

**Interaction in instrumental learning:  
the influence of interpersonal dynamics on parents**

**\*Andrea Creech (Institute of Education, University of London)  
and  
Susan Hallam (Institute of Education, University of London)**

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**\*Correspondence:**

Dr. Andrea Creech, Researcher,  
Faculty of Policy and Society,  
Institute of Education, University of London,  
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL

[A.Creech@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:A.Creech@ioe.ac.uk)

Tel. 0207 612 6468

## **Abstract**

The research reported here forms part of a study which investigated the impact of interpersonal interaction on teaching and learning outcomes, in the context of learning a musical instrument. This paper presents the findings relating to parents, exploring how parental involvement, self-efficacy and personal satisfaction were influenced by parent-pupil and parent-teacher interactions. Systems theory provided a framework whereby interaction was interpreted as a product of a communicative system. Interpersonal dynamics were conceptualized as control and responsiveness and treated as possible predictors of involvement, self-efficacy and personal satisfaction. Personal satisfaction of parents was found to be the outcome most vulnerable to interpersonal factors. Perceived teacher leadership and parental ambition (underlying dimensions of the control scale), together with reciprocity (underlying dimension of the responsiveness scale) had the greatest positive effects. This paper points to the potential for parents and teachers to reframe their modes of relating within learning partnerships, thus (according to systems theory) effecting change in communication patterns and potentially fostering enhanced outcomes for all.

Keywords: interpersonal interaction; parental involvement; self-efficacy; satisfaction; musical instruments

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**Introduction**

Powerful images of musicians' parents abound in accounts of the lives of many iconic figures in Western music and many parents have been depicted as exerting enormous influence on their children's musical development (Easton, 1989; Galloway, 2002; Menuhin, 1977; Milstein & Volkov, 1990; Stern & Potok, 1999). However, little is known about the motivations and perceptions of parents who engage with their children's instrumental learning by offering resources as well as behavioural, cognitive and/or emotional support (Creech, in press-a). Whereas much education research has examined parent involvement and teacher behaviour in terms of the outcomes for the developing child, the research reported here focused on parents, exploring how the interpersonal experiences of those who support their children in learning a musical instrument impact upon parental involvement, self-efficacy and personal satisfaction.

**Background**

*Parent involvement in musical development*

Music education research, to date, has provided much compelling evidence that parental involvement in the early years of instrumental learning is indeed linked to musical achievement. Early empirical work concerned with the parental role in instrumental learning reported positive relationships between musical home environments and the musical responsiveness of children from these homes (Wermuth, 1971). More recent research has approached the same topic from a

number of perspectives, including research concerned with parental musical background (Bloom & Sosniak, 1981), socioeconomic background (Klinedinst, 1991), parent support for practice and lessons (Brokaw, 1982; Davidson *et al.*, 1995; Doan, 1973; Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Zdzinski, 1992), parental goals, aspirations and values (Addison, 1990; Davidson & Scott, 1999; Sosniak, 1985), parental self-efficacy (Creech, 2001), family interaction patterns (Davidson & Borthwick, 2002), and parent-teacher-pupil relationships (Creech, 2006; Hallam, 1998; Manturzevska, 1990). This growing body of evidence suggests that parents do indeed play a key role in children's persistence with learning musical instruments and that the implications for the parents themselves may be complex.

### ***Collective Efficacy***

Parents who believe that their own presence and effort influence their children's achievements tend to act on this belief, and have been found to be controlling and facilitative in relation to the development of the child's interests (Georgiou, 1999). Bandura (1997, p. 246) suggests that self-efficacious parents such as these regard education as a shared responsibility; "The higher their sense of efficacy to instruct their children, the more they guide their children's learning and participate actively ... In contrast, parents who doubt their efficacy to help their children learn turn over their children's education entirely to teachers". Bandura observes that via a process of collective efficacy enhancement, self-efficacious teachers may empower parents with the confidence to help their children learn, in turn instilling the children with self-efficacious beliefs which assist persistence with learning and enhance student attitudes toward the teacher and the subject matter (Tschannen-Moran *et al.*, 1998).

