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The Suzuki Method: History, Philosophy, and Contemporary Implications

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THE SUZUKI METHOD: HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

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The Suzuki method emphasizes early musical intervention, involvement of parents/caregivers, and a musical home environment as foundational tenets of its philosophy. Parent involvement and home environment in general education (PI-HE) and in music (PI-HEM) has been operationalized and explored in a growing body of research. Most existing PI-HEM research has measured elementary and instrumental students in grades 4-12, while few studies have measured PI-HEM in preschoolers aged 3-5. Further exploration of the Suzuki Method through the lens of contemporary PI-HE literature could reveal a more specific understanding of the Suzuki Method in our modern landscape so that a conversation about equitable applications of the method may be ignited. Scholarship on the Suzuki method, PI-HE, and PI-HEM were reviewed in this paper. The first section of this paper provides information on the Suzuki method, beginning with the history and philosophy of the method, followed by an examination of the tenets of the philosophy, and a review of the previous research that has examined the intersection of the Suzuki method and early childhood. The second section of the paper examines seminal PI-HEM measurement instruments, followed by studies on PI-HE in relation to learning outcomes in general education and in music, and finally PI-HE and relationships to demographic and socioeconomic background of parents.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Across time, culture, and tradition, musical experiences have been valued among families and communities. The place of music in society has been advocated for as early as the first American settlements (Keene,1982). Throughout time, approaches to music education have evolved, and music pedagogues around the world have left their mark on the music education systems in use today. Among them, a man named Shinichi Suzuki and his method are known to be at the heart of string pedagogy, especially for young children. This method has a rich historical and philosophical background rooted in the social movements of Japan in the Twentieth Century.

Shinichi Suzuki, born in 1998 in Nagoya, Japan, first conceived his method to teach young children the violin. *Talent Education*, as he titled his instructional design, was more than just a method to Suzuki; it was a way to nurture confidence, community, and nobility in young children. Eventually the method found its way to the heart of string pedagogy in the Western world (Blaine, 1976). Two important hallmarks of the method are parental involvement and a musical home environment.

Parental involvement is a factor that has been found to have an impact on the musical and educational success of young children. Increased parental participation has also been associated with higher reading achievement, lower grade retention rates, and fewer years in special education within preschool and kindergarten students (Miedel & Reynolds, 2000). In music education, parental involvement has been found to improve affective, cognitive, and performance outcomes of band students in grades 4-12 (Zdzinski, 1996).

Suzuki students can begin instrumental study as early as 3 years of age, but more

commonly begin their studies between the ages of 5 and 6. The age range of 3 to 5 is central to the *pre twinkle* phase, a foundational element of the Suzuki Method that sets the groundwork for future musical learning. The presence of active parents in addition to a musical home environment is essential for the successful execution of the method for young students in the pre-twinkle phase.

Because parental involvement and home environment are pivotal to the success of the Suzuki Method, this paper will review literature relevant to the intersection of these topics. Oftentimes certain variables that are essential for the success of the pedagogical method are not reflected in students ' family and home life (Dell et al., 2014). Examination of the parental involvement and home environment factors in the Suzuki Method could reveal a more specific understanding of the Suzuki Method in our modern landscape and begin the conversation of how to bridge the gap between potential socioeconomic and demographic barriers and the successful application of the Suzuki Method.

CHAPTER 2

THE SUZUKI METHOD

History

Japan witnessed significant changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Japan, which had historically thrived on a self-contained model, became more globally integrated and strived to become a 'Western power'. The country began following Western models of civilization, particularly a heightened work ethic among its citizens. The city of Nagoya, Suzuki's birthplace, was geographically positioned as an important area of commerce in addition to being Japan's fourth largest city. A young Suzuki witnessed a local culture influenced by industries such as textiles, watchmaking and pottery (Hotta, 2018).

