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Songs My Student Taught Me: Narrative of an Early Childhood Cello Teacher

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Abstract

Out of the mouth of babes (and even more nonverbal) has come perhaps the wisest music teacher education I have ever received. In this narrative I share my foibles as a young, over-confident, and naïve music instructor who, through a great amount of error, eventually learned the value of letting a child lead his own music learning. Throughout this narrative I highlight excerpts from teaching and parent journals that I collected and analyzed during a twelve-month period in which I taught Danny - a four-year-old cello student whose already refined sense of musicianship and innate desire to learn rarely meshed with my efforts to teach certain skills and repertoire that I thought would be “best for him.” I candidly share my arrogance, mistakes, and personal learning experiences while also revealing tensions that emerged through various parent-child-teacher interactions (manifested in shades of perfectionism and the clash between expressiveness and technique). In contrast, other stories reveal spontaneous and tender music-making moments at times when Danny, Mother, and I would just simply “play.”

Introduction

To this day, whenever I teach my graduate students about McPherson & Williamon's (2006) adaptation of Gagné's (2003) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, the "Chance" box seems to animate itself and jump out of the screen at me. Sometimes I tell my students why, and sometimes I keep Danny's story to myself, as a kind of special memory to share with them on a different day – a day when we have a lot more time. In any case, whenever I see this model I can't help but remember my serendipitous acquaintance with this boy who, similarly to the "Chance" box, literally reached out and caught my attention, and eventually my heart.

My bias and personal opinion are both obvious in this narrative, but are actually central to the account, since Danny's story is as much about my own shifting perspective over time as it is about the musicianship of this young self-proclaimed maestro. It is, after all, a story about what Danny taught *me* about *teaching* that I wish to share.

Background

This narrative tells the continuing story of Danny, a precocious young boy whose pre-lesson musical history I have shared previously, prior to the beginning of his formal cello lessons (Hendricks & McPherson, 2010). The first phase of this longitudinal study described Danny's parent-child interactions and musical predisposition in the form of a case study, in which I merely acted as researcher observing the family environment. However, I present this second phase in the form of an autoethnographic narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis, 2009; Barrett & Stauffer, 2012) in order to provide a more intimate account of my personal interactions with Danny and his family, as well as our influence upon one another.

Danny's precociousness. Danny had an atypical interest and affinity toward western classical music that, while encouraged and supported by his parents, also stemmed from Danny's aural and emotional sensitivity. My chance meeting of Danny was a result of common nonmusical interests that I shared with his parents, but after I introduced myself as a cello teacher, and the parents revealed Danny's keen interest in learning the cello, we considered ourselves a match made in heaven.

By the time he started cello lessons at age three-and-a-half, Danny was already very familiar with every major orchestral instrument, as well as many obscure instruments that I had not even heard of. He listened incessantly to CDs his mother checked out for him from the library, watched videos of orchestra concerts, and spent tireless hours constructing pretend musical instruments out of just about anything he could get his hands on. His conversations with adults (individuals with whom he best associated) tended to center around musical

instruments, which, incidentally, he could pick out aurally by listening to recordings. His father Eric describes Danny prior to starting lessons:

People always ask us who he gets his musical interest from, me or [his mother] Riley. The answer is, really, that he came up with it himself. I come from a pretty musical family, and took piano lessons for years. I also played trumpet in the band, and learned to sing. None of that, however, leads to having a son who can name, describe, and pick out by sound all of the instruments in the orchestra by the time he turns three. I'd pick a younger age as the cut-off for that, but it took him several months to reliably differentiate the oboe, the clarinet, and the English horn.

All of this, he came up with by himself. Riley and I have been continually stretched to answer his questions. What IS that part of the violin called? What is a flugelhorn, anyway? . . . He loves to watch concert videos, and listen to the radio. While he was still two, he called me at work, pretending to be Zubin Mehta. How many people even know who Zubin Mehta is? Everywhere he goes, he takes some object that has become an instrument to him, and people who know him simply assume now that he has that coat hanger because it makes music for him.

My arrogance and naïveté. At the time I met Danny, my world was still two-dimensional; I was taught that there were rules that guided actions and those wishing to achieve “success” (using the most narrow of definitions) were wise to comply. My task as a cello teacher, therefore, was to hand down the rules that had been handed down to me, like master to apprentice.