In the context of their children's violin study, recent research (Creech, 2001) has suggested that parents who, irrespective of their own musical ability, possess a strong sense of self-efficacy construct a role for themselves whereby they may engage in behaviour and activities which, as noted earlier, have been linked to musical achievement (i.e. providing external motivation for the child, supervising practice, instilling focus and discipline in practice, attending lessons, communicating with the teacher and responding to the child's wish for parental help and support). Whilst approximately 50% of respondents indicated that they felt less efficacious as the child progressed and matured past age eleven, a mere 8% of parents surveyed believed that the child would have progressed equally with or without parental involvement. These results suggest that parental efficacy is perhaps malleable and susceptible to interpersonal factors.

***Interpersonal dynamics: responsiveness and control***

Baumrind (2005) suggests that the extent to which parents engage in supportive behaviour is associated with interpersonal qualities she labels as responsiveness and demandingness. This model of interpersonal relating style reflects Birtchnell's relating theory (2001) whereby interaction is conceptualized on a horizontal closeness-distance axis intersecting with a vertical upperness-lowerness axis. Birtchnell does not privilege different positions on his interpersonal model, pointing out that while closeness holds people together, distance provides the space to become autonomous, and while upperness allows the opportunity for people to exert influence on others, lowerness enables individuals to benefit from the care and leadership of others. The models proposed by Baumrind and Birtchnell closely resemble Leary's biaxial model for interpersonal interaction (1957), whereby all interpersonal behaviour was represented around the two axes of responsiveness and control.

Although ‘responsiveness’ and ‘control’ have not specifically served as the focus of previous music education research these same dimensions, variously referred to as magnitude, respect, proximity and due regard, have been alluded to rather than made explicit in results of investigations which have been specifically concerned with instrumental music teaching (Duke, 1999; Hallam, 1998; Hendel, 1995; Rife *et al.*, 2001).

### ***Parents as part of an interpersonal learning partnership***

Systems theory provided a framework within which interpersonal behaviour was interpreted not as a characteristic of an individual person, but as a characteristic of a communicative system (Van Tartwijk *et al.*, 1998). Tubbs (1984) defines the communicative system, conceptualized in this research as a parent-teacher-pupil triangle, as “a collection of individuals who influence one another, derive some satisfaction from maintaining membership in the group, interact for some purpose, assume specialized roles, are dependent on one another, and communicate face to face” (Tubbs, 1984: 8). Amongst the variables he identifies as having the capacity to influence the group and to be modified as a result of membership of the group are interpersonal relations amongst group members. O’Neill (1996) argues that the parent-pupil-teacher relationship in the context of musical instrument learning can justifiably be conceptualised as a communicative system because all three participants experience new patterns of action and communication as a direct result of the instrumental training and because many motivational issues can be understood and possibly resolved when considered as a function of the microsystem.

The research reported here thus explored how interpersonal relations, conceptualized as control and responsiveness, were perceived by parents, and addressed the question of whether parents' personal satisfaction, self-efficacy, and involvement in their children's musical study were influenced by their experiences of music-related parent-teacher and parent-pupil interpersonal interaction.

## **Methods**

### ***Development of the Survey***

The views of parents were elicited via the 'Survey of Parents' Views', developed for this investigation from existing research instruments that variously purport to measure a) children's satisfaction with instrumental lessons (Rife et al., 2001), b) parent involvement in children's instrumental learning (Doan, 1973) and c) interpersonal qualities of teachers (Wubbels *et al.*, 1993). These each targeted just one member of the teacher-pupil-parent triangle. For the research reported here, material from each of the three sources was adapted in order to provide an insight into the influence of interpersonal dynamics on personal outcomes for parents. The new version was piloted with a group of 30 parents and scrutinized by Music Education professionals. Items were discarded where 1) they did not bear significant correlations with the overall scale to which they belonged, 2) respondents indicated they did not understand the statement and 3) the experts did not agree that the statement was an indicator of the overall scale to which it belonged.

The aim of the survey was to establish to what extent the interpersonal dimensions of control and responsiveness influenced outcomes for parents that had been defined in earlier research (Creech, 2001). Hence in addition to the groups of statements relating

to scales for interpersonal mechanisms the survey included scales for parental involvement, self-efficacy and personal satisfaction.

