

The inhibition of musicality: Perspectives of piano teachers in Malaysia and Singapore

International Journal of
Music Education
2025, Vol. 43(3) 344–355
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DOI: 10.1177/02557614241227231
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijm



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Abstract

In South East Asia, a nexus of social conditions influences private music education, creating situations where students' musical development could be neglected or actively impaired. Such musical inhibition has not been widely researched nor well understood. This basic qualitative research study aims to explore how twelve private studio teachers in Singapore and the Klang Valley of West Malaysia understand the inhibition of musicality in their students. We made use of four fictional stories in semi-structured interviews with purposefully sampled piano teachers. The fictional stories described sources of inhibition, including parental disinterest, abusive teaching, student personality, and parental pressure. The interviews elicited stories from the participants that contradicted or confirmed elements of the fictional stories. Our analysis identified some of the symptoms of musical inhibition: trauma, loss of interest, and loss of confidence. We also identified some causes of musical inhibition, including parental pressure, misuse of examinations, and teaching that is militaristic, threatening, abusive or fierce. Understanding the inhibition process allows teachers to be trained in recognising and circumventing inhibition processes, thereby contributing to the flourishing of the student in question.

Keywords

examinations, inhibition, musicality, music teaching, parental pressure

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Introduction

This paper investigates how music teachers understand musical inhibition. The first and second authors are piano teachers in Malaysia and Singapore who have observed symptoms that suppress a student's musicality, such as loss of interest and confidence, shyness, performance tension, and fear in students who have transferred from other teachers. However, searches revealed that this inhibition of musicality has been neither widely researched nor well understood. Understanding the symptoms and causes of musical inhibition would aid teachers in recognising, circumventing, and preventing inhibition processes, thereby contributing to the flourishing of the student in question.

A definition of musical inhibition

Musicians often understand musicality as the level of expressivity in music performance (Brändström, 1999). For example, Gabrielsson (1999) claims that the expression of emotions is a 'crucial part of musicianship and musicality in general' (p. 51). In this study, we understand musicality more broadly as a polymorphic concept involving a 'complex interaction of physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychosocial traits' (Levitin, 2012, p. 637). Intra-personal factors shape and constrain the development of these traits in an individual. Environmental factors such as social attitudes towards music making, and learning environments at home and school affect the development of the above traits. Furthermore, musicality is an ability that is both receptive, as in listening to and appreciating music, and productive, as in creating music using various means (Levitin, 2012).

In agreement with most music educators and psychologists, we believe that musicality is widely distributed in the population. It exists in the womb (Tafari, 2017) and manifests through all phases of life (Odendaal et al., 2021) through various skills, which may include aural ability (Möistlik & Selke, 2011), listening (Levitin, 2012), dancing (Trehub, 2016), singing or playing instruments (Levitin, 2012), memorisation (Levitin, 2012), improvisation (Ockelford, 2007) or composing, arranging or producing music (Upitis, 2019).

While substantial research has focused on the development of musicality (see reviews in Forrester & Borthwick-Hunter, 2015), there has been little research investigating the inhibition of musicality. There are three commonly discussed kinds of inhibition in general psychological work: behavioural, cognitive and social inhibition. Behavioural inhibition is defined as 'an inborn bias to respond to unfamiliar events by showing anxiety' and 'a specific vulnerability to the uncertainty all children feel when encountering unfamiliar events that cannot be assimilated easily' (Rubin, 2001). Cognitive inhibition is the overriding of a mental process, whether intentionally or not (Macleod, 2007). Social inhibition is the suppression of emotional expression or behaviour during social interactions to gain approval (de Moor et al., 2018). In all three manifestations, inhibition involves a limitation or incapacity to express a wish or natural ability freely.