Shinichi's father belonged to a middle class that was involved in an environment of trade and consumerism of small goods. He owned and operated a violin factory; coincidentally, Shinichi and his brothers and sisters enjoyed play time near the building, but never actually touched the instruments. It was during the age of 17 that Shinichi heard a recording of Schubert's *Ave Maria* played by the famous violinist, Mischa Elman. This moment, listening to the sound of the violin which he had previously thought to be a toy, touched Suzuki and set his mind to learn the violin. This was the start of a deep interest in music, philosophy, education, and humanism (Hotta, 2018).

After studying the violin in Japan, Suzuki eventually traveled to Berlin to study with Karl Klinger, an accomplished German composer and violinist. Facing a language barrier in this new land, Suzuki observed German children speaking their native language with natural fluency; this would later greatly influence his understanding of the process of learning. Upon Suzuki's return to Japan, Suzuki witnessed many Japanese children living in the devastated landscape in the

aftermath of World War II. Suzuki wanted to help these children develop to their full potential by giving them violin lessons. After a handful of years applying his pedagogical approach to these Japanese children, Talent Education, as he titled his teaching method, gained significant notoriety among local parents and teachers (Mark, 1996).

Western Adoption the of Suzuki Method

Approximately 40 years after Suzuki's providential encounter with *Ave Maria*, 1,200 violinists aged 3 to 15 years old stood upon a dusty clay surface. They had gathered upon the floor of an Olympic sized gymnasium which was still under-construction. The violinists stood in rows making an angular shape around a stage. A wiry man named Suzuki wore a tailcoat and waved patterns in the air from a haphazard podium. A live broadcast captured these young violinists playing with beautiful tone, calm coordination, and confidence. Even at this early age, the violinists appeared to be masters of playing in such a group (Hotta, 2018).

The grand concert for the first National Convention of the Talent Education Research Institute was a visual and aural exhibition of the application of Suzuki's Talent Education. This event, taking place on March 27th, 1955 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium was the gathering place for students of Suzuki and other Talent Education teachers to perform an ambitious program including musical works from George Frederick Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach and Antonio Vivaldi. Perhaps most bold among the musical selections on the program that day was Bach's Double Violin Concerto. It was performed by eight hundred violin students from memory, executed by the students with musicianship and technique one may only expect from a seasoned musician. This day would become the catalyst for a widespread Western involvement in the Suzuki method (Hotta, 2018).

A video recording with sound of this event was presented at a meeting of the Ohio String

Teachers Association at which Dr. John Kendall, the director of Muskingum College in Ohio, was in the audience. Kendall was initially incredulous of such a mass assembly of young, talented performers, and so in 1959 Kendall traveled to Japan to meet and study with Suzuki for several weeks. Kendall returned to the United States, and through his advocation for the use of Talent Education among American educators, the first and second violin Suzuki method books were published. Conceived as a private lesson method, the Suzuki system of teaching thereafter became widely used by American music educators for both public education classrooms and private instruction (Blaine 1976).

Talent Education Philosophy

Suzuki's philosophy is defined in a personal account of his method which he published and titled *Nurtured by Love* (Suzuki, 2018). Suzuki wrote this book to compile the thoughts and ideas that guided his life's work. The writing expressed by Suzuki in *Nurtured By Love* suggests that he believed 'nurture' was a critical variable that developed musical success, which he supported by personal anecdotes and examples from the natural world. He states, "we are not raising miniature violinists. We are trying to raise worthy citizens while proving that talents are not inborn,... that great sensibilities and talents can be nurtured in any human being" (Hotta, 2018, p. 27).

Suzuki created the term *supreme environment* to represent his ideal learning environment. A supreme environment reflected a child's life and the music classroom as one. Elements of music would be integrated into the child's routine through parental intention and a musical home environment. In Suzuki's original design, parental involvement reached to the extent of parents learning the instrument prior to their children to model good learning and playing. Within a supreme environment, a positive outlook should be maintained by the teacher, parents and

students. With these environmental elements in place, Suzuki believed the student could learn through the *mother tongue method*.

