

Research Article



Parents and Group Music Lessons: A Role Theory Perspective for Music Teacher Educators

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Abstract

This collective case study aimed to explore the various expected roles for parents of preschool children in group music lessons in the Klang Valley of West Malaysia, the area located around Kuala Lumpur. We collected data by conducting two semi-structured interviews with 10 parents and three teachers of three preschool group music classes. Four broad themes emerged. Participants viewed parents as playing the roles of supporters, practice supervisors, role models, and consumers. We propose that a flexible understanding of role is essential in crafting meaningful relationships between parents and teachers and suggest the approaches that might assist future music educators to develop such a perception.

Keywords

expectations, group music lessons, role of parents, role theory, West Malaysia

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This study considers the ways in which future music teachers might prepare for interactions with parents of their students. Drawing upon the perspectives of parents and teachers on the expected roles of parents in preschool group music classes, we suggest that an understanding of role theory can make a useful contribution to the educational process. Although the relationships between parents and teachers involve many variables such as personality, culture, religious views, motivations, and goals, we contend that comprehending the expected and enacted roles of parents adds an important dimension to recognizing this complex relationship.

A study in the United States identified that one of the challenges university-trained urban music educators faced was coping with uninvolved or unsupportive parents (Baker, 2012). Most music education in Malaysia happens in private settings, and music teacher is a commonly used term to describe someone who teaches such private or small group music lessons on a specialized instrument. Many such teachers do not complete university qualifications before beginning their careers as music teachers and, as a result, are likely even more under-prepared to interact with the parents of their students. When parents and teachers hold divergent role expectations, this is fertile ground for conflict.

In this article, we used role theory as a lens through which to view the relationship between parents

and teachers. Biddle (1979) defined role theory as “the study of behaviors that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors” (p. 4). Turner (2002) posited that individuals flexibly adapt behaviors depending on the situation they find themselves in, as individual roles continue to develop within relationships with other role players, who act according to preconceived ideas and relationship dynamics. Role players constantly evaluate the costs and benefits of such role adaptations. Individuals should not feel limited to role requirements, rather they should be able to negotiate or adapt their way into a better situation. Turner (2002) uses terms such as functionality, representationality, and tenability to explain these processes. To date, very few studies have attempted to understand and explain the complexities of parental roles in music education (Davidson et al., 1996). Although researchers have considered how family history impacts the socialization of preservice music teachers (Isbell, 2008), we have yet to uncover research suggesting ways to prepare preservice music teachers to interact with their students’ parents once they begin teaching.

Parents as Partners

Ilari et al. (2011) posited that “musical parenting can be understood as the set of beliefs, values, and behaviors that parents have/engage in with their children concerning music” (p. 52). Parents play a key role in cultivating children’s musical growth (De Vries, 2009), by introducing music into the early childhood experience of babies and very young children (Young, 2003b). As a result, parents are frequently regarded as their children’s first music teachers, recognizing the multiple roles of music in their children’s lives by laying early musical foundations and developing musical skills and knowledge (Koops, 2007; Rodriguez, 2019). Parents play the roles of partners and co-participants in their children’s early childhood education by engaging in musical practices such as singing (Carlton, 2014; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017; Rodriguez, 2019), playing musical games (Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017), and playing instruments (Young, 2003a). One example is the Suzuki method, where a parent is expected to be present at all of the child’s lessons, take notes on what and how to practice, act as the practice supervisor at home, and encourage listening to Suzuki recordings (Bugeja, 2009).

Parents can also play the role of nurturer by participating in musical activities with their children that help form emotional bonds and communicate with them (Dissanayake, 2009; Ilari, 2005; Young, 2017). Furthermore, parents can provide opportunities for socialization and community connection for their children by establishing relationships within the family and between different families at music group lessons, which lay a foundation for children’s social and emotional well-being (Barrett, 2009; Rodriguez, 2019; Young, 2017). Cooper and Cardany (2011) opined that parents have an important role in helping teachers assess and better understand the children’s learning and developmental progress. The findings of these studies are in line with the core values of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which recognizes the need for “reciprocal relationships between practitioners and families” through adopting attitudes of mutual respect, collaborations, and being involved in decision-making roles (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 23).