### ***Survey distribution***

Three hundred and fifty-two parents completed the survey, representing a response rate of 44%. Two hundred and ninety were female while 47 were male (15 did not provide this information). The majority (217) of parent respondents were aged 40-49, while 68 were aged 30-39 and just 52 were aged 50 or over. Ninety-three parent respondents claimed to have no musical background, while 164 parents had learnt an instrument as a child or adult. Fifty-three parents were amateur musicians, 11 had attended Music College and 16 were professional musicians. Questionnaires were distributed to parents by 80 violin teachers, all of whom were members of the European String Teacher's Association, the Incorporated Society of Musicians, or the British Suzuki Institute. The parents completed the questionnaires in their own time and returned them to the researcher in prepaid envelopes.

All of the parent respondents had at least one child who learnt the violin: 251 of the children were female and 91 were male (10 did not state gender). The age range of the pupils was 8 – 18, and the sample included those who had just begun learning ranging up to those who had been learning for in excess of 6 years. The average musical attainment level was National Qualifications Framework level 2 (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music grade 4). The mean number of years studied was 5, while the mean pupil age was 12. Sixty percent of pupils learnt by “no particular method”, 19% learnt by the Suzuki method, and the remainder learnt by a number of other specified teaching methods.

### ***Ethical issues***

The principal ethical consideration in relation to this study was that its focus was interpersonal interaction amongst the participants, a sensitive area with the potential for raising unexpected issues. In accordance with British Psychological Society ethical guidelines (Phoenix & Thomas, 2002), written informed consent was obtained from all participants and all participants were given assurances that the data collected would be treated as confidential, and that individuals would be anonymised in any reporting of the data.

### **Findings**

#### ***Control and Responsiveness***

Factor analysis provided insight into facets of interaction that were represented by the control and responsiveness scales (see Creech, 2006) and made it possible to create an index of underlying interpersonal dimensions within parent-teacher and parent-pupil interactions.

#### ***Underlying dimensions of control***

The parent control scale revealed was found to comprise five underlying dimensions, interpreted as 1) *perceived teacher leadership*, 2) *communication*, 3) *parent isolation*, 4) *parent ambition* and 5) *parent preponderance* (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

*Perceived teacher leadership* represented a dimension of control within learning partnerships where the parent perceived the teacher as enthusiastic, providing strong direction, clearly articulating his or her views in relation to the subject matter and making himself or herself available for communication with parents. In contrast, the factor defined as *parent preponderance* suggested a relationship where the balance of

control was perhaps in favour of a parent who had high expectations of the teacher and yet also had strong views of his or her own about how the learning should proceed. The third facet of parent control was concerned with *parent isolation*, where the parent found communication with the teacher difficult, perceived the teacher as strict and was perhaps rather intimidated by the teacher and remote from both the teacher and the pupil in terms of sharing objectives in relation to the subject matter. *Communication* differed sharply from *parent isolation*, representing a dimension of interaction amongst parent, teacher and pupil characterized by exchange of ideas and parental involvement in matters relating to their children's musical objectives and goals. Finally, *parental ambition* for their children was found to be an underlying dimension of control, suggesting a serious commitment to the subject matter at hand and high expectations of their children's musical achievements.

#### ***Underlying dimensions of responsiveness***

Responsiveness was found to break into four underlying factors. These were interpreted as 1) *approachability*, 2) *intimidation*, 3) *reciprocity*, and 4) *acquiescence* (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 HERE

The facet of parent responsiveness defined as *approachability* represented the parental perception of the teacher as both patient and sensitive to the parental point of view. This dimension suggested a style of parent-teacher interaction whereby the parent felt comfortable and confident about entering into dialogue with the teacher. On the other hand, the underlying dimension of *intimidation* suggested a relationship where parents perceived teachers to be arrogant, displaying a lack of patience and a lack of mutual respect.

The third underlying dimension of responsiveness, concerned primarily with responsiveness within the parent-child relationship, was labeled as *reciprocity* and suggested a relationship where parents were involved with their child learning an instrument to the extent that they considered this endeavour to have been a life-changing experience for themselves. This factor suggested parental interest in understanding the child's point of view and willingness to compromise when personal goals or expectations conflicted with those of the child.

