

# **Viewing the parent-teacher relationship in music education through the lens of role theory: a literature review**

**Kathryn Ang, Clorinda Panebianco, and Albi Odendaal**

## **Abstract**

The relationship between a parent and a teacher can be fraught with difficulties because of role conflicts that may result from the negotiations that occur between them. We synthesized recent perspectives drawn from the research literature on parent-teacher relationships with that of role theory, and aim to demonstrate how the current research literature can be used to describe the roles of parents and teachers and their relationship to one another in music lessons. Our findings indicate that parents often play multiple roles such as home supervisors, supporters, providers, role models, partners in education, and consumers, whereas teachers may play the roles of professional musicians, educators, partners in education, and role models. We argue that roles should be understood as resulting from interaction and negotiation between parties in a relationship, and suggest that concepts from role theory are helpful tools for the reconceptualization of parents' and teachers' roles.

## **Keywords**

music lessons; relationships; role of parents; role of teachers; role theory

## **Introduction**

In this literature review, we address the relationship between a child's music teacher and the parent, and explain how an understanding of the roles of each of these parties can be understood. We use role theory as a basis to understand the literature on parent-teacher

relationships, and propose a new way of understanding this relationship. It is important because the formation of relationships can be promoted or hampered by the way that parents and teachers understand the various roles that they want to play and are expected to play. Although research has been conducted in the areas of parental involvement (Davidson et al., 1996), parent-teacher-pupil relationships (Creech & Hallam, 2003), teacher-pupil relationships (Carey & Grant, 2015), and parent-teacher relationships (Macmillan, 2004), no researchers have directly addressed the issues of parental roles, teacher's roles, or parent-teacher roles within the arena of relationships between parents and teachers. Therefore, there is a need for theorisation and clarification of roles within the music teaching environment.

Some research exists in music education that has drawn on role theory (Cramer et al., 2002; Miksza, 2007; Rolle et al., 2018; Scheib, 2003, 2007). These findings have highlighted musician-performer identity role conflict, suggesting that especially preservice music teachers may experience conflict in understanding their identity in playing dual roles as musician and music teacher (Miksza, 2007). Furthermore, role stress in the professional life of the school music teacher has been considered (Scheib, 2003) as well as the implications of role theory for issues of job satisfaction faced by school administrative personnel and music educators (Scheib, 2007). Cramer et al. (2002) investigated ways that gender expectations may have a strong influence on a performer's choice of instrument. In addition, the findings of a study on role expectations and role conflicts within collaborative composing projects (Rolle et al., 2018) revealed that some of the main challenges faced by the parties involved were associated with role ambiguity. We contribute to this theoretical perspective by considering parent-teacher relationships and interactions from the perspective of role theory.

Although similar in intent to some of the research on teacher identity in the aforementioned articles, we do not focus on the teacher identity role (e.g. Natale-Abramo, 2014; Pellegrino, 2009), but add to this research by assuming that the relationship between the parent and teacher likely impacts a teacher's role perception and, by extension, on teacher identity. There has been much research on teacher roles and identities (Natale-Abramo, 2014; Pellegrino, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore this literature apart from noting that it exists, and that the various identities teachers hold are sometimes in conflict, resulting in tension for the teachers (Hargreaves et.al., 2007; Mark, 1998; Natale-Abramo, 2014). Dolloff (2007) clarified the difference between role and identity in the following way: "Role' is what a teacher *does* while 'identity' is who a teacher *is*: ..." (p.3). Of course, doing and being are not concepts that should be far removed from each other, but we focus more on the doing in this literature review.

Role theory has been explored from psychological (Sarbin, 1968), sociological (Biddle, 1979; Turner, 1968), cultural (Callero, 1994), and interactionist (Bonsall, 2009; Jackson, 1998; Callero, 1994; Järventie-Thesleff, & Tienari, 2015; Turner, 1968) perspectives. The concept of role thus provides a useful means for explaining the self, society, as well as the self in relation to society (Callero, 1994). In this literature review, we employ an interactive perspective, which means that we understand teachers and parents do mutually and continually shape each other's roles through interaction. This suggests that roles are not static, but continually being adapted through interactions and varying situations. Although people have been understood to play their roles according to the positional and personal expectations that have been placed on them (Biddle, 1979), an interactionist

perspective suggests that play could also be understood as an improvisatory and playful concept rather than one in which social structures pre-define a role.