“Like master to apprentice.” I liked the sound of that.

That made me the expert here. While I advocated the “Suzuki Triangle” of Teacher-Parent-Child (Suzuki Association of the Americas, 2003; Suzuki, 1981, 1983), my interpretation of it was one of TEACHER-teaching-Parent-teaching-child. Our roles were not equal in my view. In a kind of “trickle-down” approach, I would teach Danny’s mother Riley cello lessons, and also teach her how to teach her son. Then she had the task of figuring out how to motivate Danny to practice with her each day, because, admittedly,

I didn’t have a clue how to do it myself.

Motivation in Danny’s World

How does one motivate a three-and-a-half-year-old? Stickers? Charts? Praise? (Dare I mention candy?) My attempts to motivate Danny through extrinsic rewards were irrelevant at

best. Stickers were hardly looked at, let alone celebrated. And they certainly did not help him focus on the music or the techniques I was trying to teach him. In truth, Danny demonstrated an atypical passion for music that provided him with more intrinsic motivation to *play* (not practice) than I had ever seen before in any student of any age. My attempts to steer him towards my own version of “rightness” were simply frustrating, if not painful to him.

Danny’s parents recognized their son’s unique interest in music, but told me that they were somewhat hesitant to start him in music lessons at such a young age. Yet, as his father reports, they felt a drive to do so if, for no other reason, out of a fulfillment of what he called his son’s “intellectual needs.”

There is only so long that a kid can go around telling people that he wants to be a musician and a conductor when he grows up before you have to consider putting him in lessons of some kind. I mean real lessons, not just buying him a recorder and trying to teach him fingerings. He plays with [homemade] “instruments” of all kinds, but comes back most often to the string family, and the bassoon. Bassoons are problematic, being approximately twice as tall as he is. Strings are built down to 1/16th scale, so the physical limitations of being only three aren’t quite so insurmountable. He picked the cello to learn first. Of course, once he learns the cello, he said, he wants to learn the violin, then viola, and then the bass.

We had been reading a book on gifted children called, “Some Of My Best Friends Are Books,” about how reading can help children meet their emotional and intellectual needs. The idea that gifted children, my gifted children, have intellectual needs, and that the opportunity to meet these intellectual needs can have strong consequences on their emotional growth, was something that I had not considered before.

Is there a part of Danny that will feel incomplete if his chance to be a musician consists of carrying around PVC pipes fastened together with elastic bands and calling the collection a bassoon? Being smart and interested in music is one thing. Feeling like a musician trapped inside a little body that can only pretend is another thing. What is really going on inside him when he has taken wooden spoons and is using them to play cello along with Vivaldi? Is he playing a game, or is he coming as close as he can to touching the picture he sees of himself inside?

There are people who are willing to answer that question for me. He’s only three, they say. It’s a phase, they say. I did Suzuki lessons, but I didn’t start until much later, they say. But THEY don’t know Danny, do they? They don’t go to the library looking for CDs, because their three-year-old has been asking for a clarinet concerto

for a week now. They don't have three-year-olds that would call them out for putting on the oboe CD and telling him it is a clarinet concerto. I do.

Despite his rationale for going ahead with lessons, Eric kept a cautious eye, observing how such lessons might influence his son's innate love of music. His journal entry shows his initial awareness of the depth of Danny's intrinsic interest, in contrast to the techniques and extrinsic rewards I was trying to impose:

So I don't know. I do know that we won't find out if we don't take the chance. I will be watching to see if he can look his teacher in the eye for ten seconds. I will watch to see if he can hold the cello between his knees while in rest position. Later, I will watch to see if he holds his bow properly, and if he keeps his elbow up. But, I will also be watching to see if he holds his head differently, if he plays by himself differently, how he relates to the self-portrait in his head differently. I don't know how I will know these things. I don't know if I will know these things. The criteria are more subjective than the sticker chart his teacher has.

Yesterday I came home from a meeting and instead of running out and demanding my attention, as is his wont, he continued what he was doing with play food inside a cardboard box. I went into his room to see what he was doing. He looked up at me and said, "I'm listening to my music." He had on the Suzuki Cello volume 1 CD. Three days ago, it was cello music. Today it was HIS music. I feel like something in how he listens has changed for him since we brought the cello home. Am I attaching more significance to that than what it deserves? Maybe. Time will tell. He did seem more centered than usual, if that word has any real meaning in this western society. But if that word doesn't have any real meaning here, I think that Shinichi would still know what I mean. And he would approve.

