Teaching Parents to Practice:

The Value of Parental Support in Instrumental Music Instruction

Erin Howard

University of Washington

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According to world-renowned jazz trumpeter Miles Davis, the key to musical success is "practice, practice, practice." This sounds simple enough, but what exactly is practicing? How often and for how long is necessary? Where should this happen, and what exactly is it that is being practiced? These are vital questions that need to be answered in order to facilitate the highest quality of practice, and subsequently, the most efficient and effective learning for young musicians. Who should be answering these questions? The obvious answer is you, the music teacher. However, research shows that for optimum student achievement you should not be alone in this endeavor. Parents can be very influential in instrumental music learning— in either a positive or negative direction. The purpose of this article is to identify the ideal conditions for students to have a successful experience practicing during their early years of instrumental music. Strategies, structure, and support systems in and out of the classroom, as well as our role as music teachers in facilitating this phenomenon will be explored.

How Do Students Practice?

As music teachers it is our dream that all of our students will go home and practice their instrument studiously on a regular basis. In pursuit of this dream we must ask, Is practice the key to success for all students, of all ages? What does it take to make this dream a reality? The first obstacle is to understand what students are doing when they "practice." This is a domain that has been under study for several years by Dr. Steven Oare. In his 2012 study regarding decisions

made in the practice room Oare begins by describing a typical dialogue between teacher and

student:

> Mr. Terris: Your practice sheet says that you practice an hour a day, but your playing test
> was only a C. Can you explain why?
>
> Clara Nett: I don't know what happened! I could play the test last night!
>
> Mr. Terris: How many times did you play it?
>
> Clara Nett: 10 or 20.
>
> Mr. Terris: How many times did you play it correctly?
>
> Clara Nett: Umm, I dunno. Once or twice.
>
> Mr. Terris: Hmm. How did you practice it?
>
> Clara Nett: I dunno. I just played it (Oare, 2012, p.1).

This dialogue illustrates common themes Oare uncovered in his study of the practice habits of

five seventh- through ninth-grade students. In order to investigate the issues underscoring this

example dialogue, Oare studied the practice habits of five seventh- through ninth-grade students.

The students were videotaped while practicing and subsequently interviewed using a

retrospective verbal protocol in which they recalled their practice after it was completed.

Students were asked to discuss the goals they had while practicing, choice of practice strategies,

self- assessment process, and feelings of efficacy.

Oare found three main themes in the student responses. First, older students were more

likely involved in private lessons and chose to practice specific spots within their assigned music

with the purpose of improving performance. Consequently, they were able to stay focused on a

single activity for up to 10 minutes at a time, and only 4 or 5 selections of music were addressed

during their sessions. Younger students without formal private instruction did not choose the

music they practiced based on a desire to improve performance. Instead, the motivation to practice was based more on fulfilling the required amount of playing time, and, as a result, the choices of music they made were based on a desire to have fun. Much of the music they chose to practice was the music they were most interested in and were already able to play. Though they stated that they knew which pieces needed work, they did not have a specific idea of what aspects of the music needed work.

The second theme that emerged involved the way students engaged with difficult music. Although each student exhibited different levels of tolerance for frustration, at some point they each demonstrated the tendency to move on to a new activity when something began to cause frustration. Student ability to maintain focus over the span of the practice period also affected motivation. Generally, each student's attention span seemed to wane after 8 to 12 minutes of practice, as exhibited by a decrease in student persistence when performing difficult sections, an increase in the span of time between performance attempts, and an increase in student distraction. Though students did not quit practicing before the end of the time period, they were clearly less effective at the end of their session (Oare, 2012). This confirms the work of Lehmann and Ericsson (1997), who found that deliberate practice can only be sustained for limited periods of time because it requires great effort and concentration.

The last theme identified was the inability to clearly articulate musical goals that were attempted or accomplished. According to Oare, "The students in this study were usually able to choose moderately challenging music, though they were, by and large, unable to describe with specificity the aims that they intended to accomplish or to plan their practice time productively" (Oare 2012, p. 65). Students tended to choose things needing improvement in a reactive instead

of a proactive manner. This finding supports previous research by McPherson and Zimmerman (2002) who found that the ability to clearly define goals that are specific, proximal, and moderately challenging is a major component of effective practice.

