

The Twelfth International Research Symposium on Talent Education:
Empathy, Innovation, and Musicianship
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When Margery Aber first envisioned the International Research Symposium on Talent Education (IRSTE) over two decades ago, she hoped to provide a forum that would accomplish two things: (a) demonstrate the credibility of Suzuki's talent education approach through scientific research, and (b) support Suzuki teachers in conducting personal investigations to improve and strengthen their own programs. As a result, each IRSTE has featured presentations of new research of interest to Suzuki teachers, while also training and supporting practicing music teachers in creating their own research projects.¹

This year, IRSTE Co-Chair Pat D'Ercole announced that the symposium has "come of age" – we now have a considerable number of Suzuki teachers who have earned doctorates and interest in research, so we are able to develop and present our own projects without outside leadership. The number of published Suzuki-related research projects is also growing; the Suzuki Method Research Bibliography² reports the publication of 74 studies about the Suzuki approach since 1966.

Research "Master Class"

This was the third symposium to include a research "master class," where individuals presented research projects to the audience and then received coaching from a master researcher. This approach is unique to the IRSTE symposium, and has been well appreciated by attendees. The previous two symposia featured projects of graduate students; however, this year's symposium focused on a project that was created specifically for the symposium by the IRSTE Research Team, a group of scholars who had each presented original research projects in previous symposia.

Featured Project: Suzuki Participation and the Development of Empathy

Over the past two years, members of the IRSTE Research Team (Pat D'Ercole, Kate Einarson, Beth Guerriero, Nancy Mitchell, and I) have been meeting regularly via Skype to design and pilot a study observing potential relationships between Suzuki instruction and the development of empathy. Our research was guided by the following three questions:

1. Is there a significant effect of Suzuki private and/or group instruction upon parent-reported empathic character traits of children?
2. What relationships exist between parent-reported empathy ratings of children and parent beliefs, values, and commitment in music?
3. What are parent perceptions regarding the importance of group class?

We created a survey to obtain the following: (a) demographic information; (b) musical beliefs, values, commitment to private lessons, and projections toward future success; (c) beliefs and values regarding Suzuki group class; and (d) parent perceptions of child's empathic traits, as measured by the Griffith Empathy Measure.³ After creating the survey, we tested it with a group of 48 parents whose children were enrolled in a Suzuki program in the Midwestern United States. They were asked to take the survey twice: once in September, and again in March, after students had had the opportunity to participate in six months of group lessons.

Group lessons and empathy. While our number of pilot participants was too small to draw any general assumptions for other Suzuki students, we did find some interesting trends that we look forward to investigating in our main study. For example, the empathy ratings of those who stayed in group lessons during the 6-month period started out higher and further increased in comparison to those who did not stay (or did not participate at all) in group lessons, whose scores started out lower and further decreased over the same time period. We look forward to studying these trends with a larger sample of participants to determine if participation in Suzuki group lessons can actually lead to higher levels of empathy among children.

Parent beliefs/values and empathy. We found significant correlations between children's empathy scores and their parents' beliefs and values regarding (a) the importance of music instruction, (b) importance of Suzuki instruction, and (c) the belief that music will help their child succeed in other areas. This suggests that children's empathy scores are related to (and perhaps influenced by) parents' beliefs regarding the importance of music instruction.

Parent perceptions regarding group class. On our survey, we asked parents to explain why or why not they believed group class was important for their children. Their responses centered around themes of *community* (teamwork, peer mentoring/modeling, friendship, social music making, belonging to the larger Suzuki community); *skill development* (individual technique, individual musicality, of ensemble skills); and *challenges* (scheduling issues, disparity between the age or level of the individual student and those of the rest of the group). We hope for these findings to be of use to the program where we piloted our survey.

Feedback and future directions. Dr. Cutietta's comments to the IRSTE Research can be summed up by the word "focus." While he praised our use of the Griffith Empathy Measure and noted our discovery of some potentially important findings, he encouraged us to narrow purpose and research questions, keeping our project simpler and more direct. As a result of this discussion, we decided to focus more directly on our first research question (group lesson participation and the development of empathy) and save the third question (parent beliefs regarding group class) for a separate study.

Finally, comments from Suzuki teachers in the audience helped us realize the need for a descriptive overview of various group lesson formats and approaches used by teachers throughout North America – something we hope to implement in our study and share with the members of SAA.