"Shinichi would still know what I mean." I confess: When I first read this blog entry, I was quite taken aback at Eric's audacity to make such an informal reference to Suzuki. Suzuki followers rarely (if ever) call Shinichi Suzuki by his first name, but more commonly refer to him to as "Dr. Suzuki," traditionally out of deepest respect.

Later, however, as I became more aware of Eric's interest in the writings of Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (1997), I wondered if this discussion of his son seeming "centered," and his use of Suzuki's first name, might have been in reference to spiritual commonalities between Shunryu (Zen master) and Shinichi (music pedagogue). Was Eric aware that Shinichi Suzuki's philosophy expanded beyond a paradigm of performance and technical standards, to one of love and connection (Hendricks, 2011)? Was I aware of this? Eric's use of Suzuki's first

name might have, for all I knew, denoted a strikingly uncommon level of intimacy with the founder of the Suzuki method – one that he certainly did not acquire through my pedagogical influence, which privileged technique and perfectionism over spirituality and connection (despite anything I might have professed to the contrary).

The Clash of Expression and Technique

Danny and music were inseparable, but Danny and technique were most certainly at odds. His awareness of musical form and his knowledge of western classical masters (both composers and performers) was, at his age, already superior to that of most adults. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, his three-year-old body and impatience for externally-imposed form fought mercilessly against his ageless sense of musicianship. His father described the conundrum:

When we started talking seriously about having lessons, one of our concerns was how he would adapt to having a teacher rein in his style. The boy has spent so much energy watching artists play that he has very clear ideas of how things should be done. When playing a wooden spoon “cello” he likes to shake his head like Yo-Yo, and when he plays a “double bass” he slaps it, and twirls it around like he’s a Beatnik. He puffs his cheeks like Dizzy, and makes faces like Zubin. He’s learned from the Masters.

Unfortunately, most of what he has learned from the Masters is what a stylish performance looks like to a three-year-old. He doesn’t know yet what goes into making it sound like that. Unless a teacher can rein him in, he’ll be like the novice singer who shakes their jaw to get some “vibrato.” It’s an approximation, but it isn’t the real thing.

Now he has a teacher telling him how to sit, what to do with his body, where and how to play notes. [...] If he is going to become the musician that he wants to become, shaking his head like Yo-Yo, he needs to start with the components that allow that intensity. He needs to hold the cello between his knees so it is solid as he starts to use the bow on it. He needs someone who will enforce the step-by-step aspect of learning, in a way that I can’t do. I’m not removed from him enough to be able to stick wax in the end of a recorder so it won’t play, and make him finger through three blind mice when he wants to turn it sideways and make it a piccolo.

It’s the third day since his lesson, and Riley, who is the one who practices with him, already has questions about how to keep the balance between allowing him to move on so he doesn’t get bored, and holding him back so he gets the basics more solid. He has started to embellish his bowing. Yesterday he was bowing all the way to the floor,

with wide hand waving. He can do it the right way, but it isn't as much fun. "I am ready to learn," indeed. Good thing she can ask the Teacher.

"I am ready to learn" – Eric's father was alluding to one of several traditional statements that Suzuki students say to their teachers out of respect, as they bow to them at the beginning of a lesson.

Ta Da - I had them convinced.

I was the expert, they knew it, and they would defer to my wisdom. And with their blessing and trust, I moved forward, doing what I believed was best for the boy – which, at the very beginning, meant taking the cello bow away from Danny until he could learn some more basic skills. The cello bow – the primary maker of sound – was getting him much too excited and causing him to shift his focus away from technique. It would, therefore, have to be hidden in the closet of *my* studio (not at his home) until I deemed him ready and deserving to get it back. I confess I was proud of myself. By keeping it in my studio space, he would understand that I held the key to his musical future. If he truly loved music, which he obviously did, then he would of course comply. It was what was best for him. Knowing how sensitive Danny was, however, I warned his parents in advance so that they could prepare him emotionally.

