

Parental support in the development of young musicians: a teacher's perspective from a small-scale study of piano students and their parents

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Abstract

This article focuses on the influence of parental support and interactions on the young musicians' learning processes. In an attempt to corroborate the findings of the wider research, a case-study has been carried out comprising observations of 34 parents and 34 piano students taught by the author in three different locations (private studio, private school and music conservatorium). The study explores the influence of parental support, during both lessons and practices, on the student's learning outcomes. The attitudes of children towards the parents' support during the lessons and practice are also investigated. The influence of aspects of the learning environment and salient characteristics of students are examined.

Key words: parental influence, children musical development, instrumental learning, practising, piano lessons

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Parents stepping farther

There is compelling evidence that the confident and skilled playing of most young performers is supported by caring parents who are committed to help their children along the challenging, yet incredibly fulfilling journey of learning an instrument (Davison, Howe, Moore & Sloboda, 1996). This support is considered to be of paramount importance in the early musical development of a student, as it engenders security and confidence in the child's playing.

The provision of support is not an easy task for parents, considering that they need to:

- try to understand an often unfamiliar language.
- participate actively with the teaching.
- make time to practice with the children.

- expose children to various musical opportunities.
- encourage and instil positivity.

Parents' socio-economic status, educational/cultural background, occupation and attitudes/beliefs related to their children determine the type of involvement they will have in the musical development of their children. Generally, a stable family life provides the child an environment where learning can be nurtured with no external pressures or worries (Howe & Sloboda, 1991a). Parents who are musically inclined (either professional or amateur musicians) may offer their children a more 'musically minded' support, exposing them to the right opportunities and directing them more effectively towards the goals to be

achieved during learning. Conversely, parents who are not musical are often unaware of their potential role when it comes to their children's musical training, often sitting passively during their instrumental class, or simply chaperoning their children to/from lessons (Hallam, 1998). However, studies have revealed that children who are successful with instrumental learning do not necessarily have parents who have musical abilities; in fact, most have parents who simply offer support and encouragement rather than provide expertise and technical knowledge. In other words, parental commitment appears to be more significant than high levels of musical competence or ability (Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Davison, Sloboda & Howe, 1995-96).

Parents willing to support their child's musical learning often do not know how to help the child overcome difficulties and obstacles during the early stages of the learning. As a consequence, parents may often be unable to communicate the correct message to their child when it comes to practicing in between lessons. In addition to physical dexterity, children need to develop and refine musical awareness, intellectual agility and emotional depth. During the early stages of learning parents can nurture these attributes through the provision of care, love and patience, in a non-threatening environment. If they understand and appreciate the vital role of practice, the children will consequently see home practice as an important and enjoyable activity along with the many other activities and commitments they are involved with in their young life. Studies have demonstrated that both parental support and teacher input and influence contribute to strengthen the child's self-esteem, motivation and enjoyment (McPherson & Davidson, 2006).

The child's learning progress can also be affected by parents' preconceived ideas about his or her capabilities. This may result in misconceptions about the child's actual skills and attitudes towards learning an instrument. Research has shown

that these 'fixed' ideas can impinge on the child's progress and can lead to the child feeling unable to cope and achieve (McPherson & Davidson, 2002).

Parents need to take into consideration the child's specific needs, characteristics and personality. Parent-child interactions are not uni-directional, but are based on mutual choices and decisions. McPherson (2009) proposes a model where parental goals, the child's characteristics and social/cultural contexts play a fundamental role in shaping the child's musical development. Parents' beliefs and aspirations determine the way they choose to interact with the child, by creating an emotional climate within the family and conveying specific messages and values to their child. In turn the child's individual characteristics, especially the desire to learn, to improve and engage with music, as well as the socio-contextual characteristics, influence the styles and practices employed by the parents.

Teachers who have parents observing their lessons can pass the information not only to the child, but also to the parent, who becomes an essential link in the learning chain. In a study involving 42 students aged 10-17 attending a specialist music school, it was shown that, as well as parental attendance at lessons and supervision of practice, feedback from parents to teachers produced remarkable benefit to the child's progress (Howe & Sloboda, 1991b). However, not all teachers are happy to have parents involved in the process of learning. In a survey of teachers, students and parents' attitudes towards parental involvement, Macmillan (2004) found that teachers who have extensive experience, as well as pedagogical qualifications and specialized training, tend to encourage parental support. Less experienced/qualified teachers are either indifferent to parental collaboration or discourage it. In such cases parents are ill equipped to support practice in an effective and structured way; thus their help may be only to prompt the child to practice, or ensure that all the teacher's

assignments are practiced, or simply offer encouragement and moral support.