Finally, factor four represented *acquiescence* on the part of the parent, in a relationship where the teacher was perceived to be willing to explain things again yet not prepared to compromise. Parents with the highest scores for this factor perceived the business of learning the violin to have been life-changing, but perhaps differed from those who were strongest on *communication* and *approachability* in that they chose to leave the setting of goals and responsibility for learning to the teacher.

## **Outcomes for parents**

### ***Involvement***

Parental involvement was measured with 19 statements concerned with cognitive support (listening to and discussing music in the home, encouraging participation in extra-curricular musical activities, and providing musical resources), behavioural support (monitoring and participating in practice, attending lessons and adopting the role of home teacher) and personal support (acting as the child's advocate, being both caring and autonomy-supportive (Creech, in press-b)). Parents indicated how often they engaged in specific types of involvement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The strongest agreement was found in relation to items

concerned with providing practical, facilitative support to children. Mean scores above 4 were found for statements concerned with providing the tools necessary to support instrumental study (quality instruments, instrument maintenance, listening equipment in the home) as well as facilitating by providing space for practising, making arrangements for individual lessons and providing transport to lessons, indicating that many parents often or always offered practical support. Similarly high mean scores (above 4) were also found for statements indicating that parents provided personal support by attending their children's concerts and rewarding their successes with praise.

Moderately high mean scores (between 3 and 4) were found in relation to several statements concerned with active involvement on the part of the parent. These responses indicated that many parents often or always listened to the child practising, assisted with practising and offered constructive criticism, took responsibility for ensuring that the child did daily practice and attended the child's violin lessons. The lowest mean score amongst this cluster of statements was in relation to attending lessons ( $\underline{M} = 3.27$ ).

Although there was a relatively high mean score in relation to the item concerned with encouraging participation in extra-curricular musical activities ( $\underline{M} = 3.89$ ), other statements concerned with musical activities outside of the boundaries of lessons and practising produced lower mean scores (between 2 and 3). These results indicated that parents only rarely or sometimes took their child to professional concerts, arranged rehearsals with an accompanist or sent their children to summer music courses.

### ***Self-efficacy***

Parents' responses concerned with self-efficacy were measured on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The greatest amount of variability for this outcome was found to be in relation to whether parents felt able to help their children achieve their potential on the violin and whether they believed that their children would have progressed equally well with or without their help. Relatively low mean agreement ( $\underline{M} = 2.92$ ) was found in relation to whether parents believed they could help their children achieve their potential. Notwithstanding this, there was also a relatively low mean score ( $\underline{M} = 2.56$ ) in relation to whether parents believed that their child would have progressed equally well with or without their help. Thus there seems to have been some uncertainty amongst parents as to the extent of their influence on their children's learning outcomes. Nevertheless, there was stronger agreement ( $\underline{M} = 3.45$ ) that their children would do well if they practised as much as the parent requested and similarly strong agreement ( $\underline{M} = 3.63$ ) that parents believed they offered clear explanations on matters relating to the violin.

### ***Personal satisfaction***

Parents' responses to statements concerned with personal satisfaction were measured on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Parents in this sample were largely united in their positive attitude towards the violin and in the importance they attached to this activity. Few parents indicated that they would be happy in the event of their children discontinuing violin study ( $\underline{M} = 1.86$ ) and there was strong agreement (mean scores above 4) that parents had a positive attitude towards the violin and that it meant a lot to them that their children learnt the violin.

## **The influence of underlying interpersonal dimensions on outcomes for parents**

Statistical analyses (see Creech, 2006) provided evidence that the underlying interpersonal dimensions of control and responsiveness did account for some variability in personal outcomes for parents within the teacher-pupil-parent partnership (Figure 3).

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

The outcome for parents that was most sensitive to interpersonal dynamics was personal satisfaction. Thirty-eight percent of variability in this outcome was accounted for by *parental ambition, perceived teacher leadership, communication and reciprocity* (positive influence) and *intimidation* (negative influence). In comparison, *communication, ambition and approachability* (positive influences) together accounted for 27% of variation in parental self-efficacy, while *perceived teacher leadership, parental ambition and acquiescence* (positive influences) together accounted for 15% of variation in parental involvement.