Inhibition could stem from several causes. Behavioural inhibition is often biologically based (Schölmerich, 2000). Inhibition could also be due to relational factors; for example, social inhibition is affected by parental beliefs, parent-child relationships and extra-familial relationships (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). Experiences also affect inhibition, and Reynolds et al. (2018, p. 269) note that 'fear and anxiety symptoms can be acquired through a direct traumatic experience, the transmission of verbal information, and vicarious learning'.

Even though we can observe many of the above causes and outcomes of inhibition informally in our music students, we could not identify relevant research. Both musicality and its inhibition are polymorphic concepts involving the whole person. In this paper, the inhibition of musicality is

therefore broadly conceived as limiting a child's potential ability to receive or produce music due to intra-personal, relational, experiential or environmental factors.

Context of the study

Malaysia and Singapore are neighbouring countries with similarities in language and culture. Most students in Malaysia and Singapore study instrumental music at private music schools, international schools, or with private studio teachers rather than at state schools. In both countries the majority of studio teachers prepare their students for music examinations that are offered by examination boards based in the United Kingdom (Abdullah, 2022; Stead & Lum, 2014). These countries are some of the world's largest markets for these kinds of examinations (Ang, 2013), which offer the opportunity for students to perform repertoire for grading and feedback (Salaman, 1994). Popular external examination boards include the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London (TCL) and the London College of Music (LCM). A typical examination consists of three pieces, scales and arpeggios, sight-reading and aural tests (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2019). The first and second authors have observed many parents and teachers who use the examination system for musical and educational purposes. However, parents and teachers also use examinations to enhance public prestige or bolster a child's portfolio to meet the entrance requirements of prestigious schools (see Davidson & Scutt, 1999. In a society where 'face' is essential to gain 'the "admiration" of others by making one's successes or abilities known to them' (Hwang et al., 2003), examination results and certificates become highly prized as goals rather than as moments in a journey towards musical maturity. The highly competitive Singaporean education system starts ability-based streaming at a young age (Göransson, 2022), pressures parents to provide extra tuition to their children to prevent falling behind in a high-stakes examination system (Manzon et al., 2015). The comparison students face elicit behaviours suggesting loss of interest and confidence, shyness, performance tension and fear, which are inhibitory responses (Rubin, 2001). In this article, our aim is to explore how 12 piano teachers in Singapore and the Klang Valley in West Malaysia describe the symptoms and understand the causes of musical inhibition they have observed.

Procedures

Participants

This exploratory research used a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002). We used purposive sampling to identify six experienced piano teachers at each of the two sites, Singapore and the Klang Valley in West Malaysia. Teachers were chosen as participants because they have a broad view of the phenomenon of inhibition, both through first-hand observation and discussions with colleagues. Piano teachers form the most numerous subgroup among music teachers in the research sites, so we limited participants to this group. We aimed to identify a balanced sample of participants who teach western classical, jazz and popular music, or a combination of these (see Supplemental Appendix A). Students were not considered due to the ethical risk of interviewing minors who may currently experience abuse, as well as the practical difficulty of identifying students who are experiencing musical inhibition.

Data collection and analysis

We used interviews rather than observations of teaching because we did not want to suggest that participants might be inhibiting the musicality of their students. Before the interview, participants

received four fictional stories (Kallio, 2015) that depict scenarios of musical inhibition based on the experiences of the researchers, combined with fictional elements. These stories depict different sources of inhibition gleaned from the general psychology literature on inhibition (de Moor et al., 2018; Macleod, 2007; Pérez-Edgar & Fox, 2018; Rubin, 2001) and specifically identified parental disinterest, abusive teaching, inborn shyness, and parental pressure. We designed the fictional stories (Supplemental Appendix B) to confront participants with relatable situations to help reveal possibly hidden values. Fictional stories had previously been helpful in interview situations in Malaysia, where high respect for authority and saving face limited the openness with which questions were answered (Ang et al., 2020). Furthermore, they minimised possible feelings of accusation or entrapment in the participants by discussing the experiences of others.