Additional research in this domain by Rohwer and Polk (2006) categorized the practice tendencies of students into two spheres: holistic corrective/non-corrective and analytic reactive/proactive. Analytic practicers are the students prone to remediate sections of their music both proactively and reactively. These students make significantly more gains than do the holistic practicers, who tend to run through music for the sake of running through it and no not engage in reflection of their practice. In the same light, Barry (1990, 1992) found that students who engage in unstructured practice tend to play their music faster, use a metronome less, use fewer mental practice strategies, as well as utilize less self-assessment than those who engage in structured and supervised practice.

How SHOULD Students Practice?

The way students practice and the way they should practice (to be most effective) can often be two entirely different things. Getting students to commit the time and effort to practicing is indeed the first obstacle, but the real challenge is teaching them how to do it in a way that is effective and meaningful. In this section I will highlight the current research on positive practice habits and strategies.

Miksza (2006) found little correlation between time spent playing and quality of performance. Miksza (2007) advises that teachers should emphasize to students that the length of time spent playing is not necessarily an indicator of how much improvement will be made. In

general, the results of these studies have shown that the quality of practicing that takes place is often more crucial to improvement than the quantity of time spent playing. "Quality" practicing may serve the same purpose as the term "deliberate" practice that is mentioned previously regarding limited attention span. Lehman, Sloboda, and Woody (2007) explain that:

Some types of practice are more enjoyable than others. To distinguish between these types we can speak of formal (deliberate) and informal practice. In deliberate practice, we have specific goals that lie somewhat outside of our current level of performance, and we try to attain those during bouts of great concentration. Hence, playing through a piece for the third time does not satisfy this criterion because of the absence of a specific goal and the lack of feedback (p. 65-66).

This alludes to the fact that the purpose of practice is not just to learn specific music, it is to help musicians learn specific skills that will enable them to "assimilate, manipulate, memorize, and retrieve" (Lehman et. al 2007, p. 45) musical skills from one piece to the next. Effective practicing should build a "toolbox" of skills that can be applied and adapted as necessary.

Oare (2012) identified four general categories from his research that may shed light on the mental thought processes of middle school band students during practice: motivation, goals, strategies, and assessment. Oare suggests the themes are highly interrelated and used them to form a model of practice in which each aspect has influence on the others (Figure 1). These serve as implications for teachers. First, student choices regarding what, and how, to practice are more focused when motivations are goal-oriented instead of time-oriented, supporting the Miksza

(2007) study. Second, practice goals tend to be vague, which leads to difficulty in defining

criteria for success and strategies for improvement. Finally, though students have knowledge of

various practice strategies, their understanding of the appropriate use of the strategies is lacking.

Figure 1. Oare, S. (2012). Decisions made in the practice room: A qualitative study of middle
school students' thought processes while practicing. *Update: Applications of Research in Music
Education*, *30*(2), 63
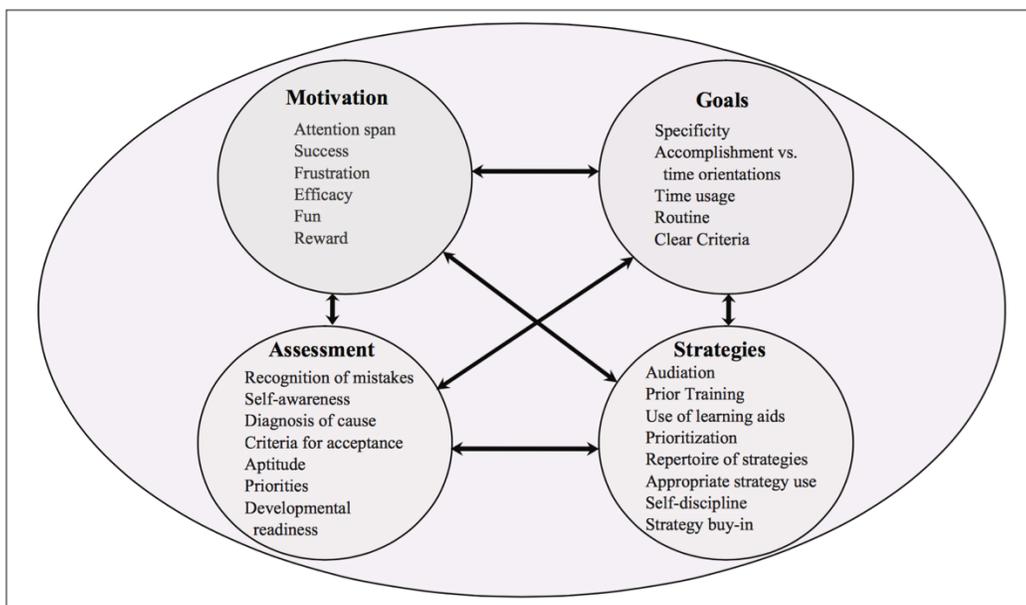
A unique element of music learning is that students are often their own "coaches." When