Thus key interpersonal factors accounting for variation in the outcomes for parents, and in particular their levels of personal satisfaction, were perceptions of teacher leadership as well as parental ambition. It may be that during the formative years parental ambition helped to sustain engagement with learning, while the process of shifting the balance of responsibility for learning in favour of the pupil-teacher dyad was made much smoother when these parents sensed strong rapport between pupil and teacher and when they found both personal and professional qualities to admire in their children's teachers.

## **Implications**

One may ask why we should be concerned about the satisfaction of parents relating to their children's musical development. From a systems perspective, however, reciprocity within the parent-pupil-teacher partnership means that the experience of one party will reverberate throughout the system, impacting upon the experiences of the others and, by extension, on the functioning of the group as a whole (Tubbs, 1984). As Heston, Dedrick, Raschke, & Whitehead (1996) have reported, dissatisfied parents have the potential to contribute significantly to teacher stress; from a systems perspective satisfied parents may conversely contribute to professional satisfaction amongst teachers and, by extension, to enhanced outcomes for pupils.

The importance for parent satisfaction of *perceived teacher leadership*, looked at in combination with the positive effects for *communication, reciprocity, approachability* and *parent ambition* lends support to the concept of teacher as "responsive leader" previously formulated in relation to the perceptions of teacher participants from the same study (Creech, 2006). The findings presented here demonstrate that parents as well as pupils are potentially vulnerable to the interpersonal relationships with teachers, and are potential beneficiaries of partnership with responsive leaders. Furthermore, the findings suggest that parents function best when they perceive significant others (in this case teachers) to be both caring and autonomy supportive (Noack, 1998).

The evidence that parent *ambition* and *communication* produced significant and positive effects for self-efficacy supports earlier research that suggested self-efficacious parents of violin students both controlled and facilitated their children's

musical development (Creech, 2001). By the very nature of this self selecting sample most of the parents were involved with their children's learning at least to the extent that they made considerable sacrifices in terms of both time and money, making practical arrangements for lessons, providing transport, attending their children's concerts, and providing the finance for lessons and for instruments. The investment in music made by these parents may have been a reflection of ambition for their children to become accomplished musicians. It may be that ambition functioned as motivation for parents to engage in particular kinds of involvement behaviour which in turn led to the formation of efficacy beliefs. This interpretation would support the notion of the circular nature of collective efficacy, whereby parents' efficacy beliefs are related to home-school collaboration, which in turn impacts upon enhanced teacher and pupil efficacy and pupil achievement (Bandura, 1997). The potential importance of the parent's contribution to collective efficacy within learning partnerships suggests that teachers would do well to develop and implement strategies that nurture parental self-beliefs relating to their ability to contribute to effective learning.

As systems theory would suggest, this research provides evidence that parents, as well as pupils and teachers, may be vulnerable to dimensions of interpersonal interactions within the learning partnership. From the systems perspective proposed by Tubbs (1984) this need not be interpreted as a deterministic position; parents, teachers and pupils alike may choose to reframe their own modes of relating within the learning partnership, thus effecting change in communication patterns within the interpersonal system and potentially fostering enhanced outcomes for all.

This paper points to the need for further research that addresses the question of how interpersonal relationships amongst parents, professionals and pupils impact upon each member of the learning partnership. In particular, qualitative methods would be appropriate to explore the processes that underpin the index of interpersonal dimensions presented here as characterizing learning partnerships. Furthermore, it was outside the scope of this paper to explore differences in interpersonal experience according to pupil, parent and teacher demographic factors. Finally, as noted above, the analysis presented here was based on a self-selecting sample of parents; future research that represents a wider spectrum of parents, including those whose children have chosen to discontinue their studies, would add to our understanding of the potential for interpersonal dynamics to either enhance or diminish personal and professional outcomes within learning partnerships.