The interviews were semi-structured and concentrated on eliciting stories from the participants that contradict or confirm elements of the fictional stories, as well as discussing questions of a more general nature (see Supplemental Appendix C for teachers' interview schedule). The first author selected participants and conducted the interviews in Malaysia, while the second author did the same in Singapore. Interviewing twelve participants allowed for data saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interviews lasted 43 minutes on average, the shortest was 32 minutes and the longest was 52 minutes in duration.

We transcribed the interviews and coded them using Atlas.ti through a collaborative online coding process. We used initial coding, theoretical coding and data theming (Saldaña, 2021), which were consolidated into a final coding through a consensus. Based on the coding, we developed a theoretical understanding of the major themes in the study.

We enhanced trustworthiness by presenting the interview transcriptions and preliminary results to the participants for feedback. None of the participants asked for the transcriptions or results to be changed. The ethics review boards of the institutions of the researchers approved the study.

Findings

Symptoms of musical inhibition

Our analysis of the interviews indicates that musically inhibited students could display the following symptoms: trauma in the form of physical tension or psychological stress, loss of interest, and loss of confidence.

Trauma. For many music students, trauma inflicted in a music lesson remains embodied in physical tension and psychological stress long after the experience. Emma shared about a transfer student whose previous teacher was physically abusive. She noticed long-lasting negative effects arising from the abuse, stating that 'every time she play[ed] wrongly. . . [she] will get a bit of tension. She will always state that she is very sorry and then she will. . . go all out and apologise' (8:14).¹ Her physical tension could be attributed to the development of cognitive inhibition due to abusive teaching. The student's psychological stress is less obvious, but her over-apologetic behaviour suggests a fear of making mistakes and disappointing others, which is an outcome of social inhibition. The above inhibitive reactions could also be related to intra-personal traits. Regardless, abusive teaching can diminish a student's productive musicality as expressed through activities like performing, musical movement, or improvisation.

Loss of interest. A second symptom of musical inhibition is a possible loss of interest in music. Emma told of a transfer student whose previous teacher was abusive. '[The student] was still able

to play well and to express but . . . would always tell me that they hated it. [. . .] They do not like to practise' (8:10). The musical expression of student is negated by a dislike for the instrument due to abusive teaching and likely led to discontinuing music studies, which we understand as a rejection of both the receptive and productive aspects of musicality. Alice claims that a number of her peers who developed musical inhibition due to negative experiences in their musical learning 'swear that they will never touch music again' (4:23).

Loss of confidence. Another symptom of musical inhibition is a loss of confidence. Yuja shared that she used to be a threatening and fierce teacher, with parents reporting that their children's 'self-esteem went super, super low' (12:37). She also noticed students' stage confidence plunged when she criticised them excessively without positive reinforcement. She recognised that,

a positive family environment will help them to be more confident on stage because they are not afraid of making mistakes [. . . they] know [their] parents understand [. . .] Whereas if a family is more critical [. . .] the moment they make a mistake, either they will have [a fearful] facial expression or their eyes would turn and look at the parents because they know they're going to be criticised (12:28).

The above scenarios depict loss of confidence, implying social inhibition stemming from relational and experiential factors and could aggravate intra-personal traits such as shyness. These traits could negatively impact the productive aspects of musicality, especially in performance.

Causes of musical inhibition

Parental pressure can inhibit musicality. Teachers described how parents inhibit aspects of the learner's musical development by creating a pressured environment through setting overly high expectations, comparing them to other children and being overly controlling.

Most teachers spoke of managing parents' *high expectations*, which were unrealistic and misaligned with their teaching approach. Leon was exasperated with parents who expected that their children's examinations should be completed within very short time frames, such as 'one month [of] studying lessons' (6:8) with him. Nadia was similarly pressured by a parent who wanted her daughter to 'finish [the grade 8 piano and theory exams] because next year [would] also [be] her A-level [exams] . . . no matter what' (11:19). Furthermore, Elina was disappointed with parents who wanted to stop their children's music lessons if the examination results were bad as it would discourage the student from learning music:

Some parents are really quite difficult, very stubborn [. . .] Then that's too bad actually because the child relies on the parents for financial support, you know, for lessons and all that (10:26).