The fateful lesson day arrived. He came; I confiscated the bow; and then taught him a few fundamental techniques (including, of course, pizzicato). We bowed to one another to signal the close of the lesson (as is customary in Suzuki studios), and the family left. In my arrogant naïveté I believed – honestly – that the boy's tears at the end of the lesson (which turned into fortissimo wails outside my house once the door was shut) were because he was so sad to end the lesson and go home. However, Eric's journal tells a different story:

We talked to him over and over before his . . . lesson Saturday, about his teacher taking his bow. He knew it would happen, but I don't think he really BELIEVED it would happen. It was almost lunchtime when he got home, so his blood sugar was low, which makes it hard for him to deal with adversity. In this case, he bawled all the way home, and half-way through a cup of juice. After he was calmed down, he mused about it most of the day. "WHY did she have to take my bow?"

Ah, but he would understand in time, right? Eric at least gave me hope for as much by providing this report:

By Sunday, he had come to terms with it. His favorite way to practice is to give us lessons. He shows us how to bow to start and finish a lesson, the various rest

positions, how to sit. . . . He even explained to me why he had to take away my cello bow, so I would be able learn the things I need to learn before I can play “Twinkle, Twinkle.”

I don't think I ever expected Danny to leap for joy at practicing technique – rarely do any of us do this, regardless of age, right? Who really likes to practice? Isn't practice something that we all *have* to do because someone who knows better is telling us what to do? Like master to apprentice? Or like . . . like . . . or . . .

Hmmm.

Is this an apprentice model, or a dictatorship clothed in the guise of love?

At a loss for ideas. I suppose the first wakeup call came as I noted over our year together just how extremely resistant Danny was to this refining process. The same boy who would sit for hours on end watching videos and live concerts - the same boy who would tirelessly study the intricacies of musical instruments - the same boy who turned anything he could get his hands on into a sound maker - couldn't last more than two seconds when I would ask him to place his fingers in the “correct bow hold.”

In technique-teaching moments throughout the year, Danny would often slump down and freeze into a heavy ball (with hands fixed in a fist and inaccessible under him); or he would start rolling around on the floor; or he would, very frequently, make a quick dash off his cello chair, run out of the studio, and hide under the living room coffee table and start meowing like a cat. So most often I would share my technical strategies with Riley, whom I advised and encouraged to take cello lessons as well, and trust her to do the work with him at home. Thanks to Riley's creativity and effort, she was able to slip moments of technique work into playful songs and games, which Danny then cooperated with – perhaps because of the music that she promised him would come from technique, but certainly, I believe, because of the intimate and playful attention he got from his mom at such times.

Developmentally inappropriate practice. I knew Danny's passion for music was there as I taught him – but discussions of technique turned him off instantly. After some observation, I noted that his tiny fingers (although quite strong when he grasped a conducting baton) seemed too weak to hold down the strings, and it was difficult for him to differentiate between each finger's duty when he held the bow. This is not rocket science for anyone who understands child development, but it was a big breakthrough for me: His fine motor skills were still developing, and I was asking him to do things that he was not yet able to do. In my inexperience, my technical requests took him far beyond his reach, without the scaffolding he

needed to stretch appropriately. My heart sank as I realized that this boy, with music filling every aspect of his life, may (as far as I can tell) have been devastated at his inability to perform music the way he envisioned it in his mind, ear, and heart.

Music and Play

When Danny was allowed to play his cello outside of lessons and formal practice, he was fully active and engaged. When he was invited to give “concerts” to neighbors and friends, or when his mother and I played cello duets and invited him to “play” along, he would very eagerly take his cello (named “Carolyn”) out of “her” case and saw away – making all sorts of cacophonous noises that only a mother could love – all the while making virtuosic expressions with his face similar to those his father described above.

I eventually discovered that Danny was willing to try out some of the techniques I wanted him to learn during lesson time if I rewarded him by taking his requests to perform certain cello pieces for him, or if he could see – tangibly, with markers on a board – that his opportunity for “free play” (his turn to make whatever sounds he wanted with his cello) would be coming up next.

His parents and I noticed bits of technique start to work their way into his moments of “free play.” While he would often delight in stochastic scrubbing with his bow *under* the bridge to make high-pitched screeching noises, he would also pause at other moments to demonstrate the difference between a “T” (straight bow, perpendicular to the string) and an “X” (angled bow, recipe for bow placement problems) and other such issues that we had discussed together. Perhaps he was not opposed to these ideas, but seemed to want to work them into his music in the way he saw fit - without pressure for perfection, but with creative interest.