The *mother tongue method* refers to the natural ability of young children to learn and repeat sounds and language in their environment. Suzuki observed German and Japanese children speaking their native language with ease, accent and nuance, revealing that children can understand and repeat their own language. Suzuki believed this was the result of children being immersed in an environment that was constantly refining their language during the child's impressionable stages. This observation shaped Suzuki's understanding of music pedagogy. The *mother tongue method* in essence became the application of the language learning analogy to music learning; children learn music by listening to the music in their environment. Suzuki suggested the mother tongue method is a way to ensure all young students of the Suzuki Method will be immersed in an environment that nurtures their abilities (Suzuki, 2018).

An anecdote from the natural world was used to express the synthesis of a supreme environment and the mother tongue method. The Bush Warbler is a native Japanese bird that learns a unique warbler song by imitating the sounds heard around it during the early part of its life. Bush Warbler training begins when the bird is young and impressionable, at which stage the birds are called "Tsukego". The Tsukego are given elements of what Suzuki describes as a supreme environment for learning, meaning that each day the young bird hears the song of an elder master warbler. The bird does not know the difference between a classroom and life; the two are one. The Tsukego is exposed to its song, or language, throughout all periods of its day. The Master Warbler demonstrates its song correctly and many times over until the warbler can itself sing the warbler songs (Suzuki, 2018).

Tenets of the Suzuki Method

The applications of a supreme environment and the mother tongue method are reflected in the tenets of the Suzuki Method. An illustration of Suzuki's philosophical terminology can be seen in figure 1. A detailed list of these tenets are found in the teacher handbook *Every Child Can* (2003), a publication by the Suzuki Association of the Americas. The tenets are listed as follows: early beginnings with instrumental instruction being between ages 3-5, listening, positive environment, small steps, tone production, repetition, common set, repertoire, group classes, and the suzuki triangle (*Every Child Can,* 2003). The tenets and their descriptions are listed in table 1.

