

"One child, one parent, one teacher, bad environment"

spoken by Shin'ichi Suzuki

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Dr. Suzuki was looking straight at me as he walked up to my face, and said directly to ME, "One child, one parent, one teacher, bad environment. You have to have families come together for lessons".

It was 1976, and I was observing a few months at Dr. Suzuki's Talent Education Institute at 3-10-3 Fukashi, Matsumoto, Japan. He knew I was an American pianist. I was among many people in his teaching studio to watch his next lesson, waiting.

He walked to me with great purpose, stood near me with his face facing mine, looked into my eyes and gave me this directive, "One child, one parent, one teacher, BAD ENVIRONMENT". I was surprised.

People had been referring to two lesson events in Suzuki's Method. One was "the group lesson" which distinguished Suzuki Method from other methods. The other was "the private lesson", like in other methods.

This day, Dr. Suzuki was telling me that the second lesson event ALSO was different. He was saying that is it NOT a "private" lesson, but an "individual lesson in a group". A personal turn in the group, an "individual lesson group".

I felt he was giving me a mission to teach this crucial concept, and a big responsibility. He explained to me that in Suzuki Method, children and parents have lessons with other children and parents, for all to watch each other's individual lessons, in the "individual lesson group". He said children's individual instruction by their teacher at their instrument takes place in a group. The whole time is everybody's lesson.

They learn from watching each other. Parents learn from watching another parent's child being instructed. The individual lesson is not "private" (not "secret", not "confidential", not behind closed doors with the others waiting outside.) It is open.

And this is different from the larger group's playing together called the "group lesson" or "group class".

Dr. Suzuki told me this with urgency, as if he knew that this important concept was not enough known.

This format is what I saw when I watched lessons for weeks and weeks in Matsumoto. Dr. Suzuki's studio was full of people watching each other's individual turns playing for him. He would teach one person, and would address his remarks to everyone in the room. He included all of us in his instruction. Mrs. Kataoka's room was full of kids and parents watching. She would talk to the parents often.

I would see parents watching lessons even when their own children were not there. All knew that all lessons are open. Everyone learns from everyone's lessons!

This is like at institutes and workshops. He was saying this is the way for home studios too!

The Suzuki triangle has a circle around it! When you draw it, feel how right it is.

Ever since that day, I have tried to have a group of children and parents have lessons together. They become special to each other. They are "lesson partners". I tell them the whole time is everybody's lesson. They take turns at the piano. Parents sometimes also have turns.

If I were to have no students, having just moved to a new place, I would "start" lessons when I had at least about three students. If one family called me, I would have them listening at home while I find more students for their individual lesson group. They'd all listen at home 'til they could sing the whole book, then children would watch me teach their parents until the children were asking for lessons. (See my articles "Call back when you're humming all of Book One" and "Approach Positive as babywalk talk").

Parents and kids see each others' entire lessons. They are part of the lesson for each other. They are a learning-together group, a support group with camaraderie (not competition). They appreciate each other's efforts and progress. Teacher keeps attention all around the group so everyone feels included.

Teacher has some contact (eye-contact, talking, singing) with each member of the group. Synergy, energy of and from the group, nurtures learning. It may seem easier at first to work with one person alone, but in the big picture, the social aspect gives deeper long-lasting motivation and learning.

When teachers can show the same point for each of the students, they all learn more solidly. Everyone's ability raises together. More efficient is to show everyone each time, to make the most of the teaching (rather than to do it one by one, demonstrating each point to one alone parent-child pair at a time, then demonstrating anew for another solitary family, when many others could have enjoyed learning from watching). "Together-learning" is happily effective learning.

The teacher can learn to use the whole group to help everyone including to help the teacher be more effective! The group can actually HELP the individual student when the teacher includes them to, for example, sing, raise their hands for the important high notes, chant the meter or rhythm, sit then stand to show contrasts... Kids can point to the notes for each other's reading assignments, with knitting needles (effective and funny). Teachers and families can get used to functioning beautifully in their lesson group with their lesson partners.

Kids in these kinds of lesson groups are comfortable performing solos since their lesson every week IS a solo in front of a group. They are used to having lots of eyes on them, many bodies near them, and distractions. They are used to finding from within themselves their own focus. They can hone their awareness of their performance, their own power of attention. This skill grows in the group every week.

When I create my fall schedule, I take time to figure out families to be together. Sometimes it works out perfectly. For example, two or three kids (depending on age and level) with parents arrive around 4, and leave around 6. They get used to being two hours at the studio in their individual lesson group. They take turns at the piano for their individual lesson, sometimes more than once. Sometimes we do theory as a group, sometimes they play along with each other. We do body alignment and breathing exercises, parents too. We're all together in a little studio with two grand pianos side by side. It's a cozy and close, friendly and rich experience.

When it's not their turn at the piano, sometimes they actively participate in a lesson point, other times they can pay attention directly or indirectly, lay on the three big stretching/exercise balls, play with all the music notation materials on the floor under the grand pianos, write songs, even (for older kids) do necessary school homework, or rest. My blind student will jump. Or lay on and off the couch. I ask the student at the piano to sit perfectly and pay attention. The kids not at the piano are free to move around. If I need to ask for more quiet, I do.

I find, however, that if I demand that the others sit to watch, they tend to fall asleep. Bodies need to move. I'd rather they be active in the music room, and happy

together. Sometimes it works out really well with the groupings. Even when it's less ideal, the grouping is still motivating and instructive for parents and kids. Once in Oberlin, the only pairing I found for two certain kids was a tiny 6-year-old girl with a big twelve-year-old boy. The parents and kids looked for each other; when someone was absent, they were missed.

Group of three kids works better than two, so if one is away, you still have a group.

Kids and parents DO motivate each other and learn from each other even when "on" different repertoire. Since we always are listening for beautiful tone production for heartfelt musical expression, we all are always "on" the same thing!

This is "the individual lesson group", with personal teacher attention to each individual's playing skills, vs. the "group lesson". Dr. Suzuki's point is that the individual lesson is for everyone to learn from; (it is NOT PRIVATE).

The individual lesson for a student is in a masterclass just like we saw Dr. Suzuki teach in Japan, and like children are taught at our institutes and workshops. THIS is the model lesson. The "individual lesson group" and the "group lesson" are the two main formats for Suzuki students. Pianists can also have a "group lesson".

In the Japanese language, there's a word which means "individual" / "personal" or "private" but does not mean "private" in the American English sense of being alone behind a closed door with nobody watching. Somehow, though, in our English translation of the Japanese concept for individual lesson, the word "private" has accidentally been used in "private lesson" which differs from the "group lesson".

I think that saying "private lesson" is a mistake in translation from Japanese to English. And it is a serious mistake. Because it accidentally changes the lesson format away from Suzuki's idea of individual, personal attention by the teacher for the student at the instrument within the circle of the observing individual lesson group. Suzuki asks us for a **Circle Around The Suzuki Triangle. Suzuki Triangle is Child-Parent-Teacher. Circle is the surrounding supportive lesson group. Think of this: Circle of Suzuki Triangles around the Suzuki Triangle.**

I remember Dr. Suzuki's instruction to me. I felt he was giving me a mission to teach this concept. Let's all think about this, the way for students to learn happily.

Even hard-working and enthusiastic students enjoy a boost from their lesson partners; when the lesson partners can't come, there can be a drooping feeling. Joy is togetherness in a thoughtfully positive support environment where we always encourage each other, with camaraderie (not competition). With appreciation.