A year of freedom versus restriction. Danny’s passion for music in general never waned throughout the year. Once his mom shared a video of a random moment where she walked in the bedroom and found Danny wearing nothing but his socks, jumping on the bed with a broom in his hands, poised like a rock guitarist who was screaming unintelligible lyrics. Perhaps he had decided to branch out a bit from the classical genre? But in any case, his actions and dress were the epitome of expressive freedom. He also kept his family’s living room full of his musical projects and toys, with keyboards and drums and clarinets and bassoons and conducting podiums and batons and music stands and ... you name it.

Throughout the year, when I would visit Danny’s family at home for social occasions, Danny and I would spend time together as if we were the best of friends. I read him bedtime stories; we “jammed” together on his various real and homemade instruments; we would laugh, play,

roll on the floor together – we simply shared a natural play experience. But when Danny came to my home for formal lessons, the energy was strangely distant and confining.

Despite our best efforts and a few highs along the way, nothing really changed that much over the year.

Danny's Last Lesson

At the end of the school year Eric got a new job. They would move away, and this marked the end of our cello lessons together. Danny's final lesson was at his house instead of mine, amidst packing boxes.

As I walked in, Danny reported in a sad voice that Ellie [Danny's 18-month old sister] had not been letting him practice. I asked for clarification and he said that she was too noisy. I thought that was an interesting thing to bring up, but Eric reported later that he had told him this as well. Was this his excuse for not feeling ready for the lesson? I can't count the number of times I've heard excuses from students before lessons begin. Different excuses, but similar both in desperation and in incredulousness. Boy, we learn those tricks young in our lives.

Throughout the year I had gradually come to realize that I had pushed Danny too hard, and I wanted, at least in this final lesson, to let him just simply play and enjoy himself. However, this lesson, which I had hoped would be a significant musical event to bring us closure, was more like a microcosm of the push-and-pull year we had experienced together. My journal entry illuminates Danny's strivings for musical freedom, in contrast to the technical and perfectionistic demands that his mother and I had gotten into a habit of imposing:

The lesson was bumpy in progress. Danny was very interested in music but not much in the cello. I tried to follow his musical lead and Riley tried to persuade him to do what she thought(?) I wanted Danny to do. Since we were in a different environment, I wanted to play more and teach less, yet Riley was determined to make up for the change in location by keeping things formal. In the meantime, Danny appeared frustrated because he wanted to be involved with the activities, but not according to someone else's rules . . . That living room has always been Danny's kingdom: He is allowed to build forts there, he gives "concerts" there, and he makes up a lot of the rules of play there. Add to that the fact that he had not eaten breakfast, and it was a difficult thing for him to have a lesson.

Knowing Danny was hungry, I decided to try a game I named “feeding the cello” to help him focus on his tone production. We fed our instruments puffed millet (light bow) and added sugar (heavier bow) and milk (slow and then fast bows). Danny grasped the concepts brilliantly but did not play them as well as he talked about them. As he played I looked in his eyes and saw a bit of a glaze. He had not completely awoken yet, and this was all a struggle for him.

We managed to talk Danny into a few good bow holds, and got him to keep his feet on the floor. Then we finally allowed Danny to use his conducting baton to lead Riley and me as we played our cellos. Danny told us all the right notes to play as we performed an antiphonal dialogue version of “See-saw” [with our cello bows]. Riley appeared frustrated although she was putting forth an incredible effort.

I felt more like the researcher than the teacher today: I observed all of us a little bit from an outsider’s perspective and saw three perfectionists, all with different agendas, but all with a competing desire to please someone else. I thought to myself that this was no fun at all, not for any of us.

After recounting the lesson, I took a moment to reflect on the year – a year that ended very differently than I had imagined it would. Here I was, the so-called “expert,” struggling to keep the interest of a boy who, at the beginning of the year, lived and breathed music. I wrote:

Of all the things that I have learned this year, the one that is most deeply embedded in me is how music is meant to bring joy. Perfectionism, although intended to pave the way for greater happiness, never really does. Danny’s love of music will be suffocated if he worries so much about getting it “right” (whatever that is). The jury’s still out for Danny and what he wants to do. Will our overzealousness cost him his dreams? Were they really his dreams to begin with? It’s such a fine line between developing proper habits and stifling the love of playing. But in watching a 4-year-old who loves music and has struggled to maintain that love on the cello this year (thanks to our efforts to impose our limiting ideas on his free spirit), I think I know what I would hope for him now.