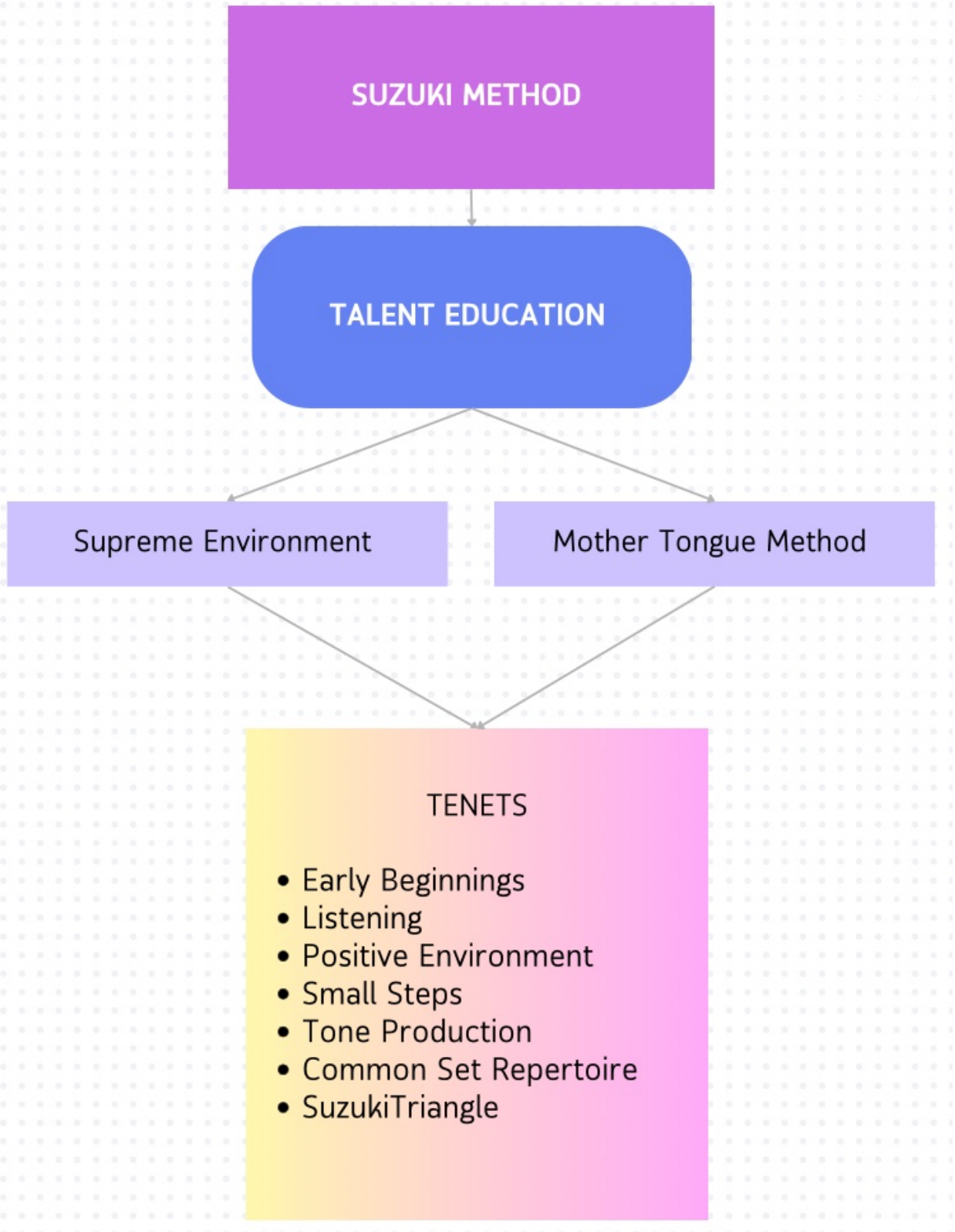

Figure 1. Hierarchy of Philosophical Terminology within the Suzuki Method

Table 1. Tenets of the Suzuki Method

Early Beginnings	3-5 years old
Listening	Regular exposure to live and recorded selections of music
Positive environment	Feedback and attitudes
Small steps	Small, sequenced learning objectives
Tone production	Beautiful, ringing tone
Common set repertoire	Selected music within the classical canon and composed by Suzuki
The Suzuki Triangle	Student, parent/caregiver, and teacher

Early Beginnings

The tenet of *early beginnings* refers to enrolling children in Suzuki Method training between 3-5 years old. Enrolling children in Suzuki lessons in early childhood serves to expose the students to music as early on as possible, because like language development, Suzuki believed that ideal music education begins at birth. The Suzuki teacher handbook, *Every Child Can* (2003), defines the ages of 3-5 years old as the ideal time for students to begin instrumental lessons because children at this age can establish practice habits before other activities compete for their time. Additionally, children in this age range are receptive to aural learning, enjoy repetition, and are eager to please.

The term *pre-twinkle* within the Suzuki method refers to the initial instructional stage that precedes formal note reading. During this phase, young students focus on developing

foundational skills such as posture, instrumental technique, and ear training. The emphasis of this instructional period is for the intention of cultivating aural abilities through listening, imitation, and basic instrumental techniques. The pre-twinkle phase provides the foundation for future musical learning.

Listening

The tenet of *listening* aligns with the language learning analogy, with the argument that music is first and foremost about sound and therefore should be learned aurally. The argument made in *Every Child Can* is that students should listen to their repertoire because it increases memorization skills, is not dependent on visual symbols, enables students to self-correct, and expands the student's sensitivity to style and interpretation. Listening includes recording of the Suzuki repertoire, teachers, live concerts and 'fine' music of any genre. The listening is defined as both passive and active, with passive listening occurring during meals, at bedtime, while doing homework, etc. Activities for active listening involve singing with the music, movement to the music, listening for specific elements, and drawing visual connections.

Positive Environment

Positive environment is defined by two categories: feedback and attitudes. The feedback within a positive environment should be honest, specific and follow immediately after a task. A positive attitude is asked of the parents/caregivers, students and teachers and is defined by a belief in the student, appreciation of the accomplishment of a step no matter the size, discipline with love, and sensitivity to each child's response to praise.

Small Steps

The tenet of *small steps* means each task within the child's learning should be small and achievable. Each step should be mastered before moving on. A step may be unique to the

student, meaning that every student may be on a different step compared to peers of the same age or grade. This tenet shares a relationship with *repetition* in that each step involving the playing and performing of repertoire should be repeated.

