musically untrained parents are willing and able to assist their children with practice. Other parents have no conception that help could be given. Some underestimate their ability to help with music practice.

Do children appreciate parental assistance?

Very interestingly, children in my sample appreciate the assistance. They made comments such as: 'Mum helps me work out the notes', 'She helps me realise when something is wrong, then I can correct it', 'Father can show me my mistakes and how to repeat the passage over and over again; he knows some of the tricks of the trade', and 'Mum can help even though she doesn't play the piano'. As with attendance at lessons, all children who receive help with practising, like it.

Connection between teacher qualifications and encouragement of parental involvement

Teachers in my sample who are the most likely to encourage parental involvement are those who have initially received training in teaching skills, have followed specialist courses, have been teaching for the longest, and have the most pupils. In contrast, those who have received no initial teacher training, have not followed specialist courses, and have less teaching experience, discourage or do not discuss parental involvement.

Summary

My literature review reveals overwhelming support for the notion of involving parents in general education and, additionally, in instrumental learning. My survey findings show that some teachers discourage parental involvement, and they give good reasons for doing so. Other teachers encourage it, although few of them demonstrate full awareness of the

many ways in which parents can support their children. Those more likely to encourage parental involvement are experienced teachers who have received initial pedagogical training and then followed specialist music courses.

While some parents are unaware of the value of their potential input, others assist their children without the teacher's knowledge. It is evident from my research that parents are more able to act as an intermediary between the teacher and the child than teachers realise. It is not necessary for parents to be musically trained to help their children. Crucially, children who receive help welcome it. For all these reasons, there are good grounds for believing it is of benefit to pupils and should be encouraged.

A key issue seems to be training parents to help in a positive, non-critical way. To assist successfully, 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.

Recommendations

First, parents should select music teachers who have studied education as well as music. Second, given the fact that very many performers will do some teaching, all instrumental music courses should include a pedagogical element. Third, teachers should explain to parents how they can assist with their children's musical development. And fourth, researchers and teachers should publish widely in teachers' journals examples of successful parental involvement, to demonstrate to other teachers how it can be done, and to inspire and encourage them to do likewise.

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