Enabling parents to become more involved in their child's musical education does not mean encouraging them to be intrusive, controlling or overbearing, but rather to negotiate with their child, as well as becoming aware of what is happening when an instrument is being learnt, what to expect from the learning process and how to help their child manage it. By offering their support parents learn to become realistic about their child's capabilities and, under the teacher's expert guidance, will be able to adjust their help accordingly and potentially avoid false expectations. It is the teachers' responsibility to maintain and nourish a good balance between themselves, the students and the parents, especially in the case of parents who are trying to live their own unfulfilled dreams through their children. Ultimately, it is a mutual sense of purpose, agreement, and cooperation among the three parties (parents, children and teachers) that will foster successful and effective learning (Creech & Hallam, 2003; Creech & Hallam, 2011).

Children whose parents value autonomy and independence as part of their child's development tend to be more curious, involved and interested in what they are learning, and this allows them to become more competent and confident. Conversely, children whose parents rely on authoritarian and controlling practices find it more difficult to show initiative and cope with difficulties. Children should be allowed a degree of autonomy and freedom, as these in turn will foster confidence and progress (McPherson, 2009). As the learning progresses the parents' active involvement in the child's learning tends to decrease, and the children are able to become more directly responsible for their own decisions, thus freeing themselves from parental dependence. However, moral support can still be provided throughout the later stages of learning. Studies have shown that with low-achieving students, parents' support is minimal in the early years of learning, but it tends to increase

during teenage years, in the hope of maintaining momentum in learning (Davidson, Howe, Moore, & Sloboda, 1996).

There is convincing evidence that parents' encouragement of practice influences the child's level of musical ability (Howe & Sloboda, 1991a,b; McPherson & Davidson, 2006; McPherson, 2009). Depending on the parents' (and child's) specific characteristics, encouragement can take various forms including actively supervising the practice, initiating the practice, reminding the child to practice for a certain amount of time, or simply offering moral support. Unless naturally self-motivated, very young children require and welcome parental encouragement to practice regularly and consistently; however in some instances this encouragement can take the form of pressure and insistence which can lead to arguments, tension and, at times, serious crisis in the child-parent relationship (Howe & Sloboda, 1991b). As the child gets older and becomes more independent, self-motivation increases and so does the ability to structure and manage both lesson and practice.

Very young children are often unable to recognise the difficult areas of a piece, or the mistakes they are making. This is because their discernment ability is still immature. They lack cognitive, aural and technical skills that allow their playing to become instinctive and automated (Hallam, 1998). As a consequence they tend to repeat the piece from beginning to end numerous times while ignoring problems, and consequently progressing more slowly than they could. A week may pass before the teacher has an opportunity to address the mistakes and allow the student to get back on track. However, if parents attend lessons and supervise practice, any mistakes would be identified earlier; even though they are not able to play the piece, they gain an aural awareness as the teacher demonstrates it during the lesson. This will result in the child correcting mistakes more promptly and being able to concentrate on other problematic areas.

It is essential that parents know how to monitor their child's attention when practicing, and recognize when the child is not focussing on the tasks s/he is meant to be working on, so that practice can be goal-oriented, efficient and responsive. Lehmann & Ericsson (1997) call this type of approach *deliberate practice* ("practice activities involving specific goals and strategies"), which is primarily aimed at improving performance in a structured way, requiring sustained concentration and effort. With focussed and alert practicing, students are able to understand what needs to be corrected and improved, thus creating a very fertile ground for stimulating challenges and goals. The major benefit of focussed work is that students will learn to find solutions to problems and set tasks to better themselves.

A positive approach to practice from both student and parent will drastically increase its benefits. Studies have shown how positive feelings can nurture commitment and motivation when learning an instrument, especially when working on repetitive tasks. Conversely, negative emotions will limit the enjoyment and the involvement when practicing, discouraging future commitment (Davidson, Faulkner, & McPherson, 2009). The positive support of a parent will help the child to undertake practice with a positive attitude, providing him or her with immediate and encouraging feedback during the work.

Parents can help alleviate the sense of isolation that characterises the child's work at home by becoming close companions when practicing. There is evidence that parental supervision helps the child maintain a higher level of concentration, thus learning occurs more efficiently (Lehmann & Ericsson, 1997). By showing interest in the child's efforts and achievements, parents create a strong bond with the child. In turn, by feeling close to the parent, the child is able to cope much more effectively when experiencing moments of crisis and difficulty during the learning experience (McPherson & Davidson, 2006).