Tone Production

Suzuki coined his own term *tonalization* which means the ability to create a beautiful, ringing tone. In the same way that vocalists develop their voice through daily vocalization exercises, Suzuki believed that instrumentalists should approach tone production. Suzuki students begin working on tone from the first moment they draw their bow across the string.

Common Set Repertoire

A *common set repertoire* was established within the Suzuki method based on the classical cannon and including compositions by Suzuki himself that serves several purposes. The common repertoire allows for group lessons to occur, provides the teacher with the ability to evaluate student progress within the bounds of a smaller curriculum, and introduces the students to the Suzuki repertoire from the beginning of the student's involvement in the method. The set repertoire was also designed to address technical and musical objectives using a step-by-step approach.

The Suzuki Triangle

The *Suzuki triangle* is a cornerstone of the method and it consists of the relationship among the student, parent/caregiver, and teacher. Each point of the triangle is ascribed equal importance with respect and communication in all directions. Each member of the triangle has a defined responsibility to the other two members. The teacher's responsibility to the parent/caregiver is to affirm and encourage the parent/caregiver position, educate and inform the parent/caregiver on how to give assistance at home, and making suggestions for practice,

listening, and note taking. The parent/caregiver's responsibilities include attending lessons and note taking, learning the elements of the instrument and developing basic skills therein, observation of other student lessons, playing recordings, and practicing with the student as the teacher assistant at home. The student's responsibilities vary by age, however respect toward the teacher and parent/caregiver is an important element throughout.

CHAPTER 3

MEASURING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND HOME ENVIRONEMT IN MUSIC (PI-HEM)

The philosophy and tenets of the Suzuki Method define parental involvement and home environment as essential components of the method. As Suzuki articulated “the destiny of the child is in the hands of his parents” (Suzuki, 2018, p. 12). This statement serves to emphasize Suzuki’s understanding that parental involvement was essential to the success of young students. Contemporary research in general education and music has further recognized the role of parental involvement in student success. To objectively quantify the constructs of parental involvement and home environment, contemporary researchers have developed and validated measurement instruments tailored to different contexts and populations. Important among these measurement instruments are those created by Zdzinski (2013) and Wills (2015).

Zdzinski (2013) investigated the multifaceted structure of the Parental Involvement in Home Environment in Music (PI-HEM) using a factor analysis to create a reliable and valid scale. The resulting PI-HEM scale offers a standardized measure for future research, facilitating an understanding of how music-specific parental involvement factors relate to student success. The PI-HEM scale is comprised of the following factors: Home Musical Structure, Attitudes Toward Music, Home Musical Environment, Music Program Support, Parental Expectations, Family Musical Participation, and Family Musical Background. By integrating data obtained with this scale along with other variables like grade level, ethnicity, family structure, and parenting style, a more comprehensive understanding of PI-HEM can be achieved and tested.

Another measurement tool has been designed to investigate the relationship among early childhood music instruction and parental involvement is the Parents' Use of Music with

Preschool Students (PUMPS) (Wills, 2015). This tool was created for the purpose of gathering data related to demographic characteristics, experiences in early childhood music programs, the personal music experience of parent/caregiver and information about the nature of music use in the home.

Other measurement tools have been designed to address different aspects of PI-HEM. The Parental Involvement Measure (PIM) by Zdzinski (1996) was designed for middle school instrumental music students, providing a comprehensive assessment of parental engagement through Likert scale items. Cui (2023) developed the Parents' Level of Actions in Private Music Learning Scale (PLAPMLS) to examine parental actions in children's private music education in China.