Yet this boy still felt a need to please me; to do things the way he thought I wanted. I reported in my journal:

After his last lesson was over, I took the video camera and recorded a conversation with Danny. I asked him what he wanted to do with the cello when he was in his new home. He told me that when he came back (perhaps not comprehending the finality of

the move) he would be playing in an orchestra. I asked him what songs he would be playing. He said, "ALL the Suzuki songs." I asked him what else. He hesitated, and then showed me his left hand, with curved fingers, and said, "This one." I asked him if it was the tunnel song [technical exercise to curve the left fingers] song and he said yes.

Danny gave me all the "right" answers – that is, at least what he seemed to think I wanted him to say. In other words, "When I see you next, I will have the perfect technique that you expect. I will play in the orchestra like you expect. I will play all the songs that you expect me to learn." But what did Danny *really* want? I considered the answer to this question in my journal:

Perhaps he doesn't know. That's simple enough to imagine since it is human nature to change one's mind about something to which we are so emotionally attached.

Certainly we know that he loves music, loves the cello, but just wants to be able to play it without patiently trudging through all the steps and games that are typically enough for a child his age. His mind and ear are far beyond his developmental capacities to play the cello, but music is in his heart and head. He regularly sings to himself, and adds expression, emotion and variety (in range, timbre, and articulation) to songs when singing with others.

Musical instrument preference comes and goes for him, interest in playing the cello waxes and wanes, but some sort of encounter with music is always going on in his play, actions, and in his interactions with others. He still gets extremely emotional if he doesn't get his way with group music activities, and he randomly conducts (always as expressive as Bernstein). Danny is a Pre-Twinkler [Suzuki student in preparation for the first song "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star"], and progressing quite naturally and expectedly according to his developmental abilities. The difference between Danny and other Pre-Twinklers, however, is that Danny is already a developed musician. Perhaps this makes the frustration too much for him to bear.

Saying Good Bye

I had promised the family that I would find a new cello teacher for them in the area to which they were moving, but I just hadn't been able to bring myself to make the necessary calls. Finally, after the shocked surprise and encouragement of a teaching colleague to get on the phone and "find this brilliant boy a teacher" (I admit I was completely persuaded by ego), I started working with the connections that I had. Riley and I also spent some time on the

Internet looking at Suzuki Schools in the area to which they were moving. Unfortunately, nothing we found seemed *good enough* for Danny.

Reflecting back. In my frustration, I thought back to the previous fall, when I first asked Riley if she would like to take cello lessons along with her son. I was taken aback as she immediately started to cry – I had no idea she cared so much about music! To her, she said, music was “a window to the soul.” Later, I asked Eric about Riley’s spontaneous tears. He explained her emotion as a result of never feeling “good enough” to study a musical instrument:

There are a lot of things that she never got to try when she was a kid. In high school she was on the tennis team, but I don’t think that she had any kind of lessons or joined any leagues or anything. And I think a part of her has felt like if she had shown enough talent in something her parents would make that a priority, because her younger sister took piano lessons, because her sister had some musical talent. And so to have somebody say, ‘You can do this’ was an affirmation that I think she had never had.

Riley’s lessons and duets with me that year had been, in my opinion, fun, free, and nonjudgmental - more like two good friends playing music together. In the last few months, however, she had showed much less interest in playing, similar to the lack of interest in lessons that her son displayed. Had she stifled her musical aspirations? Was she too busy now? Or was she simply no longer interested? Or – or maybe – had the perfectionism in our “triangle” been too much for her as well? I really didn’t know.

But I wasn’t about to let it all end like this.

A new idea. One night just before they left, my mind’s eye opened up to a different scene than I had previously imagined. I emailed Riley to share my idea:

In a nutshell: Danny’s formal lessons are put on hold, but you get to play [your cello] for fun, perhaps taking a few lessons, and just simply playing every once in a while for yourself. If Danny wants to play too, then he can play. So in truth you’re practicing with him, but in a much less stressful format. Just for fun. And Danny could merely observe, or participate, as he wishes.