We aim to demonstrate that the concepts developed in role theory are helpful tools for the reconceptualization of parent and teacher roles in the development of relationships. This relationship can be fraught with difficulties because of the conflict that may result from the negotiations that occur between the role players (Grace, 2012). In order to explain the process of differentiation into roles, Turner (2002) suggested three principles. Within the first principle of functionality, there is a clear division of labor and collaboration between parties, and “roles are constantly modified for greater apparent effectiveness” (Turner, 2002, p. 252). Second, roles are viewed as “vehicles for conveying certain images (representationality) and are framed and reframed in relation to what they are seen to represent” (Turner, 2002, p. 252) within the principle of representationality. Third, roles are also “subject to continuous tension to supply a tenable balance of benefits to costs for role incumbents, limited by the power and resources of those incumbents” (Turner, 2002, p. 252) as explained within the principle of tenability.

## **Method**

Through this literature review, we aim to build an account of the expected roles of parents and teachers, and of the ways that parents and teachers interact based on recent perspectives of parent-teacher relationships found in the research literature. In addition, we consider how researchers—who did not rely on role theory—describe the perceived roles of parents and teachers. A literature search was undertaken using combinations of the terms music lessons, relationships, role of parents, role of teachers, parental involvement, parent-

teacher relationships, parent-teacher-child relationships, and teacher-pupil relationships. The databases searched were JSTOR, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and IIMP. The literature was read and coded using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016) in Atlas.ti by the first and third authors. The process of coding was carried out by the first author in consultation with both second and third authors. This involved regular interaction between the authors, with the first author doing approximately 80 percent of the coding.

From our coding of the data found in the literature, we realised that while a wide range of parental roles were discussed, that an even wider and more diverse range of teacher roles could be identified. In addition, the roles that both parents and teachers were expected to play had a direct impact on their relationships with each other. As such, the resultant themes from this review were (1) the range of parental roles, (2) the diversity in roles of teachers, and (3) the interpersonal relationships in parent-teacher partnerships within music education.

1. The range of parental roles included the roles of (a) home supervisors, (b) supporters, and (c) providers. In addition, we identified that parents may play the roles of (d) role models, (e) partners in education, and (f) consumers .
2. Regarding teacher roles, the prominent roles of (a) professional musician and (b) educator dominate discussions in the literature. In addition, we identified that teachers may play the roles of (c) partner in education as well as (d) role model.
3. Finally, we considered the interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers. Our search revealed the benefits of children's musical development if the parents were (a) involved in attending their children's music lessons, (b) supervising their

children's practice sessions at home, and (c) creating a positive music home environment.

For the remainder of the article, it is important and helpful to note that we are imposing a role theory lens on literature that is not based on role theory.

### **Theme One: Parental Roles in Music Education**

Parents play a wide range of roles in educating their children musically both at home and at their children's music lessons. We identified six role types from the literature, and will discuss the roles of home supervisors (Comeau & Huta, 2015), supporters (Leong, 2008), providers (Creech, 2001), role models (McPherson, 2009), partners in education (Davidson & Scutt, 1999), and consumers (Creech, 2009).

#### ***Parents as Home Supervisors***

We suggest defining the parental role of being a home supervisor in terms of acting as a home teacher (Vries, 2005; O'Neill, 2003) or a practice supervisor (Macmillan, 2004). The findings of these studies indicated that parents who fulfil these roles support the work of the teacher by aiding the child to perform various tasks related to learning or practicing at home. O'Neil (2003) investigated parents as home teachers based on the observation and analysis of the practice sessions of 30 Suzuki students and their parents at home. Training parents to be home teachers proved to be an effective tool in providing content and pacing for the parents to supervise their children's home practice sessions (O'Neill, 2003). Macmillan (2004) conducted a qualitative study that examined the attitudes of teachers, parents, and pupils to parental involvement in piano lessons. It was found that both parents and pupils in his study

encouraged parental involvement, but only some teachers welcomed such collaborations. The interactions between parents and teachers in these studies facilitated the development of the role of home supervisor for parents who may not necessarily know how to fulfil such a role prior to interaction.