CHAPTER 4

SUZUKI EDUCATION AND RESEARCH INVESTIGATING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Parental involvement and a musical home environment are cornerstones of the Suzuki method, as reflected in the method's philosophical tenets. While Suzuki string programs have been recognized for success, a small body of research has addressed the application of Suzuki in early childhood and educational outcomes. A study conducted by Blaine (1976) explored the application of the Suzuki method in the teaching of heterogeneous brass-wind instruments in elementary school music education. Blaine was prompted to investigate the efficacy of the Suzuki instruction with brass and winds after the Suzuki method began expanding in schools beyond its traditional violin focus. This research addressed whether students trained with the Suzuki method exhibited higher performance levels compared to those taught using traditional methods. Results revealed that the Suzuki groups achieved significantly higher scores, as measured by the Whybrew Performance Evaluation Scale which was designed to measure subjective elements of music such as tone and technique.

Studies have been conducted to investigate the possible musical and socioemotional benefits of the Suzuki method in early childhood. Kovarovic's (2012) research explored the relationship between parental involvement, early childhood education, and emotional regulation in children, with a specific focus on the Suzuki method. The findings of this research suggested that the intensive parental involvement that accompanies Suzuki instruction positively influences the emotional regulation of students.

A study conducted by Scott (1992) also highlighted the role of parental involvement and early education. This study examined the socioemotional regulation of preschool children

enrolled in music ages 3-5 by measuring attention and perseverance behaviors. Similar to Blaine's 1976 research, this study compared Suzuki instruction to selected traditional approaches in early childhood music and movement instruction. The results of the study indicated that Suzuki groups scored significantly higher in levels of attention and perseverance behaviors than the groups receiving instruction through traditional approaches, providing evidence that the Suzuki early intervention had a positive impact on the socioemotional regulation of children in early childhood.

CHAPTER 5

PARENTAL INVOLEMENT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Within the past two decades a handful of meta-analyses have examined parental involvement in relationship to learning outcomes of school aged children. Fan and Chen (2001) synthesized literature on parent involvement and student' academic success; Jeynes (2012) addressed the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs for urban students. The analyses were not specific to music education and were primarily concerned with outcomes for middle school students. A commonality among these analyses was an aim to identify which type of parental involvement has the strongest relationship with academic achievement.

The most recent of these meta-analyses was conducted by Ma et al. (2015) whose work summarized previous meta-analyses and addressed early childhood and elementary aged children. For these reasons, the meta analysis of Ma et al. is most germane to the scope of this research. Ma et al. (2015) synthesized findings regarding the relationship between learning outcomes and parental involvement during the developmental periods of early childhood and elementary education. Data examined in this analysis consisted of 100 independent effect sizes across 46 studies examining correlations among children's learning outcomes and parental involvement. The 46 studies were coded for variations in the variables of publication, design, and frameworks of parental involvement. Learning outcomes during early childhood and early elementary school education were defined as academic achievement and cognition variables that facilitate academic achievement. Because most of these studies were seeking to examine the strength of the relationship among parental involvement and achievement, correlation coefficients measuring effect sizes were used. The final step examined studies for outliers and to

identify salient variables responsible for variation in effect sizes. To accomplish this, a statistical procedure known as weighted least square multiple regression analysis was applied (Ma et al., 2015).

Results of the regression analysis revealed that the variables responsible for learning outcomes were parental involvement frameworks, while publication and design variables were identified as outliers. Only eleven variables within parental involvement frameworks were statistically significantly correlated with learning outcomes and were used in the final regression. Hierarchical regression analysis further revealed the two frameworks of parental involvement that had the strongest correlation with learning outcomes. Those frameworks were Types of Parental Involvement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and Dimensions of Parental Involvement (Ho & Willms, 1996). Types of Parental Involvement, as defined by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), was the dedication of parent resources to a given domain within the child' world (e.g., resource given to school, social activities, athletics). The domains within this framework were categorized as behavioral involvement, personal involvement, and intellectual involvement. Within the Dimensions of Parental Involvement, parents' involvement at home, in particular the discussion of school activities and assistance planning and managing the children's programs, had the strongest relationship to academic achievement (Ho & Willms, 1996). Studies revealed strong positive relationships among personal involvement and intellectual involvement with the positive learning outcomes of children (Ma et al., 2015).

