

My experience as a teacher:

Why should a child learn to play a musical instrument?

In South Africa, we face numerous challenges, for example, an incredibly low school pass rate – and a dismal literacy rate, with rampant drug abuse, violence, and unemployment to name only a few problems within South Africa's socio-economic milieu and daily discourse in modern South Africa. Tutors face these challenges on a daily basis with teaching.

I believe that the positive outcomes that music and music education can and does provide, benefits society as a whole.

Psychologists, neuroscientists, and experts involved in education, have demonstrated that music does more for children than bringing them joy in their developmental stages. It helps their brain cells make the connections needed for virtually every kind of intelligence. When children are consistently engaged with music in an age-appropriate, socially accepting atmosphere, it is beneficial to them in various spheres, for example:

- **Early Literacy:** where they gain the phonological processing, spoken language and comprehension skills which forms the groundwork of our reading skills.
- **Quantitative:** students build the spatial-temporal and intellectual skills required for mathematics, science, and engineering.
- **Social-Emotional:** which develop social and emotional skills that are vital for school readiness between the ages of four to six, for example the ability to control their responses and relate to other classmates in complex ways.
- **Physical:** by moving around, for example dancing to music and playing an instrument. The children improve their gross and fine motor skills.
- **Creativity:** Any activities that inspire freedom within a fun and friendly structure, atmosphere sparks children's creativity and provides inspiration to them.

In addition to improving creativity, learning a musical instrument promotes numerous skills that will continue to be useful in a students' life throughout their school career and further in their studies and even into adulthood. Learning an instrument triggers amongst others the following skills to develop as well, for example:

1. *Concentration:* because the student must focus on a particular activity over extended periods of time, mostly months. Developing concentration in this way also helps them when they must focus their attention on other subjects at school.
2. *Co-ordination:* the practicing and playing of an instrument improves hand-eye coordination. For example, by reading notes and then placing them on the instrument, the student develops important motor skills when playing music just as they do, and at times even more so than when participating in different types of sport.
3. *Relaxation:* music therapy is being used to complement and/or replace the more traditional forms of medicine. Researchers acknowledge that certain types of music can aid relaxation, lower stress levels, meditation, and boost energy levels. These methods can come in handy when working with students who show signs of suicide, depression, and anger management.
4. *Patience:* perseverance is an acquired skill that is required in order to master a musical instrument. By learning a musical instrument, children must develop patience and determination, which will help them later in life when they must face more difficult challenges.
5. *Self-confidence:* the act of learning and playing an instrument, the encouragement of a teacher and the enthusiasm of a proud parent, will give a child a sense of pride and confidence. Furthermore, children who practice self-expression and originality often become better communicators and orators later in life.

Researchers also found a significant relationship between music and improved outcomes in areas such as reading, comprehension, spelling, mathematics, listening skills, primary mental abilities (verbal, perceptual, numeric, spatial) and motor skills.

Music development during early years helps to develop areas in the brain which involves language and reasoning. Brain development continues for many years after birth which is a great reason for learning an instrument as well. Studies have clearly indicated that musical training physically develops the part of the brain known to be involved with processing language, left or right – depending on the individual's dominant side. The linkage of well-known songs to new information can also help imprint information in young minds. There is also a causal link between learning an instrument and spatial intelligence. This kind of intellect, by which one can visualise several elements that should go together, is critical and necessary to this sort of thinking. From solving advanced mathematical problems to being able to pack your book-bag with everything that will be needed for the next school day, from a young age.

Art students, which includes music students, learn to think creatively and “out of the box”. They learn problem solving by imagining various solutions. Questions about the arts do not have only one correct answer. For example, there can be two or three different hand positions for a difficult section within a piece of music. Recent studies show that a student who learns to play an instrument tends to achieve higher marks in school, fewer become drug users / addicts and therefore they tend to be more successful in their lives, as a rule. According to a study done in Texas, United States, students that engage in instrumental music lessons / education (formal / classical) have the lowest overall lifetime use and abuse statistics for illegal drugs, alcohol, tobacco, etcetera. This helps create a better and positive environment academically and it raises the overall safety and security of a country and its citizens.

Being in South Africa, an extremely diverse country with various cultures and languages, (eleven official languages with even more local tribes) the use of arts helps to provide children an internal glimpse of other cultures, with their means of doing and teaches them to be empathetic towards other people and their cultures. This development of compassion and empathy, as opposed to development of greed and a "me first" attitude is very important as it provides a vital bridge across cultural gaps that leads to the respect of other cultures and races at an early age and the students tend to be more diverse in their views as well.

Through learning to play an instrument the student learns the value of continuous effort and hard work to achieve excellence and the concrete rewards of long-term goal determination that goes with it.

Learning a musical instrument develops skills that are necessary in any workplace. It focuses on "doing" and “make it happen” as opposed to observing and it teaches students how to perform, literally, anywhere in the world. Employers are looking for multi-dimensional employees with a sort of flexible and supple mental power, which is what music education assists to create as described above. Music education helps to increase students' earning potential and it can ultimately improve their own socio-economic status later in life. Students who learn an instrument are required to practice which helps with discipline and will thus result in better time management and organisational skills. Studies show that busier students actually tend to perform much better under pressure than their peers. With more activities and priorities to balance, they are more likely to master time management and develop organisation skills better than other students who do not take up music education.