Study

The study was based on the observation of 34 piano students (10 boys and 24 girls), taught by the author, and 34 parents. The students observed had been learning for periods ranging from 4 to 18 months. At the beginning of the observation, each parent was invited to be actively involved in their child's piano learning via attendance at lessons and supervision of practice sessions. Specific instructions about effective and structured practicing were provided during each lesson, either verbally or, in the case of parents who could not attend, in the form of instructions noted in the student's practice notebook.

Method

At the end of the observation period, parents and children were asked to fill out a questionnaire comprising questions related to practice and lessons. The questions were designed to investigate the following areas:

1. Parents' views about supervising practicing and attending lessons.
2. Student's views about parents' supervising practicing and attending lessons.
3. Student's views about practicing and lessons.
4. Parents' musical background.
5. Parents' view about homework assignments, competitions and exams.

The outcomes of the questionnaire were assessed in relation to the following variables: students' age, students' grade level, months of tuition, location of tuition, parents' feedback of practice sessions, parents' interest and emotional response during the lessons, parents' recording lessons and practices, students' effort, students' natural musical ability and students' overall attainment. Three of the students interrupted their lessons before the end of the study and these were not asked to complete the questionnaire. These students were assessed only in relation to the afore-mentioned variables. The variables were recorded using the methods described in Table 1.

Explanation of the coding

- Where qualitative scores were used, 0 was entered when no information was available.
- Parents’ emotional response during the lessons was related to the extent to which they felt emotionally involved in their child’s endeavours during the lessons (for example, worrying/getting nervous when their child made mistakes or getting excited when the performance was good).
- The parents’ musical competence was related to whether the parents had learnt to play an instrument at some stage in their lives.
- The assessment of the students’ level of attainment during the study period was carried out with a subjective scoring method, using quality rating. The results were rescaled as a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 5, and a categorical variable ranging from 0 to 4 was computed

Table 1: Variable recording.

Variables	Method of recording
1. Students’ age	Years
2. Students’ level	Numerical scale based on AMEB (Australian Music Examination Board) grading system with 0 being complete beginners and 10 AMusA Diploma level
3. Months of tuitions during the course of the study	Numerical
4. Teacher’s assessment of students’ overall attainment	Qualitative numerical score (see ‘Explanation of the coding’ below)
5. Teaching environments	Coded variables indicating the three different locations of private studio, school and conservatorium
6. Parents’ attendance to lessons	Qualitative scale from 1=never to 5=always
7. Parents providing feedback about practising at home	
8. Parents’ interest during the lessons	Qualitative scale from 1=low to 5=very high
9. Parents’ emotional response during lesson	
10. Students’ effort	Qualitative scale from 1=very little to 5=quite a lot
11. Students’ natural abilities (talent)	
12. Parents’ support with practice	
13. Parental enjoyment of practice supervision	Qualitative scale from 1=not nearly enough to 5=too much
14. Parents’ view about homework	
15. Parents’ view about competitions and exams	Qualitative scale from 1=dislike it very much to 5=like it very much
16. Parents’ recording lessons and practices	Dummy variables, where 0=no and 1=yes
17. Parents’ musical competence	
18. Students’ views about practising	Qualitative scale from 1=dislike it very much to 5=like it very much
19. Students’ views about parental supervision during practising	
20. Students’ view about lessons	
21. Students’ view about parents’ attending lessons	

using Z-scores (standard scores) to establish categorical intervals (1=poor; 2=average; 3=good; 4=well above average). Each student was rated on the basis of his/her overall attainment, which encompassed technical ability, musicality, and general musicianship. These items were assessed at the commencement of each student's tuition program (before) and at the cut-off date set for the study period (after).

Analysis' methods

The analysis carried out included obtaining descriptive statistics for all the variables, frequencies for categorical variables, cross-tabulation to assess relationships between categorical variables, and correlations between variables and the level of attainment.

Characteristics

Students

The age of the students ranged from 4 to 20 years. The performance level ranged from beginner to diploma (AMEB grading system), more specifically 9 beginners, 18 between preliminary and grade two level, 6 between grade four and six, and one diploma student (see Figure 1). The length of tuition varied from 4 to 18 months. It was expected that there might be a relationship between the period during which the students had been learning, and their improvement by the end of the study.