Beyond early childhood education, a close reading of research literature suggests that parents play a variety of roles, such as being educational partners (Fitzgerald, 2006). Creech and Hallam (2003) examined the literature on parent–teacher–pupil interactions, focusing on “themes of purpose, role expectations, and collective efficacy” as components of an educational partnership (p. 3). Furthermore, as educational partners, parents might also play roles of collaborators and advocates by regularly communicating with the teacher on issues related to their children’s well-being (Fitzgerald, 2006). In

addition, Ang et al. (2019) found that essential characteristics in parent–teacher partnerships include trust, reciprocity, mutuality, shared goals, and joint decision-making. Researchers view parents as practice supervisors, teachers, and leaders in their role of home supervisors (Davidson et al., 1996). Researchers in this field suggest that parental support can include parental involvement, emotional support, direct encouragement, and participation, which can all lead to excellence in musical achievement (Upitis et al., 2017). McPherson (2009) stressed that it is important for parents to act as positive role models because they help to shape their children’s self-beliefs and sense of competence.

Parents play a crucial role as providers for their children by enabling instrumental study, and investing substantial time and money to develop musical skills (Dai & Schader, 2001). This investment means that some students are excluded from music education, given the costs involved especially in a country like Malaysia, which does not include broad-based government support for music education. The role of provider is therefore amplified in this context where parental support is necessary. Furthermore, researchers have noted that parents of accomplished children have broad interests in music and support by providing challenging opportunities and materials to enhance their child’s development in the form of instrumental lessons, professional concerts experiences, and musical resources (Creech, 2010; Macmillan, 2004). Scholars agree that parents should provide a stable family life without external pressures or worries to nurture their child’s learning and enhance their musical development (Davidson et al., 1996; Margiotta, 2011).

Exploring the interpersonal interaction within the teacher–pupil–parent triad that intersected with the role of parents as consumer, Creech (2009) illuminated the strain that occurs between parent and teacher when the parent does not consider the children’s needs and wants, which may result in the teacher’s struggle to meet the parent’s expectations. When role expectations are unclear or contradictory, this consumer mindset may result in conflict between parents and teachers. Little is known about the roles that teachers expect parents of preschool children to play in group lessons.

Study Purpose and Context

The collective case study sought to better understand the various expected roles for parents of preschool children in group music lessons in the Klang Valley to inform music teacher education. This article is part of a larger study using role theory to understand the dynamics of the parent–teacher relationships within the context of group music lessons in the Klang Valley of West Malaysia.

In West Malaysia, most students study instrumental music at private music schools, international schools, or with music teachers in their home. Private instrumental music instruction typically prepares students for music examinations administered by external examination boards. The first author has had over 30 years of experience teaching music privately at her home. She prepares her students for various graded and diploma-level instrumental and theoretical music examinations. She is a music teacher educator who instructs other music teachers in piano pedagogy and repertoire.

Most private music schools offer group music lessons and individual instrumental instruction. These group music classes are available for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. The programs develop a wide range of musical abilities, such as good aural skills, group instrumental or ensemble playing, and movement to music. Yamaha’s Junior Music Course, Musikgarten, and Kindermusik are popular group music programs used with young children in West Malaysia. Group sizes typically range from 4 to 12 students. Music classes for infants (0–2 years), toddlers (2–3 years), and preschoolers (4–6 years) require parental participation.¹ During infant classes, parents generally care for their children, assist them with the activities by singing along and moving with them, and calm them down as necessary. In toddler classes, parents encourage and participate in all activities with their

children. Parents participate in preschool classes by communicating with the teacher regularly and practicing with their children before each class.