Vladimir described a student who was musically inhibited 'because the parents [were] *comparing*. . .' (5:12, italics added) her abilities to those of other students. Gordon opined that such parents were 'compensating [for] what they didn't have and they [wanted] their kids to do [what they had missed]' (7:38). Alice expressed that parents want to 'show off' and 'the utilitarian purpose here is the face', but 'the children never enjoy it' (4:27).

Yuja described how parents can be *overly controlling* with regard to their children. Some parents

. . . scold their kids,. . . so you will hear them crying. You'll hear the mom or dad shouting, 'Do it again!' [Again] and again. (12:16).

These are instances of parents who put pressure on children to achieve beyond their current skill levels and on teachers to make it happen. Although many teachers were, in principle, opposed to such parenting approaches, the phenomenon exists at the expense of students' musical development, leading Alice to remark that some parents 'don't care about whether [their children] can play well, make good music, [or] enjoy playing the piano or making music with their friends. . . What they are looking for is a certificate' (4:28).

In summary, teachers identified parental pressure as a causal factor in inhibition, as misaligned expectations and comparisons produce situations in which children work to appease their parents' expectations. Such pressure affects the students' relationship with parents and may limit their musicality. This predicament may influence teachers to be harsher in their teaching to achieve the parents' desired expectations and could instil fear in students when performing. These impact the students' musical environment, relationships and experiences negatively.

Examinations can inhibit musicality. Teachers mentioned the ways examinations are perceived in Malaysian and Singaporean contexts as factors that can result in both parents and teachers feeling trapped in a system. Some parents and students feel pressure to conform to achievement expectations that are built into the examination system.

The level of pressure that children feel while taking examinations is heavily influenced by their perceptions of the purpose of those examinations. Teachers acknowledged that these perceptions are not simply individual conclusions reached by parents but are *embedded in society, trapping both parents and teachers*. Gordon was concerned that, as a result of the examination system, children's music learning experiences were 'no [longer] a musical journey or a performance arts journey [but] a paper chase and the system perpetuates that' (7:22). Correspondingly, Yuja maintained that some parents try to push their children to do well in examinations so that they can 'pack their resumes with exams or competitions. . . So they will [continue to push] them, [whether] they are good or not' (12:31). In Singapore, students often complete qualifications to gain admission to a 'good secondary school' that sometimes requires that 12-year-old children pass a grade 8 examination (C. Tan, 2017). As a result, parents and teachers find themselves trapped in a system in which obtaining paper certification is the ultimate goal to achieve their objectives. Furthermore, Alice noted that even if the students pass the exams with distinction 'the real good playing and the exam system. . . may be separate [entities]' (4:18).

These mindsets place *pressure* on both parents and students, which harms the children's home life. According to Alice and Fleisher, both students and parents frequently saw music as just another academic subject in their study curriculum. Alice stated (4:15) that it was simply 'one more, one extra subject, music is another subject', referring to the students' full schedules and expressing a desire for music to be a central focus for the students and parents. Gordon opined that examinations inhibit musicality: '[B]ecause of how the whole teaching community uses exams, by and large, musicality is quite inhibited because it's all very objective-driven' (7:26). The implied objective was to prepare for the examination to pass it adequately. Fleisher lamented the fact that 'there [is a] lack of time to really learn a piece very well or fully before performing it. The idea is [that] I just want to pass this exam' (3:21).

Each teacher, parent and student has to find a way to respond to the expectations raised by the current examination system. Cultural assumptions about face and honour, as well as competitive school admission policies, underpin the system. Students, in particular, bear the brunt of this nexus of pressures, which may result in intra- and inter-personal stressors manifested in aspects of their musicality that are not fully developed.

MTAF teaching inhibits musicality. Our interviewees described the characteristics of teaching that would inhibit the student's musicality as militaristic, threatening, abusive, and fierce (MTAF).