Parents

The parents' category included mothers, fathers, one sister and one grandmother. Seventeen parents could play at least one instrument and

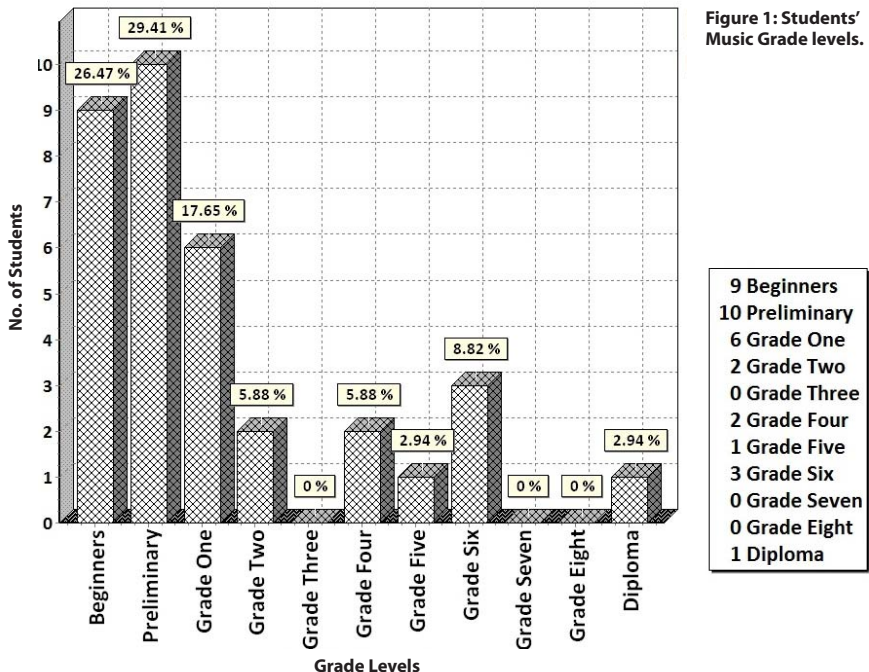


Figure 1: Students' Music Grade levels.

had varied degrees of musical knowledge (from self-taught to AMusA - diploma level). Everyone else was very novel to the discipline. The author met both parents of 20 of the students during the course of the study. In the case of the remaining students, only one parent was met.

Locations of tuition

Each lesson was conducted in one of three different locations as follows (see Figure 2):

- Private studio: 14 students aged 4 to 20 years (of whom one was the sister of a student learning at the school) - 4 beginners, 1 preliminary student, 5 grade one, 2 grade two, 1 grade four, and 1 diploma.
- School: 8 students aged 7 to 9 years (of whom 2 were siblings) - 3 beginners, 4 preliminary and 1 grade one.
- Conservatorium - within the beginner programme (up to grade 4) and intermediate programme (grade 4 to diploma): 12 students aged between 6 and 14 years (of whom 2 siblings) - 2 beginners, 5 preliminary, 1 grade four, 1 grade five and three grade six.

Study's expectations

Within the general context of interaction between parents and students, there were a variety of expectations that could be explored. In this study specific issues that were identified for examinations included:

- The extent to which parental involvement during both practices and lessons could have an impact on the student's attainment.
- The extent to which parental involvement during both practices and lessons could have an impact on the student's enjoyment of practices and lessons.
- The extent to which there may be some relationship between parental support and the age and the level of the student
- Identification of any possible link between parental involvement and parental musical background.
- Identification of any possible link between student's attainment and parental musical background.
- Investigation of the correlation between students' overall attainment and students' age, level, effort, natural abilities, and months of tuition.

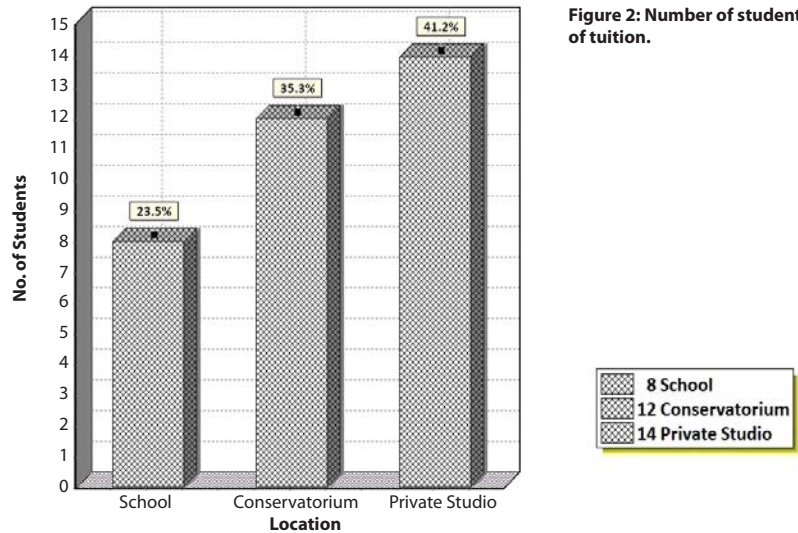


Figure 2: Number of students in locations of tuition.