Procedures

This article presents a pooled case comparison (West & Oldfather, 1995) of a collective case study (Stake, 1995), exploring the ways in which both parents and teachers describe parental roles within parent–teacher relationships. A pooled case comparison analyzes the raw data from different cases as the data are “not simply compared but are pooled for new analysis” (West & Oldfather, 1995, p. 457). The advantage of pooled case comparison is “illuminating patterns that are not apparent” when analyzing cases separately (West & Oldfather, 1995, p. 454). The collective case study consisted of the following three cases with parents in a group music setting: (a) the teacher and four parents of an early childhood group music class, introducing basic musical skills to infants below 12 months; (b) the teacher and three parents of a group music class that encouraged movement to music for toddlers with special needs; and (c) the teacher and three parents of a group music class to develop aural skills and introductory keyboard skills for children between the ages of 5 and 6 years. Together, the collective case comprised 13 participants.

We selected the participants by purposeful sampling to highlight varying perspectives on parental roles (Creswell, 2013). Three teachers were selected based on their experience with music education and group teaching and perspectives on parental roles. Each of the teachers had extensive teaching experience of over 20 years, and all had experience teaching group music lessons. The teachers took part in the parent selection process by referring suitable participants from their studio for us to contact. We then recruited 10 additional parents based on their level of parental involvement, which ranged from very regular interaction to minimal interaction and their ability to communicate clearly in an interview setting. Mothers made up the majority of participants because they were most active in accompanying their children to group lessons. In one case, both parents of one child participated because they took turns caring for their baby. Both parents also attended the group lessons and the husband assisted in videotaping the lessons.

The first author met with the participants and observed the group music classes once before conducting two semi-structured, individual interviews (see Online Appendix A) with each participant. Interviews took place 3 to 4 months apart, and each interview lasted between 16 and 60 min. Two interviews included a translator because the interviewees were more fluent in dialects of Chinese such as Cantonese and Mandarin. The first interview (see Online Appendix A) inquired about the participants’ perceptions and experiences of parental roles. Before the second interview took place, the first interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed by means of thematic coding using ATLAS.ti. We presented these preliminary findings to the participants for member checking (Creswell, 2013) at the second interview.

In the second interview, we made use of fictional stories as interview prompts (Kallio, 2015). They consisted of “previously collected data, analyses and fictive elements, combining both the research participants’ and researcher voices” (Kallio, 2015, p. 3). Fictional stories may be seen “as a means to generate rich, meaningful data, and to facilitate collaborative inquiry” (Kallio, 2015, p. 3). We designed these stories to evoke strong approval/disapproval from the participants to the situations described, which provided glimpses into their values and beliefs. To create fictional stories, we gathered positive and negative experiences of parent–teacher relationships from a focus group meeting with six teachers unconnected to this study. In advance of the second interview, we provided participants with the four fictional stories (see Online Appendices B–E). As prompts, fictional stories were especially beneficial

to parents because they do not typically have as much experience dealing with teachers as teachers do with parents. Our experience was that both the relatable and the confrontational nature of the fictional stories supported the participants' construction of meaning in the interview situation, and encouraged the more reticent participants to tell stories and express their views with greater freedom. We then transcribed the second interviews verbatim.

Together, the interviews represented an open approach to hear participants' perspectives with minimal influence (first interview), and a more guided approach intended to reveal the values that might have been hidden or unclear (second interview). We found the second interviews to be richer and more nuanced due to the fictional story prompts.

For this article, we analyzed the data using a pooled case comparison (West & Oldfather, 1995), in which we aggregated data from all interviews and analyzed them together. Our analysis, therefore, concentrated on discovering recurring themes throughout the data sets, rather than highlighting individual case findings. This analysis approach allowed us to better understand the phenomenon of parental roles across the three cases.

Our university ethics committee approved the study, after which we verbally informed all participants of the research process, and they signed letters of informed consent. We assigned teachers pseudonyms beginning with "T" (Teresa, Tina, and Tricia). The parents received pseudonyms beginning with "P" (Paloma, Pamela, Pang/Pei Ting, Patricia, Peggy, Peng Li, Phoebe, Prisha, and Pui Li) (see Table 1 in the Supplemental Materials for the list of participants' pseudonyms).

Findings

We begin by discussing parent support for teachers and then parent support for children. The data revealed ways in which the parents and teachers describe the expected parental roles relating to group music instruction. Four broad themes emerged: parental support, parental home supervision, parents as role models, and parents as consumers.