Our understanding of *militaristic* teaching refers to instruction that requires strict discipline in following instructions, to the extent that questioning and exploration are penalised. In an interview, Nadia recalled a childhood experience of militaristic teaching that resulted in trauma:

Sometimes when I was not good at theory, she made all of us stay for the whole day [. . .] You can repeat the same question for [the] whole day and you have no idea how to do [it] at all. All you get is scolding and beating and ear-pulling the whole day. It was a nightmare (11:22).

Teachers who are described as *threatening* frequently use words or actions that make students feel vulnerable or at risk. Vladimir recalled conversations with a parent that described an instance of a teacher saying 'she's just not equipped to [play the piano]' (5:6) within earshot of the child. In the second instance, a student had failed her sight reading provoking the teacher to say to the student and parent 'I don't think you are cut out [to play the piano]' (5:7). Teachers in both cases threatened to reject the student by speaking condescendingly about or to the child, jeopardising the child's self-esteem and placing their relationship with their parent at risk.

Elina stated that teachers might respond by threatening because they may have felt threatened by parents into producing results that are beyond the student's current ability.] She explained that 'some of the teachers are very uptight or very difficult because they are trying to get [the student] to pass [but they are] not able to produce' (10:13)

We understand *abusive* teaching as the use of physical violence that instils fear to change a student's behaviour. Nadia described transfer students 'being pinched on the ear till it bled' (11:11) or teachers who 'used wooden rulers to knock our fingers' (11:11). Emma mentioned students whose teachers 'hit them or even [splashed] water on them when they played wrongly or when they did not play correctly the second time', noting that the child became 'very afraid and very scared of the teacher' (8:6). In these cases, students experienced physical trauma such as discomfort and even pain, which would inevitably lead to increased tension while playing the instrument, resulting in a repeat of this vicious cycle.

Fierce teachers are harshly discouraging in their words or actions. Yuja admitted to being fierce due to frustration when a student was stubborn and not practising well:

I was pretty nasty [. . .] I don't say anything encouraging, but because [he] really stopped practising, just come to the lesson once a week and practice in front of me, this is really frustrating. I mean, I have done things like open a door and throw the book out of the room. Because it really gets on my nerves. (12:14)

Yuja later revealed that this student 'became less confident' (12:11). As the student had stopped practising, he may have lost interest in music, though whether this can be wholly or partially attributed to fierce teaching is unclear.

An inexperienced teacher may unknowingly exhibit ferocity to compensate for the inability to provide sound advice. Elina cited a guitar teacher who sold a guitar that was too big to a young student, and then became impatient and called the student stupid when the child could not play it well (10:19). This resulted in the student having a poor musical foundation, which led to a loss of confidence.

According to interviewees, some felt that MTAF teaching could lead to progress. Emma was aware of 'students who have gone through [. . .] militaristic teaching but yet ha[ve] been very successful' (8:9). Similarly, Gordon knew of students who 'acknowledge that they did learn . . . and they progressed a lot' (7:11). Despite appearing to be effective at 'getting the results', Yuja realised

that her MTAF teaching had resulted in musically inhibitive responses amongst students. She mentioned, 'I have changed [my approach,] knowing if I teach [. . .] and I [scold], I realise it does make an impact on the student. And I have changed since then' (12:1). Gordon expressed hope that MTAF teaching is dying out and that the next generation of teachers is moving away from these approaches. 'Maybe [. . .] the carrot would have done better than the stick. But that whole [older] generation, everyone believed in the stick' (7:15).