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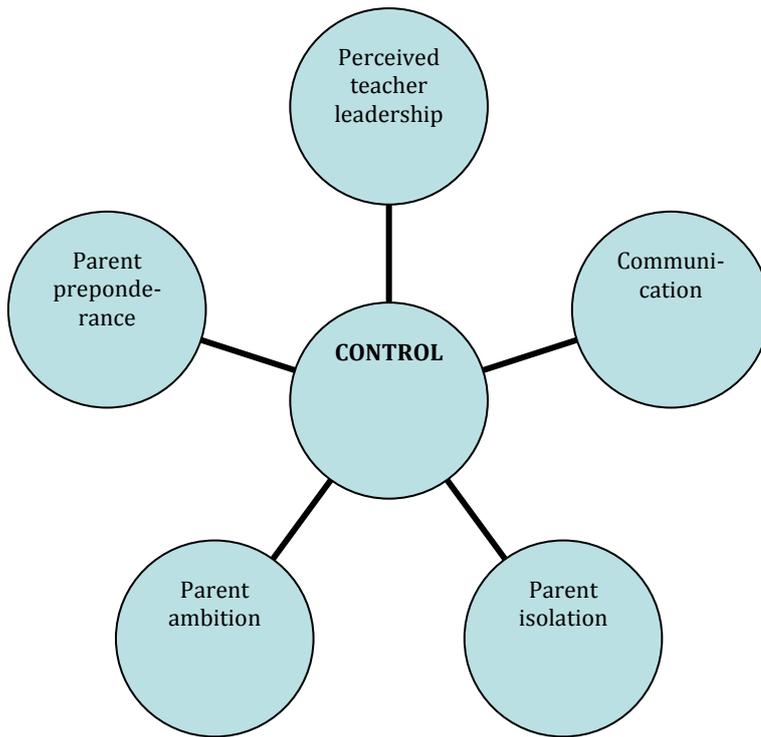
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**Figure 1: Underlying dimensions of Control**



**Figure 2: Underlying dimensions of Responsiveness**

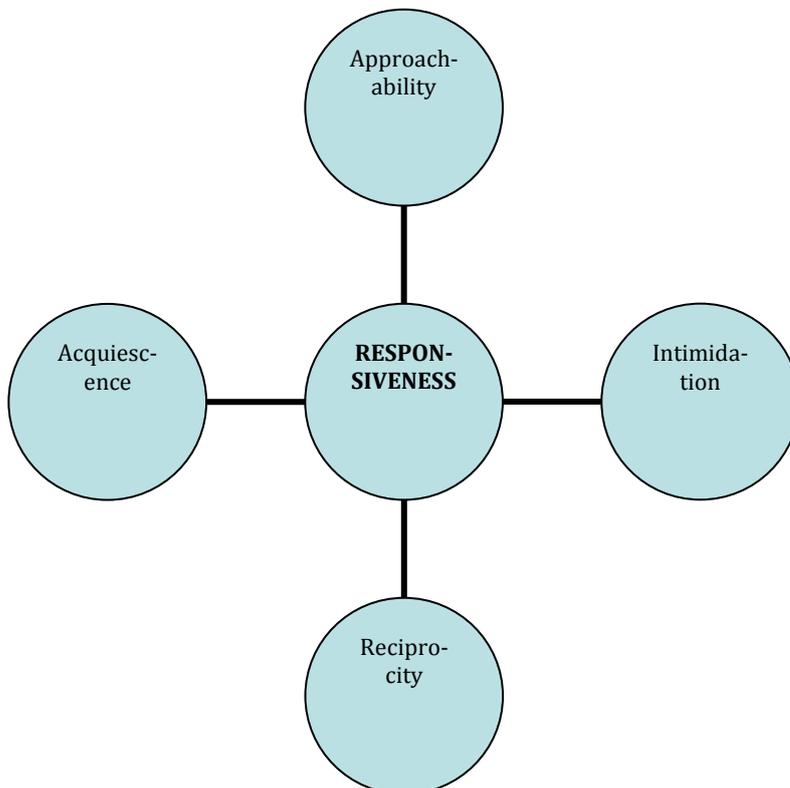


Figure 3: Control and responsiveness factors accounting for variability in outcomes for parents