CHAPTER 6

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF PARENTS

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities tend to underperform academically (Jencks & Mayer, 1990, Rossi & Montgomery, 1994). This suggests that family background can play an important role in children's music education participation and persistence. Studies addressing this topic highlight the relationship among parental involvement, socio-economic factors, and cultural dynamics in shaping children's educational experiences and outcomes.

Driessen (2004) conducted a study that investigated parental involvement's impact on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for students during their last year of primary school. Findings revealed that parents in ethnic minority groups may feel alienated from schools, impacting their level of involvement. Additionally, parent's socio-economic status and ethnic background has been found to be linked to considerable variation in the level of parents' school involvement (Boethel, 2003). Specifically, lower socio-economic status and ethnic minority parents may face barriers to involvement, contributing to academic underperformance among their children. By examining the interrelationship among PI-HEM factors, family background, socioeconomic status and psychosocial maturity, Dell et al. (2014) discovered higher income families exhibited higher levels of PI-HEM factors. While single-parent families exhibit lower levels of parental involvement towards music study and less family musical background.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY: THE CONFLUENCE OF THE SUZUKI METHOD AND PI-HEM LITERATURE

Among the philosophical foundations of the Suzuki Method, there are three important tenets to consider through the lens of PI-HEM literature. Those tenets are early beginnings, the suzuki triangle, and a positive environment. These core philosophies advocate for a collaborative partnership among students, parents/caregivers, and teachers in the pursuit of musical achievement.

Research in early childhood education has identified a significant positive relationship among personal involvement and intellectual involvement of parents with the learning outcomes of children (Ma et al., 2015). In early childhood music education, the use of the Suzuki Method was found to have a significant positive impact on the socioemotional regulation of children in early childhood (Scott, 1996). In music education, parental involvement was found to affect instrumental music outcomes of band students grade 4-12 and was significantly related to affective, cognitive, and performance outcomes in music (Zdzinski, 1996). Additionally, elementary instrumental music students have demonstrated higher levels of musical achievement when enrolled in Suzuki instruction in comparison to traditional approaches (Blaine, 1976).

As evidenced by contemporary research, parent involvement leads to improved learning outcomes in education and music. The Suzuki Method strongly relies on parental involvement and home environment in early childhood through its foundational tenets. However, early childhood Suzuki teachers may encounter families in which there are deficiencies in the PI-HEM variables due to socioeconomic and demographic barriers (Dell et al., 2014). Parental involvement levels have been found to vary based on socio-economic status and ethnic

background, with children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities facing barriers to involvement, leading to academic underperformance (Dell et al., 2014, Boethel, 2003, Driessen, 2004). Further research could address solutions for a more equitable application of the method so that the original design by Shinichi Suzuki may be implemented for all families studying with the Suzuki Method regardless of background.

In considering tools and frameworks for possible further research, a body of research has designed and validated several PI-HEM measurement instruments. Because the Suzuki Method is employed in early childhood education, these measurement instruments, or a variation therein, could be used to further refine the assessment of variables in Suzuki early childhood education. The Parental Involvement Measure (PIM) by Zdzinski (1996) was designed for middle school instrumental music students, providing an assessment of parental engagement through Likert scale items. Wills (2015) introduced the Parents' Use of Music with Preschool Students (PUMPS) tool, which identified factors influencing the musical home environment of preschool children. Cui (2023) developed the Parents' Level of Actions in Private Music Learning Scale (PLAPMLS) to examine parental actions in children's private music education in China. Zdzinski (2013) contributed to this body of literature by investigating the multifaceted structure of Parental Involvement in Home Environment in Music (PI-HEM) and developing a valid scale.

The educational philosophy of Shinichi Suzuki and his aspiration for humanism and pacifism amidst global upheaval, provides a basis for understanding Suzuki’s advocacy for his method not only as an educational approach but as a way of working towards social change. He believed that nurturing children's development could contribute to creating a better world. In contemporary society there exist barriers for some children to realize the method to its intended degree and dimensions. The music education profession’s recognition of these barriers could be a

step towards providing equitable access for all backgrounds within the Suzuki Method, allowing all children to know their full potential; as was Suzuki's vision.

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