children learn a new sport or take up a new hobby, they typically spend their practice time with

an expert or professional in that domain. But outside of the music classroom, students must rely

on their own knowledge and skill to make productive and meaningful musical choices. There has

been much recent research on meta-cognition, defined by Barry and Hallam (2002) as the

learner's knowledge about learning itself. This involves the planning, monitoring, and evaluation

of learning, including knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, strategies, and content knowledge

to assess the task and evaluate progress (Hallam, 2001). As discussed previously, unstructured

practicing is often unproductive. Meta-cognitive thinking during the practice session is a way in which students "coach" themselves during practice in order to achieve "quality" (deliberate) practice time. This includes setting goals based on identified strengths and weaknesses, constant reflection (monitoring of goals), identification of error, applying appropriate remediation strategies, and maintaining a high level of concentration. Goal-setting is a skill that is applicable to young adults in all facets of life, and it is no different in music. In order to reach greater achievement students must set attainable goals to measure progress and maintain accountability. (Oare, 2012; Barry 1992, 1994; Brandstrom, 1995; Erickson, 1997).

The Home Environment

A significant body of research underscores the influence parents can have on children during early years of development (Davidson, Sloboda, and Howe, 1995, 1996). It has been shown that children raised in families that expose them to music and music making opportunities from a young age often develop an intrinsic motivation to pursue music (Lehman *et*. *al*, 2012). Taking children to live music, exploring different genres, and making music together as a family (formally or informally) is an excellent way to open up the possibilities for children to explore music themselves. Manturzewska (1994) examined the family characteristics of outstanding Polish musicians and found the following themes:

- Child-centered attitude of the parents with emphasis on the musical education of the child
- Deliberate organization and channeling of a child's interests, time, and activities
- At least one person in the family believing in the potential of the future musicians and providing encouragement
- Music being a genuine value in family life
- Emphasis not being placed on a musical career but on enjoying making music

- Praise and rewards even for small successes
- A positive emotional atmosphere for musical activity
- Careful selection of teachers and monitoring of musical development
- Conscious and active organization of a supportive and understanding network, including personal contacts to professional musicians and music teachers
- Willingness to invest considerable time and effort in musical activities (p. 23)

These themes are congruent with previous research on the home environment and musical development. (Sloboda and Davidson, 1996; Sloane, 1985).

The Parental Role

The relationship between parent and child, and especially the perception a child has of that relationship, can have a significant role in adolescent learning. Empirical data in a range of disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, anthropology and music, suggests that children will pay more attention to things that their parents express value in (Donkor, 2012; Knaf & Schwartz, 2009; Stitt & Brooks, 2014). It is an unfortunate and common misconception by many parents to think that if they themselves are not musical, that they cannot be of any help to their child in pursuing music. As research tells us, this simply is not true. Parents can (and should) be actively involved in the music learning process just as they would with any academic homework. It is true that if parents possess musical skills that children may be motivated to also pursue music--but a far greater source of motivation is the way parents support and encourage the learning of music.

Barry (1992) investigated the concept of supervised practice through comparing musical performance improvement (melodic accuracy, rhythmic accuracy, and musicality) of students

who followed a structured practice routine under supervision with that of students who practiced without. In all categories the students who practiced with adult supervision achieved greater performance results than those who did not. These results corroborate the findings of previous research in this field done by Browkaw (1983) and Sloboda, Davidson, Howe, & Moore (1996).

As I previously mentioned, the perception of the parent-child relationship is also of great importance. Mih (2013) investigated the perceptions of parent-child relationships in two models: one of parental autonomy support and the other parental control. Parental autonomy support is conceptualized as the extent to which parents value and encourage children's independent problem solving, choice, and participation in decisions, rather than coercing them to conform to expectations through punitive disciplinary practices (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Previous research has shown many advantages of autonomous support relative to controlled motivation for learning, including more deep learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987), less superficial information processing (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, *et al.,* 2004) and higher achievement (Boggiano, Flink, Shields, Seelback, & Barrett, 1993; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005: Vansteenkiste, Lens, & & Deci, 2006). Social contexts described as autonomy supportive are characterized as giving choices and encouragement for personal initiative and also support of competence in a climate of relatedness (Deci, Ryan, Gagnè, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001).