- The influence of the teaching environment on both parental involvement and students' learning outcomes

Parental involvement in this study encompassed a series of features, the most important of which were:

- Attendance to lessons
- Supervision of practice
- Enjoyment of lessons' attendance and practice's supervision
- Provision of feedback to teachers on practice sessions
- Recording of lessons and practice sessions
- Emotional engagement during lessons
- Level of interest during lessons

Analysis

As a result of inspection of cross-tabulation and frequency analysis there are a number of observations which can be made about the subjects of the study.

(i) Parents' attendance at lessons

The majority of parents of children taught at the Conservatorium and at the private studio regularly attended the lessons. Parents of school-taught children either never attended the lessons, or attended only a few lessons during the course of the study. In all locations, the majority of parents attending lessons were mothers.

Table 2: Parents' attendance at lesson in the locations of tuition.

	School	Conservatorium	Private Studio
Never	3	1	2
Seldom	5	0	1
Sometimes	0	0	1
Always	0	11	10
Totals	8	12	14

(ii) Parents' involvement in lessons

Apart from six parents who never attended any lesson, and one parent who had a moderate interest in the lessons, most parents showed high to very high level of involvement in the lessons. Some parents were active listeners, some regularly asked questions, and some took notes. Eleven parents of students taught privately and at the conservatorium frequently recorded the lessons.

(iii) Parents' emotional response during lessons

When attending lessons, most parents (20) showed high to very high levels of emotional involvement in their child's endeavours. Their attention was obviously triggered when their child was struggling with a passage, or conversely if the playing was particularly good. In other words, they were either 'suffering' with the child if there were problems, or rejoicing with their child if the lesson went well. Four parents of the school-taught children reported a high emotional response, despite the fact that they seldom attended the lessons.

(iv) Parents' view about homework assignments

With the exception of two parents (one at the conservatorium and one at the school) who thought that the homework assignments were a bit more than reasonable, all remaining parents felt that the teacher's practice assignments were reasonable.

(v) Parents' view about competitions

Twenty-one parents from the conservatorium and the private studio and one parent from the school expressed favourable or very favourable views about their children taking part in competitions. Only two parents from the conservatorium

disliked the idea 'a little'. The remaining parents of school-taught students were either not interested or neutral about it.

(vi) Parents' view about exams

Twenty-six parents were favourable or very favourable about their children sitting piano exams. The remaining parents either did not express a view or were neutral about it. There was no main difference in the three different locations of tuition.

(vii) Children's enjoyment of lessons

No child from any of the three tuition environments disliked the lessons. Three students were neutral about it - '*I don't like them, but I don't dislike them*'. Twelve students liked the lessons, and sixteen students liked them very much.

(viii) Children's view of parental attendance to lesson

The majority of the students (22) from all tuition locations 'liked' or 'liked very much' having parents observe their lessons. Only a minority had some reservations:

Two siblings (one school-taught and one taught privately) did not like having their mother attending the lessons, despite the fact that she expressed a very high level of interest in the lessons when she attended on two occasions. The students explained that their mother's presence made them nervous:

'I dislike having my mum attend my lessons because when someone sits in makes me nervous' (8-year-old beginner).

'I find it distracting and sometimes daunting, especially when I make a lot of mistakes. Someone else sitting in on my lesson also makes me lose focus.' (15-year-old grade 1)

A 9-year-old Preliminary student from the school highly disliked having the parents attend the lesson, as she felt embarrassed by their presence.

(ix) Parents' supervision of practice

With the exception of the two oldest students learning privately (20-years-old grade 1 and 17-years-old Dip) who did not welcome parental supervision, all parents of students learning in the three tuition locations, offered their child some form of help with practice. However, in four instances it was not a parent who provided supervision but a family member or a music student. Support was given by 23 mothers (of whom 2 helped alongside a music student), six fathers, one grandmother, one sister (along with mother's occasional help), and 2 music students. In the majority of case the mother provided the support.

(x) Amount and type of help

The degree to which parents offered help differed considerably from parent to parent. Two parents provided little or very little support; 11 offered a reasonable amount; 4 offered a bit more than average and 11 offered quite a lot of support. There were no substantial differences in the amount of help across the three tuition locations.

In the questionnaire handed out to parents and students, 5 options were given to the parents in relation to the type of help offered to their child when practicing:

1. I do not sit with my child during practicing, but I remind him/her to start the practicing.
2. I do not sit with my child during practicing, but I listen without giving him/her feedback.
3. I do not sit with my child during practicing, but I listen and give him/her feedback.
4. I sit with my child during practicing, and I give him/her some directions/advice.
5. I sit with my child during practicing, and I give him/her lots of directions/advice.