### ***Parents as Supporters and Providers***

Our formulation of the role of parents as supporters places emphasis on parental involvement (Creech, 2010; Zdzinski, 2013), especially financial and emotional support (Leong, 2008), as well as direct encouragement and participation (Margiotta, 2011). In our experience, most parents fulfil the role of supporters and providers to a greater or lesser extent, whereas only few parents fulfil the role of home supervisor. Margiotta (2011) found that parents' support was most evident in their participation in both attendance at lessons and supervision of practice, suggesting some overlap between the roles of supporters and home supervisors.

Children have been found to benefit from parents who offer significant levels of behavioral, cognitive/intellectual, and personal support (Creech, 2010). The converse is also true, and Leong (2008) found that a lack of parental support, both emotionally and financially, resulted in some children giving up their aspirations for a career in music. Several other factors related to parental support have been shown to aid student success such as home musical structure, home musical environment, family musical participation, and family musical background (Zdzinski, 2013). It has been found that parents' support enables their children's motivation for and enjoyment of music (Macmillan, 2004). Other parents claimed, however, that the substantial financial investment they made in their children's musical

education was in aid of non-musical benefits in areas such as “discipline, diligence, academic performance, and intelligence” (Dai & Schader, 2001, p. 23). Therefore, the support provided by parents may involve differing levels, motivations, and outcomes. The idea of support has largely been researched from the perspective of the parent-child dyad and not from the parent-teacher dyad. Although it would be important for the parent to be supportive of the teacher and their endeavors, this has not been researched.

### ***Parents as Role Models***

When parents are understood as role models, it raises the question of what is being modeled. It is important for parents to be positive role models, as parents help to shape their children’s self-beliefs and sense of competence as well as to develop constructive problem-solving skills (McPherson, 2009). Furthermore, parental influence is “an important external factor affecting student motivation and persistence” (Sichivitsa, 2007, p. 56), implying the importance attached to the parents acting as role models for their children. Therefore, parents who intend to be positive role models for their children have to continue to frame and reframe their roles “in relation to what they are seen to represent” (Turner, 2002, p. 252).

### ***Parents as Partners in Education***

We identified a further role of parents as partners in education (Creech & Hallam, 2003; Davidson et al., 1996; Davidson & Scutt, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2006; Uptis et al., 2017). In this role, parents are described as playing the roles of collaborators (Fitzgerald, 2006; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017) and advocates (Fitzgerald, 2006), as the parents regularly communicate with the teacher on issues related to their children’s wellbeing and learning. Furthermore, in an article evaluating the impact of music educators collaborating with parents, Fitzgerald



(2006) maintained that in order for students with disabilities to be successful in music they would need the support of a strong partnership between their parents and teachers. She described her own experience of learning how to be an advocate for her disabled child as she dealt with others' perceptions of her child and the difficulties he faced at school by discussing various issues with the teachers on how best to educate her child.

Good bonding leading to partnerships between parents and teachers is dependent on role complementarity. Turner (1968) explained that in role complementarity the actor and their partners need to find a "comprehensive way of coping" (Turner, 1968, p. 554) with each other. He added that such a relationship "involves a constant strain toward equilibrium between actual behavior, evaluative adjustments between roles, and the tension of maintaining each as a viable role in relation to the other" (Turner, 1968, p. 554).

### *Parents as Consumers*

Only two articles that we found contain a cursory reference to the idea of parents as consumers. One of Creech's (2009) findings from her survey of teacher-pupil-parent triads described the transactional relationship between the parent and the teacher, as the parent acts as a consumer without necessarily taking into account the child's preferences and the teacher tries to compensate for this by heightening her own level of responsiveness to the child. In addition, Davidson and Scutt's (1999) case study highlighted among other findings that parents may be consumer-minded in expecting a return on their investment when their children pass their music examinations. Turner (1968) suggested that this kind of tension among the parents, teachers, and children may present an obstacle to what would otherwise be a harmonious interaction. The tension may result in role strain, which may cause the

teachers to function inadequately and “leave unclear, incomplete, and contradictory elements in [their] role” (Turner, 1968, p. 556).