MTAF teachers could directly impact students' ability to respond musically by putting pressure on them, affecting their self-esteem and physically or emotionally harming them. Although effective in some cases, this approach to teaching generally suppresses the expression of musicality and negatively impacts the student's overall life experience.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings we present in this paper demonstrate that inhibition of musicality is an observable phenomenon. Trauma is often embodied through physical tension or psychological stress and has previously been shown to impact musical expressiveness, among other effects (Swart, 2010). Loss of interest and confidence can be understood as aspects of motivation (Evans & Ryan, 2022; Hallam, 2016). Motivation is related to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, including a feeling of competence, autonomy and belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2018), all of which are lowered in situations of extreme pressure or the threat of psychological or physical violence. The symptoms identified here align well with findings from Coppola's (2023) study of arrogant or egotistic teachers. Such teachers tend to relegate others as lower than themselves, resulting in 'lost opportunities, self-blame, feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, and trauma' in their students (Coppola, 2023, p. 10).

Teachers could also identify sources of inhibition. Noting that inhibition can be caused by relational factors (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993), we recognise that parents and teachers are key players in determining the musical learning environment and the student's sense of belonging (Davidson et al., 1995). While supportive and involved parents strongly influence the positive self-concept of new tertiary music students (McClellan, 2011), critical parents have a negative impact on their child's anxiety when performing publicly or for an examination (Cleary, 2013), and parental pressure limits motivation of students (Cheng & Southcott, 2016; Mitchell, 2017). Xu et al. (2020) argued that parental psychological control may negatively impact both the psychological and emotional worlds of the child, diminishing a child's ability to learn autonomously, and creating a vulnerability to maladjustment. Our finding is that unsupportive parental pressure has a negative influence not only on self-concept, anxiety, or motivation but also on musicality. The links between musicality, musical skill, motivation, and self-image has been previously established (McPherson & McCormick, 2000) and is pertinent in any discussion of musical inhibition.

We found that a set of qualities in teachers (MTAF) inhibits the musical development of their students. Verbally or physically violent music teachers are not just found in Malaysia and Singapore, and have been identified in studies from Turkey and China (Özevin, 2022; Sun & Leung, 2014). In Sweden, Holmgren (2022) has shown that students' understandings of expressive interpretation are limited by the traditional 'master-apprentice' model of teaching when the teachers are not 'open for dialogue, critique, and willing (or obliged by curricula or organisation) and capable of actual change' (p. 581). Coppola (2023) also highlighted how arrogant teachers emphasise self-preservation and elitism over service and care. This growing body of research points to a serious issue of psychological and physical violence within music education, one that is worsened because it is considered taboo by many (Fernández-Morante, 2018). In this study, the causes of musical inhibition described above exist in and are supported by the unique context of Singapore and Malaysia

as discussed in the introduction. The emphasis on examinations (Shah & Saidon, 2017), face (Hwang et al., 2003) and a competitive environment (J. Tan & Gopinathan, 2000) all place pressure on the appropriate musical development of young musicians, and create a system that parents and teachers find hard to escape.

Implications for music teachers

Defining and describing the symptoms and causes of musical inhibition will help teachers recognise and start to address the phenomenon in their students. We have elsewhere described how teachers attempt to address musical inhibition in students they encounter (Khoo et al., 2023). Teachers can use this research in their discussions with parents, especially when parents are placing unsupportive pressure on their children. Raising the symptoms of musical inhibition with such parents may assist in changing perceptions of what music education is for, as well as the possible negative effects of pressure. While the effects of parental pressure have been described in the literature (Cheng & Southcott, 2016; Mitchell, 2017), the links between this pressure and societal or cultural understandings is in need of further investigation. We also hope that raising the issue of MTAF teaching will help to highlight the negative effects of this approach to teaching, and that discussion based on these findings will assist teachers to be more critically aware of their own teaching practices and the effects of these on their students. However, it is likely that MTAF teachers are uninterested in changing, and finding ways of introducing this information to a broad range of teachers is an important goal to research and pursue. The relation between understandings of musicality and MTAF teaching is an area for future investigation, as well as the role of teacher self-awareness in developing better teaching practices.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Numbers in brackets after quotations refer to data points within our Atlas.ti copybundle. The first number refers to the specific interview, and the second to a specific place in that interview.

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