Of the parents who helped with practice, the majority (19) selected options 4 and 5. Only one parent of a 17-year-old diploma student selected option 1. The quality of help differed

only slightly in relation to the location of tuition: the majority of parents of students taught privately tended to be more specific with their instructions than parents of students learning at the conservatorium and, in particular, at school.

Parents approached the supervision in various ways. Below are some examples:

The parent of an 11-year-old private student at Preliminary level reported:

'Her new piano is positioned centrally within the music/playroom so it is possible to watch her at the keyboard from about 3m away during some of her practise each week (rather than sitting at the keyboard with her which would make her less comfortable). Unless it is positive, she doesn't enjoy too much feedback/advice from her Dad. Occasionally I'll comment about loss of tempo, or remind her of the teacher's comments where applicable if I have attended a lesson. She loves to practice so I'm comfortable not getting too involved, and leaving the professional feedback to her teacher/mentor.'

One private student (9-year-old beginner) said she disliked practising sometimes because "Dad yells at me then I cry".

The parent of an 8-year-old school student at beginner level reported

'We have placed the piano next to the kitchen so I can help whenever possible and I do sit with her for theory and help whenever she asks.'

The parent of a 17-year-old AMusA student learning privately, reported:

'In the past I always helped her and sat with her almost daily to do so. In recent years however she

has resisted all help....When I used to supervise the practicing I liked it however it was too time consuming for a busy Mum, but the progress was so much better if I did it.... For years I attended every lesson ...but fewer last year and none this year; one teacher made me take the notes from the lesson to use during the practice help.'

(xi) Parents' enjoyment of supervision

Except for the parents of two older students (20-year-old grade 1, and 17-year-old Dip) who did not provide supervision, the majority of parents (25) enjoyed helping their child practicing. There was no substantial difference in the *Parents' enjoyment of supervision* in relation to the three locations of tuition.

(xii) Children's enjoyment of practicing

The majority of children (16) had a positive view about practicing ('I like it a bit' and 'I like it very much'). A minority of children (6) seem to dislike the practice a bit. Nine felt neutral about it ('I don't like it, but I don't dislike it').

(xiii) Parents' musical competence

There were an almost equal number of parents who had learnt an instrument (17) and those who had not (14). The distribution of 'musical parent' and 'non-musical parent' did not vary significantly across the three locations of tuition.

Table 3: Type of Parental Help with Practice in different Tuition Locations.

Location	None	Remind Student to practice	Listen and Give Feedback	Sit with Student & Give Direction	Give Substantial Directions	Total
School	2	0	2	3	1	8
Conservatorium	0	0	3	7	2	12
Private Studio	2	1	2	4	5	14
Total	4	1	7	14	8	34

(xiv) Parents’ feedback about practicing and assignments

Twenty-four parents provided feedback (in person or by email) about the children’s practising and progress. A few parents of students learning at school occasionally provided feedback. The majority of parents of students learning privately and at the conservatorium provided feedback on a regular basis. The students were in the age range of 4 to 11-years-old, and learning at levels from beginners to grade 5.

(xv) Recording of lessons and practices

Thirteen parents recorded their child practising. The recording was exclusively video-recording. Seven parents recorded practice regularly, and six occasionally. None of the parents of the children taught at school recorded practising. In many instances recordings of practice were emailed to the teacher for feedback. A total of eleven parents often recorded the lessons. None of the parents who occasionally attended the lessons at school recorded the lessons. Eight parents recorded both lessons and practice.

(xvi) Length of tuition

The majority of the students (fourteen) had been learning between 17 and 18 months. Nine had been learning between 9 and 12 months. Eleven had been learning for 4 months.

Discussion

Most parents in the study (94%) supervised their child’s practice with the majority providing a reasonable amount of help and showing a good level of enjoyment. Mothers represented the majority of those parents who not only helped with practice, but also attended lessons and liaised with the teacher (64%). In a few cases parents who were not able to supervise the practice made arrangements with other members

of the family (i.e. grandmother or sister) or music students, to help with the practising.

