

# Practical and Personal: An Inquiry into What Teachers Do

By Merlin B. Thompson

**A**s a Suzuki Piano teacher, I've always been interested in understanding more about what teachers do when they teach. Do they pass on knowledge? Are they responsible for telling their students what to do? How do teachers bring out their students' potential? When we consider what teachers do from a historical perspective, we see that teaching is embedded in centuries of tradition, social practices, ideologies, and educational philosophy. Teaching has been shaped over time by the influence of scientific and industrial revolutions, the rise of capitalism, the move from agricultural to urban societies, increasing access to information, principles of democracy, and recent philosophies of an inclusive society. As a result, we routinely employ a large assortment of words to describe teaching. On occasion, we describe teaching as all about *facilitating*, *opening up*, and *guiding* broad explorations. On other occasions, teaching is all about *instructing* and *training* within intensely specific and intentional parameters. On still other occasions, teaching takes on the personal qualities of *nurturing*, *empowering*, and *drawing out* students' implicit and explicit potentials.

What I'd like to do in this article is to examine two distinct teaching perspectives with immediate relevance for Suzuki teachers. The first perspective—which has a clearly practical slant—is concerned with the roles teachers play in order to influence their students' ongoing musical development. A second perspective—which takes a more personal viewpoint—is related to Dr. Suzuki's vision of music study and performance as vehicle for character development. To illustrate these perspectives throughout, I include real-life demonstrations from my own experience of working with students. My goal in bringing together these layers is to provide an opening for Suzuki teachers to participate in a robust and meaningful inquiry into what teachers do.

## Teacher Roles

Early in my career, I realized that my teaching could benefit from a purposefully vigorous tweaking. Not knowing exactly where to begin, I started by examining how I contributed to or influenced my students' ongoing musical development. It didn't take long for me to notice that what students needed from me in Volumes One, Two, and Three of the Suzuki Piano repertoire could be identified in terms of three distinct teacher roles: teaching as leading the way, teaching as passing on tools, and teaching as expanding

awareness. Most particularly in Volume One, students needed me to introduce and guide their musical explorations. In Volume Two, they needed me to hand over their own tools for study and performance. Subsequently in Volume Three, students needed me to continually broaden and refine their own sense of musicianship. Incorporating each of these three teacher roles ensured that I could nurture students' ongoing mastery of the repertoire; more importantly for students' long-term growth, I could help them cultivate and develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as musicians. I came to understand that working with students' evolving needs from one volume to the next requires Suzuki teachers to make specific adjustments to their role especially in terms of lesson activities and instructional language.

*Phrases that begin with "I'm curious to see..." are extremely valuable.*

In Suzuki Volume One, the teacher's role is all about leading the way, keeping in mind that leading is most effective when it's a direction students are interested in taking. This means that at every lesson, the teacher introduces the activities teacher and student complete together related to tone production and technique, keeping the beat, and learning to play by ear. For example in a Suzuki Piano prep class, the teacher demonstrates the piano's sound, the set-up of black keys and white keys, how to move fingers, how to hold the hand. The teacher claps the rhythm of *Twinkle Variation A*. Continuing when the student moves on to longer more formal Volume One lessons, the teacher guides the student's emergent capacity for learning by ear through specific and small amounts of rote instruction combined with singing the pieces and listening to the repertoire recording. The teacher leads tone production and technique explorations, and plays along with the student to reinforce his or her consistent rhythmic/beat competency. The structure of lesson activities encompasses working from the student's most familiar repertoire (review and refinement) all the way to the student's newest piece. In this way, the entire instructional period is directed, structured, reinforced, and validated by the teacher, even though the student's

**Continued on p. 56**

## **Practical and Personal, continued from p. 55**

impression may be quite different. In fact, most good teaching will give the impression that everything is being done so students can demonstrate ownership of their learning, rather than merely responding to the teacher.