We have identified several potential roles that parents may play. These roles overlap in several places. For instance, partners will likely also be home supervisors, and supporters may also be role models. The point of an interactionist view of roles (Bonsall, 2009; Jackson, 1998; Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2015) was not to clearly define distinct role types, but rather to show how the interaction between teacher and parent creates space in which certain roles may become prominent. For example, if the parent is helped to understand their role as partner in education, the role of both the parent and teacher may change (Turner, 2002). The ways that parents play out their roles are not a function only of their own goals and aspirations, but also of the ways that they interact with the teacher. As such, we now explore how to develop an understanding of teachers’ roles.

## **Theme Two: Teacher Roles in Music Education**

Teachers play diverse and complex roles in music education. We identified four roles from the surveyed literature, and discuss the roles of professional musician and educator (Austin et.al., 2012; Ballantyne et al., 2012; Bernard, 2004; Bouij, 2004; Miksza, 2007; Pellegrino, 2009; Russell, 2012; Scheib, 2006), teacher as partner in education (Fischler, 2007; Macmillan, 2003; Music Teachers National Association, 2004), and teacher as role model (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Dwyer, 2015; Leong, 2008; Pitts, 2012).

## *Teachers as Professional Musicians and Educators*

Teachers are expected to be skilled at music pedagogy as well as performance on their instruments, and also hold identities as both musicians and as teachers (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Bouij, 2004). These somewhat divergent identity constructs are in a dynamic relationship with each other, and preservice teachers work to find a balance between them (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Miksza, 2007). Interestingly, Bernard (2004) differentiated between “musician-teachers” and “music teachers” in her study, citing the tension between these identities and roles. It appears that there are varying perspectives on the role-identities that are associated with a music teacher, and the teacher has to balance role expectations from others as well as from themselves. In sociological terms, the teacher must achieve role adequacy, where the role behavior of the teacher could be judged as being adequate or inadequate according to the role conception of the pupils and parents (Turner, 1968).

Researchers concerned with teachers as educators have placed the emphasis on the teacher as a good presenter (Ballantyne et al., 2012), facilitator (Music Teachers National Association, 2004; Swanwick, 2008), assessor (Mills, 1991), guide (Jorgensen, 2011), contributor to the teaching profession (Swanwick, 2008), and self-evaluator and learner (Bukantaitė & Kubiliūtė, 2015; Swanwick, 2008). This is supported by statements from various professional bodies for music teachers in the United States such as the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) (2004) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (2016). The complex nature of the skills needed in addition to musical and pedagogical skills was highlighted by Jorgensen (2011) who argued that a teacher should also have “personal qualities such as organizational skills, the ability to

explain and articulate ideas clearly, tact, resilience, a sense of humor, and the ability to motivate others” (p. 218).

It is possible to extract diverse understandings of teachers’ roles from the music education literature that we reviewed. As roles are continually being “modified for greater apparent effectiveness” (Turner, 2002, p. 252), it may be that the teachers’ role as an educator can be viewed in diverse ways, encompassing a wide range of public roles such as being a good presenter, facilitator, assessor, guide, and contributor to the professions, as well as private roles such as being a self-evaluator and learner. Our perspective is that these roles are not just intrinsic to the teacher, but formed in interaction with many others, one category of which are the parents that teachers interact with. The expectations that parents communicate may complement or undermine the internalised expectations of a teacher, and that the process of role formation that a teacher is constantly negotiating should be understood in terms of both external and internal expectations.