Correlation coefficients were calculated between the Overall Attainment Score and each of the variables recorded by observation and survey. A relatively small proportion of these were significant at .05 or better, and these are shown in Table 4. It is noted that only one of these is negative and the remainder all have an expected positive relationship. These were the characteristics that had correlations with acceptable significance:

The majority of parents offered between ‘reasonable’ and ‘a lot’ of support with practising. The support provided by the parents during supervision of practice was not strongly correlated with the students’ overall attainment ($r=0.069$), but it was moderately correlated with their age ($r=0.501$); all children between the age of 4 and 15 years received parental supervision during practice, but their levels of attainment were highly variable. There is some evidence that parental support with older students was either very minimal (initiation of practice) or absent, and this probably reflects the students’ need for more autonomy. There is a possibility that the quality of

Table 4: Significant Correlations with Attainment Score.		
Variable	Correlation	Significance
Level of Student Effort	0.836	0
Level of Student Natural Talent	0.625	0
Parent Feedback about Practice	0.508	0.002
Parents Attendance at Lessons	0.550	0.003
Parents Recorded Practice	0.496	0.003
Tuition Months	0.375	0.029
Parent Recorded Lessons	0.363	0.035
Parental Interest in Lessons	0.358	0.037
School	-0.581	0

help may have influenced this outcome; however assessing the quality of help was beyond the scope of this study.

A minority of students' recorded negative opinions about parental help with practice. The remainder were neutral, positive or very positive. Most students enjoyed the practice and the lessons, but this was only weakly correlated to the parental support provided. Furthermore, enjoyment of lessons and practice was only weakly correlated with the age of the students and the level of their music education. Parental feedback in respect of practice had a moderate correlation to the students' overall attainment (see Table 4), and this was stronger with students taught privately and at the conservatorium than with school-taught students. The way parents emotionally engaged in the lesson did not have any strong relation with either the age or level of the students.

No significant correlation could be found between the parents' musical competence and the students' level of attainment, considering that the parents of high achievers were fairly evenly divided as musical and non-musical. This conforms to the findings of other similar studies, such as Sloboda & Howe 1991; Davison, Sloboda & Howe, 1995-96. The quality and quantity of parental supervision during practising also had a weak relationship with the parents' musical background. This may be related to the nature of the questionnaire, which was not designed to assess the quality of the support given by the parents during practice supervision, but simply to determine the quantity and methods of support. This is an issue that could be examined more fully in an extension of the current study.

Students learning both privately and at the conservatorium had higher attainment levels than students learning at school. In fact there was a significant negative correlation between attainment level and the school tuition location (see table 4). The average improvement for Conservatorium students was a score of 3.8, for private students it was 3.7 and for school students

it was 2.2. In the group of students learning privately and at the conservatorium, most parents regularly attended the lessons, whilst in the case of school-taught students, parents rarely attended the lessons. Although all parents offered very similar support to children learning in the three different environments, the students' attainment levels were remarkably different. This suggests that parents' attendance at lessons, along with supervision of practice, tended to have more impact on the student's attainment ($r=0.550$) than parental supervision of practice alone ($r=0.069$). These findings conform to the results obtained in other studies such as Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Davidson, Sloboda & Howe, 1995-96; Davison, Howe, Moore & Sloboda, 1996.

Most of the children in this study responded that they were happy to have parents attending at the lessons. A minority of students expressed some discomfort at having parents attend the lesson and reasons reported included being 'embarrassed', 'nervous', 'distracted', or 'lose focus'. In these cases, it might be assumed that students' feelings about parental attendance at lessons may have determined whether the parents attended or not.

Students' attainment was moderately influenced by parents making video recordings and using them to review the lessons and practice (see Table 4). About a third of parents of students taught privately and at the conservatorium regularly recorded their children during the practice, and often provided the recording to the teacher for assessment. Parents recorded the lessons in order to provide more effective supervision of the children practising at home.

There was a moderate correlation between students' attainment and their innate musical ability (refer to Table 4). This conforms with the findings of other studies, in particular Ericsson and Lehman (1997) who suggest that musical ability is not genetically determined but can be improved through practice and training.

Students' grade level and age did not have a significant correlation with overall improvement.

Period of the tuition had a significant impact on the students' level of achievement (see Tables 4 and 5). However, there was one exceptional case of an 8-year-old Preliminary student who had been learning for 4 months and achieved higher than expected.

The characteristic which had the strongest influence on students' overall attainment was the level of student effort (see Tables 4 and 6). All moderate to high achieving students showed high to very high effort levels. Although most parents offered some kind of help in the home, the children progressed at different paces. Natural musical abilities and the level of parental support did not contribute as substantially to the overall attainment as the effort. These results accord with the findings of Sloboda & Howe (1991).

It was interesting to note that the "school" parents reported a high to very high level of interest and emotional response during the lessons, even though they had attended only a handful of lessons (some, only one). Furthermore, they all stated that they gave a moderate to very high type of support when helping their child practicing, namely:

I do not sit with my child during practicing, but I listen and give him/her feedback.