This idea was inspired by the research of Lucy Green (2001), and was my last attempt to keep Danny’s love of cello alive by suggesting that he learn informally, by simply “jamming” with

his mom. It hit me somehow just how liberating this might be for both of them. I wrote in my journal:

When Riley and I play duets together, there is hardly any need for perfectionism, no need to please. When Riley plays, it's simply just for the love of it. This is what I would hope for both Riley and Danny: Music as joy.

Perhaps, I thought, she could keep playing her cello for fun on a semi-regular basis, both for herself as well as for her son who just *might* be watching. Riley just playing. Just having and modeling fun - but being ready to offer good “cellistic” advice to Danny when asked. Sounded win-win to me! (I suggested this to the family – noting now, in retrospect, that I was still trying to control the situation, still acting as “expert,” even in the moment that I was recognizing a need for more freedom).

When I shared my thoughts with Riley and Eric, they confessed that they had also been considering an alteration in future plans. In fact, we were surprised at how much our independent conclusions matched. They, too, had thought to keep their cellos but to take a rest from weekly lessons. Riley mentioned that Danny had expressed an interest in being able to “practice a while” before starting with another teacher. Eric reported that Danny told him that he was ready for a break from lessons but still wanted to keep “Carolyn.” It appeared that even Danny was in agreement with us: It wasn’t the cello that was the problem; it was the lessons.

I promised to never ask them again about their progress on the instruments.

Life after Lessons

I received only one unsolicited report about Danny and his cello after the family moved away. Riley emailed me soon after they moved, to tell me about a situation in which Danny was playing at home with his cousin and, as Riley reported, “the play hit a snag.” She tells the story:

So, yesterday Brandon was over to play with Danny. They'd been playing all right, but the play shifted somehow and Brandon was insisting on something that Danny didn't want to do. Danny hasn't quite learned how to negotiate with Brandon yet, so he got a bit upset and left the room. A minute later I heard a bump, bump, bump and could tell that Danny was bringing things back down to the basement where Brandon and I were. I went around the corner of the stairs to see if Danny needed help, and discovered that Danny was bringing down his cello (in the case still) and his cello

chair. He set them down on the landing of the stairs (so four stairs higher than where Brandon was sitting on a beanbag on the floor) and announced that he was going to give Brandon a concert.

I helped Danny get out his cello safely (the stairs aren't carpeted, and the landing isn't super big), He sat down on this chair, lined his fingers up beautifully on his bow, and began to free play. After just a little bit, Brandon said "Can you stop? I'm hearing lots of screeching." I told Brandon that we have a rule at our house that "we only talk nice about people's instrument playing, since everyone is just learning." After that he asked if Danny could play quieter, so I guided Danny to play on the C and G string. Danny added some pizzicato (thumb on the side of the finger board) and some quiet spiccato bowing. Brandon had the remote for our remote control car in his hand and they ended up pretending that the remote control let Brandon command Danny to bow fast/ slow or loud/soft.

When Brandon seemed bored with that, I suggested that Danny let Brandon try the cello. Brandon hadn't expressed an interest in playing it, but when offered the chance, he hopped right up and sat down. Brandon plucked a little and bowed some. It seemed a little hard for Danny to let Brandon play Carolyn, and Danny was ready for his turn again pretty quickly, but I think it gave Brandon a bit more understanding of the squeaks, and enough patience to listen to Danny play for a few more minutes. I'd kept my hand on the cello (near the tuning pegs) the whole time, but otherwise, I was impressed at how naturally it all went.

Echoes of perfectionism. From a new place of awareness, I observed this scene as one mixed with Riley's desire to let Danny play freely, yet still with an underlying tone of perfectionism and a need to please the "teacher." In the midst of her description of Danny's free play, she included comments that evidenced her effectiveness as a "Suzuki triangle" parent:

They'd been playing all right.

Danny hasn't quite learned how to negotiate with Brandon yet.

Danny was bringing down his cello (in the case still).

I helped Danny get out his cello safely.

He lined his fingers up beautifully on his bow.

We have a rule at our house that we only talk nice about people's instrument playing.

Were these descriptions just a natural part of Riley's story, or were they inserted for me to view, to endorse somehow? Riley didn't really need my validation. I was already in awe of her mothering abilities, her care for her children, her patience, her tireless hours dedicated to

making sure that Danny and Ellie had everything they would need to be happy, healthy, and prepared for the world. I had a tremendous amount of respect for her. Yet even in her description of a spontaneous free play moment, she still included the “right” answers – *that is, at least what she seemed to think I wanted her to say*. While I hoped that her time with Danny would be more like our cello duets had been - full of free expression and nonjudgmental space - the authoritarian triangle of “TEACHER-teaching-Parent-teaching-child” still resonated even within the new playful structure.