Parental Support

Both teachers and parents indicated that parental support—where parents play the roles of encourager or motivator, solution finder, protector, and advocate—was essential for children's well-being and learning outcomes. In addition, parents expressed the need to play the role of a character builder.

Parental Support for Teachers. Teachers concentrated on the parent–teacher interactions as well as the parent–child interactions. For example, Teresa highlighted the need for parental support for both the child and the teacher to foster the child's musical learning and development in group music lessons:

When the mum is there normally the child would either behave . . . he could trust himself more to do the task. I noticed that. But when the mother goes he will (squeal) . . . the fear comes in again. When the mum is back he will be smiling and then he will do what I want him to do. So, she is there to encourage and support. (Teresa, second interview)

Teresa observed that the parent's physical presence helped the child be more co-operative and confident, leading to a more successful lesson.

Parental Support for Children. In contrast to the teachers, parents concentrated on the parent–child interactions rather than parent–teacher interactions. For example, Peggy explained that it is vital for

parents to fulfill their function by assuring their children of their support by their physical presence at the group music lessons and verbal reassurances:

It's not just to throw [a child] somewhere and let her swim on her own. Some people say you have to do that for them to learn but then I still think you still need to be there to let [our children] know you are supportive of [their musical development]. And just to keep reminding them and to tell them that you are interested in what they love as well. (Peggy, first interview)

Similarly, from a teacher's perspective, Tricia stressed that parents needed to be more involved with their children by encouraging them to participate during the lessons and making a conscious effort to practice with their children regularly at home.

On parents as solution finders, Paloma expressed that if children liked their teacher, they would be strongly motivated to work. Prisha added that the parents could do more harm to their children by being overly protective, and Phoebe stated that she needed to advocate for her child by speaking to the teacher about whatever challenges the child might be facing.

Therefore, the parents emphasized that they were fulfilling their parental function as supporters of their children's musical learning and development by their physical presence and verbal reassurances and being motivators, solution finders, protectors, advocates, and character builders. In contrast, teachers explained that parents would be more effective in fulfilling their parental function if they interacted more with the teachers by building friendships with them, exhibited greater involvement in their children's study of the instrument, and showed more trust in the teacher by not being overly protective.

Parental Home Supervision

Components of this broad theme include parents' need to understand the child's progress in group music lessons and to supervise the child's musical activities at home, with noticeable case differences depending on the child's age. Teachers expected parents of infants to expose their children to music at home by playing recordings of the songs taught in class and regularly singing to their infants. Furthermore, teachers expected parents of toddlers to encourage a physical response to the music by moving to music with their children and the toddlers to sing along with the music that they had been taught to sing during the lessons. Teachers also expected parents of preschoolers to practice the pieces taught in group piano lessons with their children and ensure that any assigned homework was completed.

Understanding the Children's Progress in Their Study. In general, parents saw the importance of knowing their child's study program to understand their children's progress in musical learning and development with some parents expressing more critical views. Pui Li expressed negative sentiments about "people who just send their kids to the program or these lessons without knowing the details or objectives." Parents and teachers agreed that more significant interaction is necessary for communication, collaboration, and support. Teachers saw great value in parents assisting the teachers and their children during the music lessons as parents could see their children's progress for themselves. Tricia was pleased with parents who were "actively participating in the class alongside with their kids" in her group music class.

Supervising the Child's Musical Activities at Home. Parental perspectives on home supervision of musical learning experiences included providing conditions conducive to the child's learning, coaching

the child to practice singing songs and playing pieces taught during the group music lesson at home, reviewing the child's work, and, specifically for preschoolers, aligning the musical activities at home with the group classwork. Teachers recounted good and bad experiences with parents who were either diligent or negligent in supervising their children at home.

Parents held varying perspectives on coaching their children at home. Pui Li stated that the "responsibility of parents is to provide [their children] a good environment to do the coaching," while Peggy, Prisha, and Phoebe encouraged autonomy by showing the children how to practice a few times before allowing them to continue on their own. Parents explained that their approach would vary as some children would need greater guidance depending on their character and age, or whether they experienced intellectual or physical challenges.

