This past May marked the 14th International Research Symposium on Talent Education (IRSTE). The Symposium was held in conjunction with the SAA Conference in Minneapolis and is now on my list of can’t-miss events.

I’ve thought about attending the Research Symposium for many years and was excited to be there as a first-time attendee and presenter in 2018. Congratulations are due to the co-organizers, Pat D’Ercole and Dr. Kate Einarson, for putting on such an informative, well-run event.

Without prior experience, it was my impression that everyone who presented research as a part of this event either held a PhD or was part of a university research program. It seemed like an interesting event that might be best suited for other people, if I’m honest.

I was surprised to find out that IRSTE is open to anyone doing research in the field, not only professors or professional researchers. For example, I presented my own research, as an author, after surveying one hundred Suzuki parents. Other presenters included graduate students, Suzuki teachers, professors from a few universities, and members of IRSTE’s own research team.

At this year’s event, presentations included a keynote, a “research masterclass,” a panel of several researchers sharing projects on Suzuki parent education, and short poster presentations, among others. The variety of people presenting and all the different types of presentations made for a very engaging event. Appetizers were served during the poster session, and we had multiple opportunities to connect with other colleagues who are interested in research in the field of music education.

A fellow first-time Research Symposium attendee had this to say:

“This was my first time attending the research symposium, and I found the information very valuable. It is exciting how much research is being done that supports the ideas that Dr. Suzuki had so ahead of his time. As a teacher, I want to feel comfortable sharing this research with the parents in my studio. Attending the research symposium helped me feel more comfortable navigating research and gave me valuable tools to bring home to my studio.” – Jodie St. Claire, violin and SECE teacher

Highlights from the 2018 Symposium

The event kicked off with a “research masterclass.” Doctoral student Jentry Barrett presented her plans for a research project, and keynote speaker Dr. Beatriz Ilari gave feedback about the approach, offering some questions to consider before the study design was finalized and data collection began. It was a fascinating session. It was so interesting to hear about research in its beginning phases and to listen to an experienced researcher’s feedback and ideas on how to make the research even more compelling.

Dr. Beatriz Ilari, associate professor of music education at the USC Thornton School of Music was the keynote speaker for the 2018 Symposium. She gave two presentations as well as a follow-up Q&A session that were among my favorite sessions between both the symposium and the conference as a whole. The first of her talks, on Thursday, was exclusive to the Research Symposium. The second, on Friday, was open to all conference attendees.

That second session was titled “From the Diaries of a Suzuki Mom: Connecting Musical Parenting Research and Music Education Practice.” Dr. Ilari was a Suzuki student growing up and is now a Suzuki parent, as well as a researcher and university professor. She did a brilliant job of being both very relatable in her Suzuki parenting journey and very informative sharing her research.

This year, for the first time ever, SAA Teacher Trainers were invited to attend Research Symposium events on Thursday afternoon, including the keynote by Dr. Ilari and the panel discussion with four presentations on the topic of Suzuki parent education that followed. Dozens of teacher trainers accepted the invitation to attend, and it was a great
way to share ideas and build on the collaborative theme of the conference as a whole.

Although the organizers didn’t plan it, many of the presentations this year centered on parent education. There was a real feeling of synergy between those presenting as we realized how related our topics were and how our results complemented each other. This was a great start to the wider SAA Conference, where I also heard many presentations and discussions about the importance of parent education. It was great confirmation that this is something we all need to keep thinking about and working on, whether from a teaching or research standpoint.

Marta Hernandez shared very detailed data about parent experiences in Suzuki programs in Puerto Rico. After the devastation of Hurricane Maria last year, it was very moving to hear how families were affected, what parent experiences were like before the natural disaster, and the questions and concerns that Suzuki teachers have as everyone moves forward.

This year there was a new format for presenters called a poster speed talk, which I loved. Researchers who were presenting posters had just a few minutes to give an overview of their topic and research findings in a concise way. Then, attendees moved out into the hall where each researcher had displays and visuals to share. We were able to ask questions, have conversations and connect with the presenters about their project. It was a great way to hear about everyone’s work, and I hope they decide to do it again in the future.

In addition to issues related to parents, this year’s event addressed cultural and socio-economic factors that affect outcomes for students and their families. These are issues that I want to know more about as a teacher and that I think our community would be wise to address more openly. I was glad to see the conversation taking place, especially with a research and data-focused approach.

For me, the event also sparked ideas of other topics I would like to research further in the future, and it started many conversations with colleagues interested in doing the same. I was glad to know that this event was so welcoming to research by Suzuki teachers like me.

If you’d like more information on all the presenters and their research, the records from the 2018 event (including the full schedule, the list of presentations, many of the PowerPoint slides, and a bibliography of research related to the Suzuki method) can be found on IRSTE’s website (IRSTE.org). You will also find links to articles from previous events and can learn more about research that has been done by past participants and IRSTE’s own research team.

If you’re anything like me and have been interested in the Symposium but have never attended, consider this your personal invitation to join next time, either as an attendee or as a presenter.