I got a sick feeling as I read her words – the same kind of sick feeling I had whenever I found myself telling my older students that they didn’t need to be so nervous before a performance. You know, that it really didn’t matter. That they should just play from their hearts and not worry about the details – all this after I had demanded unyielding perfection from them in every practice session leading up to that moment. As if they could just turn that off all of a sudden.

Yet I could not truly provide a safe, expressive space for any of my students until I first learned to create one for myself.

Self-determination. From a different view, Riley’s description of Danny’s free play was also a “poster moment” for self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and one I felt I could truly be proud of. Danny brought down the cello and played it out of his own volition (autonomy), setting up his technique and demonstrating skills he had learned (competence), sharing the music he loved with his cousin and his mother (relatedness). Hooray - A great start, and exactly what I had hoped for. So very different than assigning an adult as the authority, calling often developmentally inappropriate shots for him.

But did it continue?

Conclusion

Last summer, four years after I gave Danny his last lesson, Riley called me to see how she might find a new home for two cellos that, frankly, had been sitting in the closet untouched for years now. Danny had moved on to a keen interest in fire trucks. And then dinosaurs. He could tell you any detail you’d ever want to know about any kind of “terrible lizard” that had ever walked the planet.

So, what’s it to me? Should I care? Perhaps it was just a “phase,” just like Eric’s friends suggested. We all go through them, right? We all get passionate about things – and then something happens to either kindle that fire further . . .

...or blow it out.

I can't go back now. If I could, I would do things differently. I would play with Danny. I would play my cello for him and with him, and answer his questions and show him things that *he* was interested in. That *he* asked me about. And I'd care much less about the end result. I'd just enjoy every moment with him, and make music in our own kind of way. It would be less about cello and more about connection.

Songs my students teach me now. Many years have passed since I met Danny and his family. Since then, I have somehow attracted a dozen or so early childhood string students into my studio. I have never sought them out. They just seem to keep coming into my life, as if the Universe continues to twist and bend back on itself to give me my own kind of spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1960), providing me opportunities to observe, listen, learn, and relearn pedagogical secrets from these young sages.

They have taught me almost everything I know about early childhood education. They teach me to play with them (Marsh & Young, 2006; Nachmanovitch, 1990). To get down on the floor with them, as their equal, and engage with them in music making (Duke, 1999; Custodero, 2009). To play my instrument, and invite them to play theirs - if and when and how they want (Andress, 1980; Moorhead, Sandvik, & Pond, 1951). To dance with them (Goodkin, 2004; Moorhead & Pond, 1942). To sing with them (Flohr & Persellin, 2011; Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009; Moorhead & Pond, 1941). To provide them a variety of music-making options, and let them choose what they'd like to do (Blair, 2009; O'Neill, 2005; Renwick & McPherson, 2002). To teach them correct bow holds and fundamental string technique, but with "flexible purposing" (Dewey, 1938; Hendricks, 2009), within a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), offering more developmentally appropriate activities (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Jordan-Decarbo & Nelson, 2002; Katz, 1987, 1995; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) that support and encourage their sense of competence (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

We still start and end each lesson with a bow to one another, but now I consider this an opportunity to demonstrate *my* respect, as I say to them in my heart, "I am ready to learn." I no longer get disappointed when they don't want to participate the way I had in mind. I take this as a moment to listen and observe and learn from them. I've learned that there are plenty of ways to participate, plenty of ways to be musical. And there is plenty of time to grow up.

* * *

[When] we see our thoughts and emotions with compassion, we stop struggling against ourselves. We learn to recognize when we're all caught up and to trust that we can let go. Thus the blockages created by our habits and prejudices start falling apart. In this way, the wisdom we were blocking ... becomes available.

-Pema Chödrön (2002, p. 141)

A person with a fine and pure heart will find happiness. The only concern ... should be to bring up ... children as noble human beings. That is sufficient. If this is not [the] greatest hope, in the end the child may take a road contrary to their expectations. Your [child] plays ... very well. We must try to make him splendid in mind and heart also.

-Shinichi Suzuki (1983, p. 15)

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