### ***Teachers as Partners in Education***

We have suggested that parents may play the role of partner, and also identified literature which supports the notion that teachers can be partners in education with their pupils and the families of their pupils, colleagues, and the community by building and nurturing partnerships with them (Music Teachers National Association, 2004). Teachers who form partnerships with their pupils found the experience to be mutually pleasurable, resulting in good progress and enjoyment (Macmillan, 2003). As partners in education, teachers may also play the roles of advocate for their pupils and disciplinarian on behalf of the parents (Fischler, 2007). She (2007) found that the teacher’s role as an advocate was often

performed because teachers represent the students by having discussions with their parents and the administration of the community school of the arts. Teachers were also aware of their role as disciplinarians towards their pupils, but they felt that in order to be more focused on their teaching, the responsibility of disciplining the pupils could be shared by the family, school, church, and the media.

Forming successful partnerships with their pupils and their families is enabled by a clear division of labor and collaboration between parties, which could be understood as role complementarity – where each role player finds a way of interacting with other relevant alter roles through regular interaction (Turner, 1968).

### ***Teachers as Role Models***

Like parents, teachers are also role models (Ballantyne et al., 2012), nurturers (Ballantyne et al., 2012,) and mentors (Dwyer, 2015; Leong, 2008; Pitts, 2012). Preservice music teachers stressed the importance of being role models by “‘wearing’ the role of teacher [and] modeling behaviors they see in their lecturers or supervising classroom teachers” (Ballantyne et al., 2012, p. 219). Furthermore, Dwyer (2015) describes an observation of a class where a teacher played the role of a mentor by taking time to have a long chat with the pupils in an effort to develop a relationship with them, and to help them to be more relaxed in learning. Both Leong (2008) and Pitts (2012) found that teachers have a strong influence on children’s motivation, development, and confidence. The impact teachers have on their pupils may influence whether or not pupils will continue learning music throughout their lives. Therefore, researchers suggest that teachers need to be continually aware of the image they

portray as role models in nurturing and mentoring their pupils in order to meet the positional and personal expectations of both the pupils and their parents (Biddle, 1979).

As we have emphasized with regard to parents, the potential roles of teachers may overlap and interact in complex ways. It is expected that teachers, as professionals, should know what to do and how to do it, yet an understanding of role theory further suggests that the teacher role is only formed and refined through interaction (Turner, 2002) with pupils, parents, and other role players that are important in the teacher's life. Next, we discuss the dimensions of interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers that have been highlighted in the music education literature.

### **Theme Three: Relationships Between Parents and Teachers in Music Education**

We have already written that parental involvement in attending their children's music lessons, supervising their children's practice sessions at home, and creating a positive music home environment can be beneficial to their children's musical development (Creech, 2001; Davidson et al., 1996; Margiotta, 2011). However, Davidson et al. (1996) mentioned that, although there are instrumental teachers who encouraged parents to be present during their children's lessons, there are also teachers who do not prefer the parent to be present. They found that the children with the most successful learning outcomes had very high levels of parental support in the music lessons and home practice from the earliest stages of learning. Some teachers discouraged parental involvement if they felt that parents could be interfering during lessons, inhibiting the development of a healthy teacher-pupil relationship, or causing their children to be over-dependent on them. On the other hand, qualified teachers who were more experienced and had attended specialist music courses were more open to parental

involvement. These teachers reported that they were able to communicate more easily with the parents and discuss problems the child may be facing because they were comfortable with each other (Macmillan, 2003).

Parents have the potential to be vulnerable to interpersonal relationships with teachers, especially if they perceived the teachers to be caring and supportive of autonomy (Creech & Hallam, 2009). The relationship between parents and teachers is thereby affected by the image that teachers represented to the parents (Turner, 2002). In addition, Pitt and Hargreaves (2017) found that teachers tended to place a greater emphasis on the benefits of children's learning and development, whereas the parents tended to be more focused on the social and emotional reasons for their children joining the classes. There is a potential disconnect in the attitudes of the parents and teachers towards the classes, which may also result in parents and teachers adopting roles that are not compatible.