From a teacher's perspective, Tricia strongly emphasized that parents should learn together with their children in the group music class to be better equipped to supervise their children at home. Tina emphasized that the effort would have to come from both sides and that parents must do their part at home to ensure adequate progress in their children's musical learning and development. Both parents and teachers agreed that parents were most effective in fulfilling their function by assisting the teacher in the class and learning with their children. However, in some cases, the teachers highlighted that the parents did not know their children's program of study and maintained only superficial communication with the teachers, pointing toward differing conceptions of roles.

Parents as Role Models and Consumers

Both parents and teachers agreed that the role of parents as role models included showing respect for the teacher. Parents also spoke of being fair, understanding, and adaptable toward their children.

Showing Respect for the Teacher. Parents stressed the importance of respecting the teacher and found upsetting one of the fictional stories where a parent lost her temper at the teacher for not answering her phone call despite arriving late for the group music class. Pamela and Patricia commented that the parent was disrespectful and should display more control over her anger, especially when addressing the teacher. Phoebe added that "if the mom treated the teacher like this, then the children will lose respect [for the] teacher." Parents stated that they are expected to be good role models for their children and became critical of the parents in the fictional stories who did not display such traits. For the most part, teachers noted that the parents of the children in their group music classes showed them respect and were fair, understanding, and adaptable. Therefore, the parents were fulfilling the teachers' expectations of them.

Parents as Customers. Pei Ting opined that "there are two types of parents. One is a very aggressive type. The other [says] 'I pay you. So, you take care of my son.'" She explained that the aggressive parent would keep pushing the child and the teacher to get as much as possible while paying as little as possible. In contrast, the second type of parent was too busy to bother about what happened to the child in the class and stated that her role was merely to pay the fee.

In addition, some parents stated that the parent should be regarded as a customer, and the teacher should provide the service because she was paid to do so. A parent pointed out that some parents are quite detached and expected some form of childcare in exchange for the fee they paid. Teachers repeatedly contrasted what happened in the group class with what they regularly experienced in one-to-one settings, where parents tended to be much more demanding. Teachers described these demanding parents as bargain hunters, looking for the best price for their children's education. However, it seemed

that the collaborative environment of the group lesson minimized overly demanding parent behavior.

Discussion

The results of this collective case study highlight the expectations of parental roles—as supporters, practice supervisors, role models, and consumers from the perspectives of parents and teachers in group music lessons for preschool children. We now consider these results in the light of Turner's (2002) principles of functionality, representationality, and tenability in role differentiation.

These data point to a clear division of labor and collaboration between parties and constant modifications of roles for “greater apparent effectiveness” (Turner, 2002, p. 252) or functionality. Generally, parents explained that they had met the expectations of their children because they supported them with their physical presence and verbal reassurances. Particularly during group music lessons, they participated in musical practices such as singing, playing musical games, and playing instruments, reflecting extant research studies of parent and caregiver support (Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017; Young, 2017). They also acted as motivators, solution finders, advocates, protectors, and character builders (see Fitzgerald, 2006; Macmillan, 2004; Upitis et al., 2017). Parents highlighted that they were regularly modifying their roles by their efforts to understand their children's progress, communicating with the teacher, assisting the teacher in the class, learning with their children, and becoming more effective as partners and collaborators in education with the teachers (Bugeja, 2009; Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017; Rodriguez, 2019). The teachers agreed that parents were generally effective in fulfilling their function as supportive parents by assisting the teacher in the class and learning with their children. Parents displayed awareness of the need to function as role models for their children, instilling values such as respect for the teacher, fair play, understanding, and adaptability toward others. For the most part, teachers explained that the parents of the children in their group music classes met their expectations as they were good role models for their children in being respectful, fair, understanding, and adaptable. These findings support other music education literature by suggesting that the parents in the group music classes play the expected roles of supporters (Upitis et al., 2017), partners in education (Pitt & Hargreaves, 2017), collaborators and advocates (Cooper & Cardany, 2011; Cople & Bredekamp, 2009), and role models (McPherson, 2009). However, our findings differ from the literature by adding the expected parental roles of protector and character builder. Parents emphasized that by being physically present and advocating for their children, they were fulfilling their role as protector. They also built their children's characters by being motivators.