I sit with my child during practicing, and give him/her lots of directions/advice.

Even though most of the students had high levels of natural ability, their attainment level was 'very low' to 'moderate'. This was partially linked to the students' low to moderate level of effort. A further factor that may have influenced

Table 5: Months of Tuition and Overall Attainment.					
Months of Tuition	Overall Attainment				Students' Total
	Poor	Average	Good	Well Above Average	
4	2	3	4	2	11
9	0	0	1	1	2
10	0	0	1	1	2
12	1	2	1	1	5
17	0	0	4	5	9
18	0	1	2	2	5
Total	3	6	13	12	34

Table 6: Level of Student Effort and Overall Attainment.					
Level of Student Effort	Overall Attainment				Students Total
	Poor	Average	Good	Well Above Average	
Very Low	1	0	0	0	1
Low	2	3	2	0	7
Average	0	3	5	2	10
High	0	0	6	6	12
Very High	0	0	0	4	4
Total	3	6	13	12	34

the students' progress was the evidence that none of the parents attended the lessons. It was assumed that the parents' inability to access direct information during the lessons about the work to be done at home might have jeopardized the effectiveness of the help they were providing when supervising their child's practicing. In other words, although they were sitting with their child during practicing, it was possible that they misinterpreted the teacher's instructions on the practice notebook, or failed to follow them.

In the light of the above remarks, it can be observed that when parents do not have the opportunity to listen, experience and understand what is done during the lesson, the support in the home may not always be appropriate. For the support to be fruitful parents need to have a clear understanding of the practice targets and requirements set by the teacher during the lesson. The possibility that the teacher's written instructions could be misunderstood or overlooked cannot be excluded in seeking explanation of lower outcomes. Unless the child remembers exactly what the teacher explained during the lesson, it could be difficult for a parent who is new to instrumental learning to understand the practice requirements. However, in cases where attendance at lessons is impossible, the teacher's written directions represent the most immediate way to access information related to practice assignments. As shown in other studies, communication between teachers and parents is of paramount importance (Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Davidson, Howe, Moore & Sloboda, 1995-96), thus regular exchanges of feedback between parents and teacher should minimize the danger of misinterpretation and allow the student to thrive in his or her development.

This is clearly a problem for students taking lessons in a school environment and one possible means of improving the situation would be for lessons to be recorded and the recording then being made available to parents, so that they could improve their supervision of practice.

Limitations of the study

The study draws its conclusions from a small selection of factors that may influence the students' progress with learning the piano, primarily parental involvement during practice and lesson, and students' individual characteristic (skills, age, level, effort, learning period, as well as enjoyment of practice and lessons). The findings are related to a relatively small sample of students and parents, and, as a result, may not be representative of larger and more varied groups of individuals. Each teacher/parents/child triad represents a micro-universe of feelings, expectations, aspirations, and needs, making it unlikely that one would find the same behaviours and responses in other similar partnerships.

In this study, all the observations have been based on the teacher's personal point of view, as well as on the individual feedbacks from students and parents. Because only one teacher is involved the variation in teaching characteristics can be assumed to be minimal. Thus, the results of the study represent only one of the many possible perspectives in the evaluation of students' musical development. It would be worthwhile to extend the study to a larger sample of music students and this would involve additional consideration of individual differences among music teachers as well.

Conclusions

The most significant outcome of this study is confirmation that the level of self-motivation and determination of young learners was the most significant factor leading to higher levels of achievement. Other factors that were also found to be important included natural ability, length of tuition, as well as the support and care of parents who helped their children overcome obstacles and achieve goals during the early stages of learning.

The majority of the parents in the study were happy to support their child's musical development by taking an active role during practice at home, irrespective of the age or level

of the child. Most of the parents involved in their child's musical development were mothers. Parental musical competence was found to have no substantial impact but there could have been differences in the quality of support offered by parents with musical backgrounds and which have not been identified in the study.

Most children welcomed the assistance of parents during the learning, although parental support did not seem to influence the child's overall attainment, level of interest and enjoyment of both practice and lessons. Students' attainment was only moderately influenced by their natural musical abilities, but was strongly influenced by students' effort.

Parents' attendance at lessons constituted a crucial role in a child's progress. Better results seem to arise when parental supervision of practice occurs in conjunction with parental attendance at lesson; this allows parents to access vital information about the learning process which could otherwise be either misunderstood or overlooked if the parents relied only on teacher's notes. Serious consideration should be given to providing recordings of lessons to parents who cannot attend the lessons. This is also an issue in the case of the substantially lower level of attainment achieved by students who attended lessons in a school environment, where parents' attendance to lessons is highly unlikely.

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