The teacher's language in this stage may be characterized as invitational and affirmative, always aiming to provide gentle guidance for the student. Requests such as, "Let me see your moving thumb," and "Ready-Go," invite the student's active participation while providing the teacher with opportunities to recognize and validate the student's own successful learning. Phrases that begin with "I'm curious to see..." are extremely valuable, because such expressions confirm the teacher's confidence in students' ability to complete any task imaginable. And if they're unable to respond, teachers are there to provide leadership for students' successful learning. Also, teachers gradually introduce the expressions to talk about tone production, how they play, and what they play. Teachers know when it may be preferable to use descriptive language (i.e. banging tone, ringing tone) in place of qualitative judgments (i.e. good tone, bad tone). Further, teachers lead their students in reflective processes by asking questions they know students can answer, like, "Which one has the ringing tone? One or two?" They set students up for successful reflection by making requests before performance that students can check afterwards, such as, "Let's check your \_\_\_\_\_ in the next section," followed by, "How did it turn out?" In this way, teachers use specific language to create a safe and productive learning environment that is effectively teacher-led and student-experienced. What happens next? That's where Volume Two comes in with a transformative adjustment to the teacher's role.

In Suzuki Volume Two, the teacher's role makes a fundamental shift to include passing on tools. Here, teachers

*Teachers empower students to do many things for themselves that teachers could do for them, but students might prefer they didn't.*

*They help students prepare for, appreciate, and flourish in lifelong relationships with music.*

deliberately initiate activities that help students develop the abilities of using their musical score and independently keeping the beat. Using a step-by-step approach, teachers assist students to track the score with one hand while playing with the other, frequently adding on note names, finger numbers, or rhythmic jingles as appropriate. This skill has immense value in equipping students to work on isolated sections of pieces and make improvements to fingerings, notes and rhythms that may be difficult to achieve through learning to play by ear. Also using a step-by-step approach, teachers reinforce the student's ability to keep a steady beat by playing with one hand and keeping the beat with the other or tapping his or her foot. This activity typically involves a cyclical process that explores smaller and larger groupings of beats (i.e. three beats in Three/4 and one principal beat in Three/4), keeping in mind that small groupings may be easily handled by small physical movements and large groupings by the entire body.

The instructional language for the teacher's role of passing on tools continues to draw from invitational and affirmative phrases that begin with, "Let me see..." and "I'm curious to see..." Teachers encourage students' active involvement with the musical score as in the following: "Let's check bars three and four left hand in Short

Story with tracking and note names... With tracking and finger numbers." "Have a look at bar 8 and 16 in Minuet. Tell me how the left hand is different... Which one do you play?" Engaging students in such interactive activities means that teachers help students make practical connections to their musical score. Also in terms of instructional language, teachers gradually pass on ways of talking about the beat. They convey various groupings of the beat as in "Show me Ecosse right hand with the *flow* beat... With the *marching* beat." What's important here is that teachers strategically assign these tools throughout the repertoire and make sure to point out how such tools contribute to students' immediate and long-term achievements. In this way, teachers empower students to do many things for themselves that teachers could do for them, but students might prefer they didn't. For example, I ask my students to show me in the score where they might have wrong notes, rhythms, or fingerings, rather than me pointing out where they have mistakes. By having students show me what they already know or don't know, I'm able to more accurately provide information that builds on their knowledge rather than my own assumptions. Ultimately, when students have things figured out, I enjoy validating their knowledge, especially because I suspect there's nothing more disempowering than teachers telling them they're making mistakes students already know about. What happens next? That's where Volume Three comes in and the teacher's role takes on a new set of characteristics.

In Suzuki Volume Three, the teacher's role adjusts to include expanding students' awareness of their own musicianship. Here, one of the most remarkable developments is evident in the structure teachers use to broaden and refine students' musicianship. Whereas the teacher previously used a lot of "I'm curious to see..." to initiate instructional activities, the Volume Three teacher launches explorations

with expressions like, “Tell me about...” or, “What’s going on?” to gather information from students before they play, no matter how brief students’ reports may be. They follow up their students’ performances with other strategic expressions like, “What did you notice?” or, “What happened?” to engage students in their own reflective processes about what they practiced, how they practiced, and how successful they’ve been. Using such interactive processes, teachers are able to recognize and validate the knowledge and experience students have accumulated throughout their studies. Reinforcing what students know, however, is only the precursor to expanding students’ musical awareness. Most importantly in this role, teachers gather pertinent information from students as the springboard for expanding students’ unimagined musicianship.

