

Music teaching for children with dyslexia

The Suzuki Approach

By Jenny Macmillan

Dr Suzuki believed his approach to teaching was suitable for all children. I have taught children with dyslexia, dyspraxia and autism and have found little beyond Suzuki's own ideas to add to the way I teach these children. I have identified ten key principles of the Suzuki approach: parental involvement, listening, observation, demonstration, step-by-step mastery, memory, common core repertoire, review, group work, and an early start. Almost all of these are important when teaching children with special needs. These children often respond well to teaching approaches that are structured, sequential, cumulative, thorough and multi-sensory. The Suzuki approach is all of these.

Ten key Suzuki principles

Parental involvement

Suzuki parents attend music lessons and supervise their young children's practices. Children with dyslexia may benefit more than most from close parental involvement. Teachers need to discuss with parents their children's abilities and difficulties, ways in which they learn best, and what they most enjoy. The more the teacher knows

about the child, the easier it is to work out how best to teach him or her. Discussion about when and how daily practice can be managed will be invaluable. Children and parents need clear advice on how to tackle problems. Appreciation of their efforts, in the form of praise, hugs, or rewards such as small toys or outings, will reinforce effort on their part and encourage them to try hard to repeat the success. Parental appreciation and praise is a significant element of the Suzuki approach.

Listening

In the same way that small children learn to speak by being surrounded by their own language, Suzuki transferred this "mother-tongue" principle to the learning of music. Suzuki children are surrounded by good music in the home. Learning by listening to music is especially helpful if children have difficulties with reading music. Suzuki children listen repeatedly to recordings of the music they can already play and will soon learn. Additionally they need to listen carefully to what their teacher says in lesson. Dyslexic children can easily get distracted, and learning to listen intently will help them in everyday life.

Observation

Observation of other pupils' lessons is another simple and helpful way for children with dyslexia to learn. Some children learn best visually, some aurally, and some kinaesthetically (through sense of touch). Children can pick up musical and technical points when observing other children's lessons. They can be motivated by hearing a slightly older or more advanced child playing a favourite piece. Socially, they can feel more involved when they meet up regularly with other students, as they do in a Suzuki studio.

Demonstration

Rather than learn through reading the notes, children with dyslexia often learn more easily (after listening to recordings of their pieces) by watching their teacher demonstrate the sounds and techniques required. Hand-on-hand demonstration is useful for those who learn best kinaesthetically. A benefit of having parents and observers in lessons is that teachers (after due consultation with parents) are able to touch pupils in order to show them in the most efficient and effective way how to play their instrument.

Step-by-step mastery

Learning how to divide a large task into several small steps is helpful in many areas of life. Suzuki teachers are trained to pick one point only for improvement when hearing a pupil play a piece in lesson. The teacher will work thoroughly on that one step, demonstrating and explaining how best to practise it. Correct repetition of small tasks is invaluable to master a skill, and Suzuki teachers will guide children and parents with suggestions for useful games for repetition. Gradually several small achievements combine into a greater achievement. This thorough step-by-step mastery of every component of a piece is an essential element for secure preparation for successful performances. Repeated successes will build the self-esteem of children with dyslexia.

Memory

Suzuki children play music from memory. For children who find it difficult to read words or music, for whom tracking may be difficult, playing from memory will instil confidence.

Common core repertoire

For each instrument, there is a common core repertoire which each

child listens to and learns to play. The repertoire is carefully constructed so each piece sequentially adds one or two new techniques while building on the child's existing skills. Repeatedly hearing the Suzuki repertoire at home on recordings, when observing lessons, and when attending pupils' concerts, reinforces the child's learning as well as providing motivation.

Review

Suzuki children retain their past repertoire, continually returning to the pieces to learn to play them more musically. People enjoy doing what they do well. By learning pieces thoroughly, accumulating them in their repertoire and improving them yet further, children's confidence in their abilities grows. Playing through their repertoire offers a constant source of pleasure.

Group work

Group musicianship classes are given in addition to individual Suzuki lessons. Some concepts are easier to present and understand through games in groups. Activities tend to be multi-sensory – singing, clapping, beating a drum, rearranging flash cards, moving to music (jumping, running, stamping the feet). Some children with special

needs are extremely sociable; others are withdrawn. Group classes help children work together, both socially and musically.

Early start

Ideally children start Suzuki lessons at the age of three or four. However, as children with dyslexia often take longer to develop and may be more dependent on parents for longer, a very early start is perhaps less important. So it may be possible to start pupils a little older, for instance after they have been diagnosed as dyslexic. However, there will still need to be a lengthy preparation time of listening to music and observing lessons before children start their own lessons.

Further factors

The above ten principles are common to all Suzuki teaching. Almost all are particularly helpful when teaching children with dyslexia. Four further factors are also useful with dyslexic children – they will also be valuable when teaching most young children.

Continued on page 96

Continued from page 95

Simple language

To avoid confusion, and to aid understanding, teachers and parents need to use simple language. Sentences should be kept short. Questions should be direct and to the point. Only one instruction at a time should be given. A list of three points to remember will confuse a dyslexic child, who will not be able to remember them all.

Practice techniques

How to practise is a huge subject. How not to practise is simple – don't start at the beginning of a piece, play until you can go no further, stop, play another piece as far as you can, stop, and say that's it for the day. That sort of practice is demotivating and demoralising and little progress will be made. Through discussion with the teacher, parents can guide their children into interesting, challenging, motivating practice which offers a sense of achievement. Children with dyslexia particularly may need to be helped with study skills. For instance, identifying a part that needs practice and devising interesting ways to repeat the passage will help the child get started. Focusing on one point at a time, eg dynamics (rather than dynamics and slurs and crisp staccatos), will lead to improvement and satisfaction.

Routine

Some children with dyslexia appreciate the security of routine. Teachers may find it best to have a specific routine for each lesson, eg starting with technical warm ups, moving onto sight reading, examining a past repertoire piece,

perfecting a concert piece, working on a new piece, and ending by playing through a favourite piece as a duet. Likewise, at home, parents may find it best to establish a regular time for daily practice, and a routine for what gets practised each day. Consistency of approach may be successful.

Charts

Charts often prove useful. They provide a visual reminder of what has been achieved. Ticks or stickers, with a small reward when the chart is complete, eg a small toy or, preferably, a visit to a concert, ballet or musical, may be motivating.

Priorities

Children with dyslexia are often highly innovative, creative and intuitive. They may excel at lateral thinking. However, bearing in mind that many tasks for them are more difficult and take longer, parents and teachers need to consider what are the most useful skills for the child. For instance, if they show an interest in and an aptitude for art or sport, it might be better to nurture that aspect of their development so they gain confidence in that area, rather than push for musical training if they show no special interest in it. Though not wanting to neglect any area of skill development, it may sometimes be preferable to emphasise their strengths rather than attempt less successfully to develop too many areas.

Conclusion

My ten key principles of the Suzuki approach are highly applicable when teaching children with dyslexia. In

addition, using simple language, discussing how to practise, finding a routine that suits the child, and using charts may be beneficial. The ten key Suzuki principles and these four additional factors, combined with plenty of praise from teachers and parents, will be helpful when teaching most pupils, especially young ones. Good teaching techniques are good teaching techniques and, for successful outcomes, they need to be applied with great care and thought to all pupils, whatever their needs. **S**



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