

Suzuki in *schools*



Kate O'Connor

by Kate O'Connor



Until very recently, the Suzuki approach to learning an instrument has been available only in private teaching practices, but rarely in

schools. Having been developed in Japan in the mid-twentieth century, originally on violin, the method is based on every child having one individual lesson and one group lesson every week, with the parent present at all times. This intensive learning process is obviously expensive, and very different from what many schools can afford to offer their pupils. As music teaching in schools has moved closer towards whole class learning, many parents are looking elsewhere for a more individual approach for their child's musical education. The move towards whole class instrumental teaching, which is undoubtedly very successful for some children, but fails to engage or truly educate many others, is what made me think about starting an initiative to set up Suzuki practices within primary schools.

Many parents I had spoken to were already being charged for instrumental lessons, and yet did not have any say in the variable standards of teaching that were being offered. Other

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parents were getting group lessons offered to their children for free, but felt that they would rather pay for an approach they knew to be

more effective and stimulating for their child. And again and again, I heard from schools that peripatetic teachers were not staying in their jobs for very long, or were apt to disappear on tour for long periods, or were generally just not very interested in the teaching they were doing. Of course this is not the case for every peripatetic music teacher – far from it – but it is sadly the case in many of the schools with which I have had contact.

SuSI

So in December 2004, I decided to set up the Suzuki in Schools Initiative, affectionately known as SuSI. Working from the premise that only two small compromises on the Suzuki approach were needed to make Suzuki a viable method for working within schools, I set about contacting schools to offer them a Suzuki programme on violin, viola, cello or piano. Our necessary compromises were that we

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must offer Suzuki to all children in the school, even if their parents could not attend the lessons, and that in order to make it less expensive, the children learning string instruments should be able to learn in pairs. I had consulted many experienced string teachers, and most of them felt it was perfectly possible, particularly in the early years of tuition, to teach a pair of children together as effectively as teaching them singly. In fact, some even felt that this could be such a benefit in terms of motivation that they were already teaching pairs within their private practices. As we were offering Suzuki only to primary schools, the children would not become too advanced to learn in this way while in our care.

A much more tricky subject was that of parental involvement, and it remains our biggest challenge. I truly believe that to deny children whose parents are in full time work the opportunity to learn in a Suzuki way is untenable within a school environment. Equal access must be at the forefront of our minds, and so the compromise that has been put in place is that children over the age of six can learn without a parent's presence in the lessons, and children under six must either have a parent there, or wait until they turn six. So our Suzuki teachers working within the Suzuki in Schools Initiative teach individuals and pairs, some with parents present, some without, starting children at any age from three to eleven. Apart from these differences, the Suzuki programmes in our schools are identical to those private practices that you find anywhere in the country. We currently have ten Suzuki programmes up and running in primary schools in London, and more schools are expressing their interest every week.

The benefits of working within a school environment can be enormous. As a teacher, I very much appreciate working within a team, and having a clear management structure, with a headteacher or music co-ordinator that I can turn to if I have a problem. It's great to work within a community of educators, where inspiration often comes over cups of tea in the staffroom at break time. Being on the staff of a school gains you access to fundraising for events, and often means you can teach kids on free school meals without charging them, as the schools are funded to support these families. Percussion instruments and keyboards are usually available for your group lessons, and you can access video and recording equipment free of charge. It also means you can teach Suzuki without needing to have your studio at home! A few of our schools are now offering Suzuki programmes on both violin and cello, which means those privileged teachers get to work not only with class teachers, but also with Suzuki colleagues. This is the way we hope more of our schools will go.



For the children, the benefits are also numerous. They are already in a space they associate with learning and education, and as a result are generally more focused and ready for their lesson than a child who has just got out of a car or off a bus. They have their lessons during the school day, so are not exhausted by having to do a whole school day and then have their instrumental lesson after school. When a Suzuki programme is set up within a school, the motivation factor is very high right from the beginning – the kids see their friends doing their lessons, practising their pieces, performing their

solos, and so on, and this automatically inspires them to do the same. Children starting in a Suzuki programme that is already established have the additional motivation of seeing the more advanced children and thinking "I want to play like that!"

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► Children who learn together at school may already know each other, but because any group starting together will have a wider age range than that of one class, they also get to make friends with children they do not already know. It is very touching to see young children become friends with older children, as has happened in all my groups. Most schools have some sort of orchestra, so in addition to their individual and group lessons, students can access orchestral experiences without having to travel or pay extra. And of course, within a school there are so many opportunities to perform! Assemblies, talent shows, school concerts, parents' evenings, summer fetes and winter fairs all provide us with an opportunity to get the kids used to performance – whether busking at the school fete, or performing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* in assembly.

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Now and the future

SuSI is still very young! Our longest-running school programme, which I set up independently of the initiative, but which became the flagship for our official school programmes, has been running for only four years. The most advanced children there, at Lauriston School in Hackney, passed their grade 3 exams last summer, and are rapidly approaching Suzuki book four. Already the school is fantastically impressed with their achievements, and some of the children there still have three years left at primary school.

I can't wait to see the headteacher's face when they perform in assembly in three years' time – Vivaldi concerti, here we come!

And where do we hope to go from here? The British Suzuki Institute's mission statement says that it aims to make Suzuki 'the method of choice in Great Britain'. SuSI covers only London at the moment, and I am working

towards making Suzuki the method of choice for London primary schools. Eventually, there is no reason why SuSI should not go national, and even international. I would like to think that in twenty years' time, any child in the UK could access Suzuki lessons should they wish to. I learned by the Suzuki approach as a child, and I really believe it is an amazing thing to offer as part of a child's education. I hope to make this extraordinary experience available to every child.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in being involved with SuSI, whether as a teacher or a parent, or on behalf of a school you are involved with.

My contact details are kate@suzukiinschools.co.uk, mobile 07946 474 320. ■

■ *Kate O'Connor is the founder and director of the Suzuki in Schools Initiative, based in London. She teaches Suzuki violin in two state primary schools, and one state secondary school. Additionally, she works as a freelance player with orchestras and bands in and around London.*

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