Expanding awareness means shedding light on areas of musicianship students may not access on their own, or ways in which students might never even consider thinking about music. It’s all about teachers bringing in thought processes that fill in the gaps and challenge students’ musicianship and ideas about life, drawing routinely from their own sense of musicianship and life experiences to meaningfully engage with their students’ viewpoints, innate characteristics, and interests. In this way, expanding awareness isn’t something arbitrarily imposed upon or separate from students. Teachers expand students’ awareness in relation to their students’ musical temperament, passions, and abilities in combination with their own life experiences and musical background. They help students prepare for, appreciate, and flourish in lifelong relationships with music.

What I appreciate about the above teacher’s roles is that leading, passing on tools, and expanding awareness may effectively overlap with each other. Most likely, teachers incorporate elements of each role in every lesson they teach from beginner to advanced

students. Linking each of the teacher’s roles to a specific Suzuki Volume and stage of student development has immense practical value, especially given that an exclusive focus on any one role may have undesirable effects. For example, leading may be a good thing, but it may also result in students being deprived of the opportunity to develop their own thinking capacity and ownership of their own development. Passing on too much information and overly complex skills without considering students’ readiness may inhibit their growth. Similarly, incorporating an expanding perspective too early may inadvertently burden students with requests beyond the scope of their musical understanding, vocabulary, and performance skills. That’s why it’s important to remember that teacher’s roles are always in relation to where students are coming from, what they’re doing right now, and where they’re heading in the future.

## Noble Human Beings

We all know how fervent Dr. Suzuki was about promoting music study and performance as vehicle for character development. How he passionately encouraged teachers to guide children to become “noble human beings”<sup>1</sup> and foster the “truly cultured person.”<sup>2</sup> While expressions like “noble human beings” and the “truly cultured person” may be more associated with the lofty ideals of past generations, we hold on to these expressions because they convey a heightened sense of who we are and how we connect with the world around us. Noble and cultured persons are characterized by a blending of generosity, compassion, humility, wisdom, confidence, and respect. They’re appreciative of their home, their community, and beyond, as well as their responsibility to the planet. They do what’s needed even without being asked, neither out of fear nor obligation, simply because they could not do otherwise. Because noble and cultured persons remain

steadfastly true to themselves under all circumstances, they meaningfully connect *who they are* with what they do. In other words, their authentic self—the ideal of being true to oneself—plays a vital role in everything they do. Their actions, well-being, thought processes, and integrity are all reflections of the marvelous resonance at the very core of their being—their own authentic self. What seems remarkable in considering Dr. Suzuki’s vision of noble and cultured persons is that teachers may cultivate the marvelous resonance at the core of their students’ identity. Teachers may nurture their students’ authentic self, engage them in musical explorations that build on and develop their integrity, and open spaces for students to become more of the unique individuals they already are.

Personal authenticity—the ideal of being true to oneself—may be described as the way in which a person’s actions genuinely align with his or her authentic self. As Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor described, “There is a certain way of being human that is *my way*. I am called up to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me*.”<sup>3</sup> Personal authenticity brings clarity and meaning to who we are and what we do in life. Without authenticity, we may experience a sense of superficiality and a disconnection from life. With authenticity, we may feel both comfort and discomfort—when on certain occasions it’s easy to tap into our authentic self and elsewhere when it’s a challenge to remain true to oneself. Suzuki teachers may nurture students’ personal authenticity in three meaningful ways: by getting to know, by accepting, and by caring for the student’s authentic self.

Music lessons provide a fertile environment for Suzuki teachers to get to

*Continued on p. 58*

**Practical and Personal, continued  
from p. 57**

know a student's authentic self because most lessons occur one-on-one, take place on a regular weekly basis, and may span several years of close involvement from preschool through high school graduation. Teachers develop a deep understanding of their students through observing and listening on professional, casual, immediate, and introspective levels. Students reveal themselves in their posture, in the tone they produce, in their gestures, their language, the interpretations they prefer, the way they learn, the tools they use to study and perform, the spontaneous expression of their own internal voice. So, by observing and listening to students' musical explorations, performances, and conversations, teachers may get a sense of who their students are as individuals.

When my students are in junior high or high school, I like to deepen what I know about them by asking them to write a one-page essay. I give questions like, "What's it like for someone your age to learn the piano?" "What does it mean for you to be a musician?" "Musicianship and artistry: What do these words mean for you?" Their responses have touched on creativity, pushing themselves, imagination, frustration, freedom, pride, attitude, and more. One student revealed how when you care about playing your instrument, you practice better and play better. Another student described how being a musician means to see the world in song. I like using this activity a lot, not only for what it reveals regarding my students' insights, but also because taking the time to put things on paper requires an intentionality that differs from our spontaneous conversations.