Should the student continue to the higher grades where a performance will be required, music performance teaches young people to overcome fear and to take calculated risks. A little anxiety is a good thing and something that will re-occur often in ones' lifetime. Learning to deal with it early in life will help to overcome any ‘fear’ in the workplace that he or she may encounter. If this skill, that music education teaches us, is not acquired, it could be problematic for the individual later in life. With music education the skills to counter these issues are mastered earlier, as is the case with music performance calculated. Risk-taking is essential in a child's life in order to fully develop and enable him or her to achieve their full potential and goals.

Other than my arguments above, based on my experience in music performance and teaching, as well as the above-mentioned findings of researchers, learning to play an instrument and music education as a whole can help students to improve lives in numerous other ways as well, such as:

- A student who learns to play an instrument, often has a greater appreciation for all kinds of arts. Students that are involved in music frequently see that passion extends into other areas, such as an interest in ballet, dancing, drama or the visual arts and the student often enjoys learning multiple languages as well.
- A music student leaves school with a wide network of peers who are set on the road for success. Instrumentalists normally study together and support each other. Thus, the students leave school, with other students being friends, who usually include people that will experience, on average, greater degrees of success in life. This can lead to all kinds of opportunities, whether that is in further academic studies, or in a specialised career, or in starting a business or any other area. All around, music education improves the lives of people and of course, they develop a lifelong love for music and the arts!

With more than ten years of teaching experience, I have taught students of various ages, cultures, and backgrounds. Although each case and student differ in frame of reference, culture, workload, life experience, and because each person has their preferred learning style and preferences, whether it is: -Aural/Auditory -Visual -Kinaesthetic -Read/Write, the ultimate weekly outcome would be to provide the student with a new facet at the end of each lesson.

Being a teacher, requires having a friendly, but professional relationship while maintaining your command as teacher with your student. Yet, no matter the teaching style and method used within lessons with the student, the interaction must be open and comfortable between the tutor and student. It is especially important that the student feels safe and secure within their lesson and not pressured to understand and achieve rapid success with immediate effect if it is not possible at that moment – this could have the opposite result than what teachers are normally aiming towards.

My objective for the first two to three years from starting with a student's lessons, is the formation of a solid foundation of musical knowledge and technical aspects while providing the students freedom to explore music of their choice of music as well. I believe that every student is unique, with their own abilities and needs and at times it seems to be an exceedingly difficult task to know what the best route will be, going forward. When preparing for the upcoming week and doing lesson planning etc. the teacher must take all into account, for example the students' age, previous work done, the time of year (June/November are the school examination periods in South Africa and during this time, the student's focus will be mainly on their school exams) as well as what still requires attention in order to reach the set goal by a set time.

Thereafter consideration is placed on what is the most important aspect that requires attention, thus a "one size fits all" approach does not work. Support and "involved parents/guardians" are a great help and is appreciated because this influences the students' progress and often makes the teachers work a "little easier" if "all are on the same page", especially when working with students who are 'special needs' students. I place emphasis on the fact that there should be mutual respect and understanding and a good working relationship between the student and teacher as well as between the teacher and parents / guardians and a great means to achieve this is by keeping an "open door policy" and ensuring that it is in place all year round.

The phrase "preparation is the key" is equally important and applicable for the teacher and the student. I often ensure that the student's theory knowledge is above standard to ensure his/her understanding of any practical aspect he/she may come across in a piece of music we are busy with.

Thus, many times lesson planning will include:

- Rhythms
- The scales and arpeggios
- Staccato and/or legato sections
- Left (Bass) hand triads and patterns
- Naming right hand notes aloud while the student plays them
- Playing the previous week's section from memory

For beginners, the majority of course study material used, will be the Alfred's basic range, which ensures that systematic progress throughout the development and growth of the student is consistent. Additional to this, I often add the Lina Ng theory books, mainly to add fun to the lessons, based on the fact that students are learning music theory, which is habitually seen as "boring" and tedious. These books contain basic beginner songs, complete with finger numbers and notes with illustrations for easy explaining and understanding.

Very often there will be a teacher duet part which assists in creating a sense of achievement, enjoyment of the accomplishment and satisfaction because of the fuller sound produced, when we play duets. I usually do this near the end of a lesson when I join the student on the piano. This also teaches the student what teamwork is all about, another valuable life lesson. Once these are completed and the student has experienced a performance of sort, to ensure that he/she can manage the pressure of a live performance, we move over to examination work / syllabus / repertoire and gradually start preparing towards achieving said goals. Should any additional music/work be required, I advise the parents/the student accordingly. I often find works in my library or online. I encourage students to find music they wish to play to attempt something different. I welcome new ideas, including some popular/modern works.

My purpose and objective as a teacher is to encourage my students to be creative, which limits the feelings of fear of failure and allows students to achieve goals at their own pace. This encourages musicality and my goal is ultimately to be the teacher that guides and assists my students in their development and accomplishment as young musicians, who will display well-rounded musicianship and understanding as they progress.

I end with the following quote:

“Musical ability is not an inborn talent but an ability which can be developed. Any child who is properly trained can develop musical ability just as all children develop the ability to speak their mother tongue. The potential of every child is unlimited”

Shinichi Suzuki