### **Discussion**

We argue that the parent and teacher roles we identified in our review of the music education literature are not static, but are interactive and fluid (Turner, 2002). Parents and teachers influence each other in various ways, many of which are not clearly understood. We described parents as possibly playing the roles of home supervisors, supporters, role models, providers, partners in education, and consumers, whereas we described teachers as possibly playing the roles of a professional musician and educator, partner in education, and role model. These roles are shaped and influenced by wider society, but also by the ways that teachers and parents interact and position each other. Turner (2002) suggested that roles are

formed and differentiated through three processes, namely functionality, representationality, and tenability.

Functionality suggests that roles are not pre-defined, nor static, but that roles are rather “constantly modified for greater apparent effectiveness” (Turner, 2002, p. 252) through clear division of labor. In the case of parents and teachers, it may be that the division of labor is not always clear, and this may result in conflict, as teachers could perceive parents to either overstep their boundaries, or else not be involved enough. Parents, however, may have expectations and desires that do not align with what teachers are offering. Parents and teachers who do work on clearly defining their roles, for example, by working together for parents to become Suzuki home teachers (O’Neill, 2003), seem to have greater success. Teachers who aim to form partnerships with pupils and their families enable clear division of labor and collaboration between parties, which is dependent on role complementarity within the relationships (Grace, 2012). Such clear divisions of labor and collaboration are only possible through transparent and regular communication channels, in which teachers, as the more experienced partner, should take the lead. Teachers would then function as mentors by being flexible in framing their conversations and spending time with the parents while advising and guiding them to be more effective in making music part of their children’s home lives. Consequently, parents can also fulfil their function as supporters of their children’s musical learning and development by their physical presence and verbal reassurances, as well as by being motivators, solution finders, protectors, advocates, and character builders.

We have highlighted a wide range of perspectives on the role identities that are associated with a music teacher, as well as those associated with parents. An awareness that roles “become vehicles for conveying certain images (representationality) and are framed and



reframed in relation to what they are seen to represent” (Turner, 2002, p. 252) may lead teachers and parents to become aware of and perhaps reframe the images they portray to each other. For example, as role models, teachers and parents portray certain attitudes and behaviors which influence pupils, and also likely has an influence on whether pupils continue learning music throughout their lives (Pitts, 2012) by influencing the child’s self-beliefs and sense of competence, as well as to develop constructive problem-solving skills, a sense of motivation, and persistence. If both parents and teachers are effective as role models, they will be working as partners for the children’s wellbeing and learning outcomes. As a result, parents can develop as role models for their children, modeling values such as respect for the teacher, fair play, understanding, and adaptability towards others. Teachers who welcome parental involvement in supervising their children’s practice at home and participating in the music lessons would encourage collaboration, which could lead to the formation of positive relationships with parents in educating their children.

The finding that teachers experience inter-role conflict in trying to achieve balance between playing the role of a skilled musician and the role of an educator resonates with the principle of tenability (Turner, 2002), where the roles are “subject to continuous tension to supply a tenable balance of benefits to costs for role incumbents, limited by the power and resources of those incumbents” (p. 252). In our experience, parents may experience tension as they attempt to ensure that the experience of the child is worth the effort being put into making music lessons work. It may be that teachers will also be experiencing tension owing to the requirements of the parents who are acting as consumers, as the teachers may tend to perceive this parental role negatively because it detracts from the pedagogical aspect. This may result in the teachers losing both focus and motivation in teaching the children.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers to frame their communication on financial transactions clearly with the parents in order to conduct their business practice in the studio or classroom in a professional manner. The benefits of greater partnership highlighted throughout our review does come at a cost of time and effort on behalf of both the teacher and parent, who both need to agree that such costs are worth it.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, we have shown the ways that concepts from role theory are helpful tools for the reconceptualization of parent and teacher roles in the development of their relationships. Additional music education research viewed through the theoretical lens of role theory may advance our understanding of the influence and consequences of parent-teacher relationships in music learning contexts. It may also contribute to the larger body of research concerned with the dimensions of interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers in music education. Furthermore, as role theory is “an expansive and variegated body of analyses examining the linkages between social organization, culture, and the performances that humans give while engaged in interaction” (Martin & Wilson, 2005, p. 651), we suggest that future researchers examine how various socio-cultural differences shape the parent-teacher roles and expectations in music lessons.

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