Accepting the student's authentic self is about teachers appreciating students for who they are rather than who teachers might want them to be. Teachers with an acceptant attitude understand that students' approach to learning a musical instrument may be quite different from their own. Most

likely, students prefer freedom, exploration, and independence in contrast to teachers' fondness for structured curriculum, discipline, and quality. In his book *Freedom to Learn*, educator and psychologist Carl Rogers described the acceptant teacher's attitude as a prizing of students—prizing their feelings, their opinions, their person. This means that teachers respect and trust students as separate persons who have worth in their own right.<sup>4</sup> They understand that teaching isn't about changing the student's authentic self into something else. Teachers recognize the value in what students literally and musically have to say.

In my own studio, accepting students means that I genuinely combine authentic exploration with honest evaluation. As a consequence, I've heard my students' favorite way of

*Teachers recognize  
the value in what  
students literally and  
musically have to say.*

performing, my own favorite, the composer's intentions, opposites of the composer's intentions, colors, feelings, four seasons, and more. Throughout such deliberate explorations, my students and I have no illusions about what we are doing—we tell it like it is. As one of my students explained, "Sometimes it sounds great, sometimes it doesn't but in the end it doesn't really matter because you're just trying something new." What's important here is that teachers use authentic explorations to exercise students' reflective capacities. Instead of an accumulation of teacher-dictated rules or a free-for-all of student whims, students learn that both who they are and what they do directly impact music. They gain confidence in doing things on their own and thinking for themselves. They learn about themselves in

relation to the sounds they make and the music they perform.

Because teachers have strong connections to music and commitments to their students' wellbeing, most teachers naturally develop caring relationships with their students. Teachers care for the student's authentic self in several ways. Firstly, by setting up a safe and stable learning environment in which teachers help students to recognize and value their own successes. Teachers use overlapping processes of leading, passing on, and expanding to assist students in gradually acquiring and applying increasingly sophisticated musical skills. Secondly, by shielding students from excessive demands, teachers take great care to guard students' vulnerability and integrity. They understand how students develop through cycles of growth and rest. Thirdly, by knowing when it's appropriate to push students out of their comfort zone. Teachers use meaningful strategies to keep students from being held hostage by their own defensive sense of self. They know when it's beneficial to introduce challenges and guide students in pushing beyond their own boundaries.

When I reflect on my own studio, it's interesting to consider how caring for students' authentic self takes on various nuances. For example in the case of a seven-year-old girl whose family moved to Calgary in the middle of Volume Two, I remember how her eyes lit up when she fully understood my intentions. My teaching was dedicated to highlighting her achievements, not in some kind of ordinary way, but in a way that she was uplifted by her success. In another example of a teenage student facing a week of hockey tryouts, extra practices, driving to numerous locations, off-ice training, not to mention homework, I knew piano time would be at a minimum. So I said, "We need to rethink practicing until I see you next. How about instead of trying to make improvements to your pieces, any time you spend at the piano is about appreciating why

piano is the second most amazing thing you do after playing hockey.” We’d have more than enough time to make improve-

ments in weeks following. Finally, an example from a summer institute: an eleven-year-old girl who held back, hardly breathing or moving while playing. This was her authentic voice. So, I asked her to breathe more deeply, to activate her energy from head to toe, to push her own limits. She was out of her comfort zone, yet she gave it her best, even surprising herself with her efforts in taking a risk.

Getting to know, accepting, and caring for students’ authentic selves means that Suzuki teachers establish the dynamic conditions for their students’ character, creativity, emotions, and imagination to flourish. They provide opportunities for their students to actively experience the blending of generosity, compassion, humility, wisdom, confidence, and respect characterized by noble and cultured persons. Given that Suzuki teachers interact with their students year after year, the potential for increasingly sophisticated developments and explorations is immense. To be certain, teaching with the student’s authentic self in mind doesn’t mean that teachers ignore their own authentic self, their own interests, expertise, wisdom, or practical experience. Teachers’ input is vital, especially when teachers use their achievements and understanding as rich resources to enhance their students’ understanding, rather than unquestionable standards students must adopt.

What this reveals is that character development and musical explorations occur simultaneously. Character development isn’t just something Suzuki teachers assign casually at the end of a lesson; it’s embedded in music study and performance—which may be why it’s not unusual for me to encounter questions and discussions that require thoughtful attention in my teaching.