Audience Discussion and Poster Session

After Dr. Cutietta's remarks, we opened up the floor to comments and questions from the audience and then began our snacks and poster session, where attendees browsed through a row of standing posters and asked questions of researchers about their projects. This year four posters were presented: "Content Analysis: Comparison of Rolland's Teaching of Action in String Playing with Selected String Method Books" (Liz Dinwiddie & Brenda Brenner); "Does Music Instruction Using the Suzuki Method Improve Working Memory and Visual-Spatial Processing in Kindergarten Children?" (Karin Hallberg, John McClure, & William Martin); "Living Soul: Awakenning the Ideals of Shinichi Suzuki, Compassion, and

Spirituality in 21st Century Music Teachers” (Karin Hendricks); and “Epidemiological Evaluation of Pain and Performance Anxiety Among String Instrumentalists” (Katrin Meidell).

Keynote Lecture by Dr. Robert Cutietta

On Thursday evening, Dr. Cutietta provided a keynote lecture that was both a celebration of Suzuki teachers while simultaneously challenging us to awaken to new problems and possibilities in the 21st Century. His visual aid (attaching Mounds bars to a yardstick with nails) and masterful contextualization of facts provided one of the most captivating music education history lessons I have ever experienced.

As Dr. Cutietta described his program in popular music at the University of California, he caused many of us in attendance to reconsider what “traditional” means in contemporary music education settings. I had to ask myself: Are we as innovative and creative in our approaches as Dr. Suzuki was? Are we willing to try new techniques and approaches to the same extent that Suzuki did, or are we stuck in a tradition of sameness? While describing how many old and outdated music education structures are fading, Rob expressed his hope for Suzuki teachers because of our emphasis on sound musicianship – a foundation that Suzuki students can take with them no matter what musical avenue they choose in later years of study.

Friday Morning Session: Presentations

Two researchers presented projects on Friday morning. First, Maureen Nilson shared research on Suzuki instruction and the prevention of performance anxiety that she had completed for her studies at the University of Sheffield in England. Her study of 175 adults and 36 adolescents showed that those trained in a “strict Suzuki” approach showed higher self-esteem and lower performance anxiety than those trained in “modified Suzuki” or “traditional” approaches.

The second presentation was given by Kathleen Einarson, who worked with Laurel Trainor on a project to determine children’s sensitivity to musical meter. In their study involving 32 musically untrained children, they found that the perceptual sensitivity to musical beat was significantly higher for seven-year-old children than five-year-old children. Both groups showed a perceptual bias for simple meter over complex meter, which Einarson related to other research to suggest that children’s musical sensitivities are influenced by the music of their culture.

Final Session: Future Directions for the Empathy Project

We concluded our symposium by bringing presenters and participants in a discussion circle, to offer some ideas for teachers regarding how they might conduct their own research projects. Our final discussion returned to the Empathy Project, where we considered how Suzuki teachers across North America might be involved in the upcoming phase of the research. The teachers and researchers in attendance offered a number of excellent ideas for the content and distribution of surveys, and we are excited to move forward with the project this coming fall.

Please join us!

If you are interested in having your program or studio represented in our research, we would be thrilled to have you participate! Size or group lesson format (or even lack of group lessons) does not matter – we hope to include a variety of approaches so that we can best understand the landscape of Suzuki-based teaching

in North America. If interested, please contact me at kshendricks@bsu.edu or call (765) 285-5493. We are eager for your help with this important work!

¹ Proceedings for the 2014 Symposium are available online at

<http://www.uwsp.edu/suzuki/Pages/IRSTE/default.aspx>

² Alice Ann O'Neill, Karin S. Hendricks, Nancy Mitchell, and Elizabeth Guerriero, "Suzuki method research: A bibliography" in *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Research Symposium on Talent Education* edited by Kathleen M. Einarson (Minneapolis, MN, USA: International Research Symposium on Talent Education, 2014).

³ Dadds, Mark R., Kirsten Hunter, David J. Hawes, Aaron DJ Frost, Shane Vassallo, Paul Bunn, Sabine Merz, and Yasmeeen El Masry. "A measure of cognitive and affective empathy in children using parent ratings." *Child psychiatry and human development* 39, no. 2 (2008): 111-122.