Psychological control refers to parenting behaviors that intrude upon children's thoughts and feelings. Parents who use psychological control may excessively implement manipulative techniques, such as guilt-induction, shaming, and love withdrawal (Barber, 1996). In contrast to psychological control, behavioral control targets youths' behaviors. Behavioral control

encompasses behaviors such as supervision, setting limits, and enforcing household rules and curfews (Mih, 2013). Behavioral control helps adolescents learn to self-regulate, leading to less externalizing, whereas psychological control impedes self-regulation and psychological autonomy.

The Mih (2013) findings support prior research indicating that students' engagement in learning is related to their use of self-regulated learning strategies in academic settings. Specifically, students' effort and persistence were positive predictors of their reported use of deep processing (elaboration, critical thinking, and metacognitive strategies). This can be transferred to the way parents approach their role supporting a child in music instruction. Forcing students to practice or inflicting it as punishment is less likely to be as effective as creating a supportive environment that encourages the child to develop autonomous practice behaviors. Figure 2 shows the differences in the stages of learning in regard to these two models of parent support discussed.
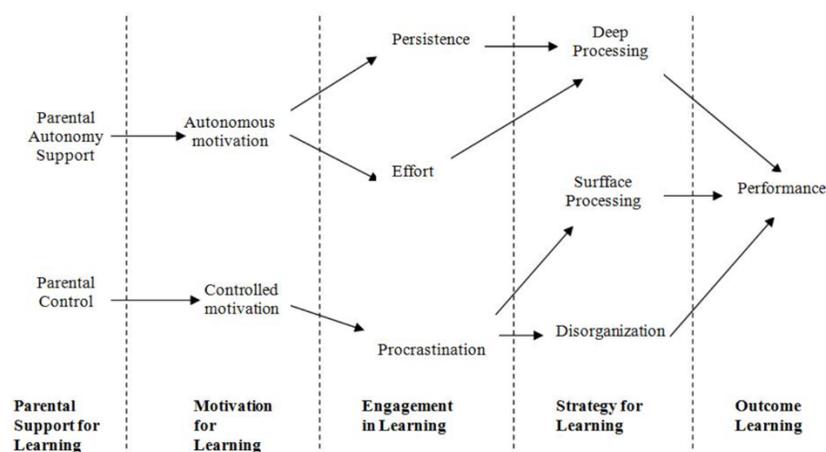
Figure 2. Mih, V. (2013). Role of parental support for learning, autonomous/control motivation, and forms of self-regulation on academic attainment in high school students: A path analysis.

Tools for Parents

The three themes found throughout the research that may be of most use to parents are the concepts of supervision, structure, and support. Parents can provide a positive learning environment by being present, assisting in creating structured practice, and being consistently engaged and encouraging. Supervision entails creating a practice schedule that works for parent and student, including all family members in the home on the practice schedule, and ensuring that students have all of the necessary materials to be successful (working instrument, music stand, chair, music, pencil, metronome, highlighter). Structure may take shape in the form of helping students determine a set place to practice away from distractions, participation in goal-setting for practice sessions, and communication with the music teacher if objectives are unclear. Lastly, parents can have a significant impact on their child's practice experience by purposefully being engaged— all the time. Beyond simply being present, it can be helpful to ask guiding questions (what did you think about how you played that? You seem stuck; what strategies could you use here?) and to deliberately let students know that their interest and effort in learning music is valued.

Our Role as Music Teachers

As the music expert on the scene, it is our role, and more importantly our responsibility, not only to educate students on quality practice, but also to educate their parents. Students need to know what to practice, how to set goals and monitor progress, and how to use strategies to remediate and overcome obstacles. This is valuable information that we should be sharing with parents too! It is imperative that parents know they be a significant influence on student learning,

whether they think they are "musical" or not. The three concepts listed above (supervision, structure, support) require active engagement, consistency, and communication— not a degree in music. Opportunities to share these novel ideas could arise in a variety of settings, perhaps in the form of your program handbook, open house/parent's night, or even a welcome letter to parents at the beginning of the year. Regardless of the format, this valuable information is key to fostering a partnership with parents to provide students with the greatest opportunities for success.

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