*Suzuki teachers establish the dynamic conditions for their students’ character, creativity, emotions, and imagination to flourish.*

Like the time a student enquired, “Dr. Thompson, do you think you’ll ever get mad at me?” On another occasion, a student wanted to know, “What is positive thinking all about anyway?” Another asked, “Why would a kid get sent to the principal’s office for looking out the window?” Such questions shed light on the topics that challenge my students’ day-to-day thinking. They seek to understand profound matters that take time to explore. Unlike their classroom teachers whose time may be limited, I’ve got time to listen to their thoughts and contribute when I can. With our mutual interest in music and our relationship based on personal authenticity, character development unfolds in musical explorations and conversations that are deeply engaging, imaginatively challenging, and potentially personally transformative. In this way, students naturally experience for themselves what it means to connect *who they are* with what they do. Suzuki teachers have the honor of witnessing and participating as their students exercise the marvelous resonance at the core of the noble and cultured person.

## What Teachers Do

This article has presented an inquiry into what teachers do from two distinct viewpoints. From a practical perspective, the teacher’s overlapping roles involve leading, passing on tools, and expanding students’ awareness as related to students’ progress from one volume to the next. From a personal viewpoint, teachers get to know, accept, and care for their student’s authentic self in respectful

student-friendly strategies into their teaching because they place a high priority on engaging students as active participants in learning experiences. They see the immense value in making certain that students have ownership of their own musical development, in contrast to the 20th-century trend for teachers to control or micromanage every step of the student’s musical journey. Pro-student teachers fuel the flourishing of independent and authentic student musicians. They present them with tasks, choices, and challenges designed to stimulate their involvement, especially in terms of being able to think reflectively, make practical applications of their learning, and extend what they’ve learned, all without losing sight of the student’s most fundamental authentic self.

In his book *Where Love is Deep*, Dr. Suzuki wrote, “Everything depends on the teacher.”<sup>5</sup> What this means for Suzuki teachers around the globe is that effective teaching involves more than having students diligently follow teachers’ instructions in order to reproduce what teachers know. Effective teaching depends on interactions in which both teachers’ and students’ voices are heard; not through superficial or patronizing exchanges, but by teachers genuinely valuing what students literally and musically have to say. At a most basic level, pro-student strategies require teachers to look willingly at both the big picture and the details of teaching, to think critically

about teaching, and to maintain realistic expectations and a healthy optimism towards their work.

*Teachers fuel the flourishing of independent and authentic student musicians.*

**Continued on p. 60**

---

## **Practical and Personal, continued from p. 59**

What I appreciate is that the two perspectives presented in this article are reliable. They work in real music studios and incorporating them will bring teachers more in tune with the practical and personal dynamics of teaching. So, in the final analysis, what do teachers do when they teach? The short answer is they fuel authentic student musicians. The long answer is they incorporate the safety, the challenges, and the rewards of musical study and performance to foster noble human beings and the truly cultured person. 🌿

## Notes

1. Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love* (New York, NY: Exposition Press, 1969), 27.
2. Shinichi Suzuki, *Where Love is Deep* (St. Louis, MI: Talent Education Journal, 1982), 32.
3. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 29.
4. Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg, *Freedom to Learn* (New York, NY: Macmillan College Publishing, 1969), 156-57.
5. Suzuki, *Where Love is Deep*, 47.

**Merlin B. Thompson** (Ph.D., M.A., B.Mus.) is one of Canada's leading authorities on the Suzuki Piano Method and the



first Canadian to graduate from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute under the mentorship of Suzuki Piano Method co-founders Drs. Shinichi Suzuki and Haruko Kataoka. He has worked with hundreds of children, their parents, and teachers in workshops, institutes, conferences, established programs, and mentorships throughout Canada, US, Australia, Japan, Spain, Great Britain, and New Zealand. Most recently, his book *Fundamentals of Piano Pedagogy* was published by Springer Publications in both e-book and soft-print formats. Merlin is the 2017 recipient of the Article of the Year Award by the American Music Teacher journal of the MTNA. In addition to his Suzuki teaching, Merlin is instructor of music pedagogy at the Schulich School of Music (McGill University) and teacher mentor in the Werklund School of Education (University of Calgary).