Teachers indicated that the parents did not fully meet the role expectations held by the teachers because they did not interact sufficiently with them. According to Turner's (2002) principle of representationality, the parental role in the group music lesson needed to be framed and reframed in relation to the teacher's expectations. The parents' focus was on supporting their children rather than the teachers, especially in the infant (0–2 years) and toddler (2–3 years) classes, where parental participation was required. In addition, teachers' perspectives on parental home supervision of their children's practice and preparation for the lessons show a range of diligence in home supervision (Bugeja, 2009). Parents expressed that some of the parents in the fictional stories did not meet their expectations because they were not good role models for their children to emulate, owing to their negative interactions and negotiations with the teachers. These findings differ from general education literature by suggesting that the teachers expected the parents in the group music classes to support them.

From the perspective of tenability, Turner (2002) posited that 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” (Turner, 2002, p. 252). Parents referred to interactions and negotiations between

parents and teachers, which revolved specifically around payment and expectations. Some parents suggested that, as the customer, the teacher should follow their wishes. This consumerist value caused tension in the relationship between the teacher and parent as the teacher tried to accommodate the parents' wishes. However, the teachers in this study highlighted that the parents of the children in the group classes were generally more concerned with their children's well-being and learning outcomes than the financial basis of the transactions. It was also noted that teachers were aware of the consumerist attitudes of some overbearing parents toward their children's education. Teachers wished that in such cases, parents would prioritize pedagogical aspects of their children's music learning over transactional aspects to reduce unnecessary tension between parent and teacher.

Implications for Music Teacher Education

Although the data in this study are only a snapshot of the verbalized opinions of participants, and although the classification of different role types might suggest a static view of roles, we have striven to show how data reflect the interactionist perspective. To use a theatrical metaphor, individuals play their roles less like a traditional staging of a Shakespeare play, characterized by strict definition and careful control, and more like improvisational theater, characterized by flexible adaptation and influenced by immediate and preceding environments. The preparation needed for actors to play the roles in these two settings is strikingly different.

We suggest that music teacher educators prepare preservice music teachers to understand parental roles in preschool group music classes to understand parental roles in preschool group music classes in several ways. First, we recommend that preservice teachers understand the full range of parental roles, with particular attention paid to the nature of early childhood parental roles. The mapping that we have performed in this study forms the basis for such an understanding in the context of preschool group music classes, but would need contextualization in different parts of the world and in different settings. Further research into the variety of roles that parents perceive themselves to play and the variety of roles that teachers expect of them in varying contexts might contribute to this perception. Presenting students with fictional stories of parent-teacher relationships as a basis for class discussion (like we did in this study) could help preservice teachers understand the various possible roles. Second, we suggest that an awareness of role flexibility is necessary. Only having a list of potential roles, such as might be developed in the discussion of case studies, may result in a static comprehension and a forced relation between the teacher and parent. Furthermore, reflecting on how teacher and parental roles interact and mutually shape each other during early childhood group music classes is critical for healthy interactions. It might be difficult for students to develop this insight without direct experience, as it requires repeated and prolonged interactions to shape and influence role expectations. Third, developing the skills that improve communication paves the way for successful parent-teacher relationships. Such skills rest on the previous two understandings, fictional stories and role flexibility, as the basis for discussions of early childhood parental roles. Role-play based on selected case studies might allow students to practice communication and role flexibility. Preservice teachers might also practice how to initiate discussions with parents over the length of their relationships. Clarifying parental roles is not an isolated event but a regular conversation with which teachers should commit. Although music teachers who are parents may find the task less daunting, we believe the responsibility rests on teachers to begin the dialogue and that music teacher educators can prepare preservice teachers to lead such discussions.

In this study, we proposed that preservice teachers should learn how to interact with and manage the roles of parents within their group music lessons. However, more research on the benefits of having such skills in a one-on-one setting in music lessons should be conducted. These studies could be carried out

in West Malaysia and other cultural settings. Future research into developing early childhood parental roles to enable parents to become educational partners with music teachers is essential, and acknowledging this process may lead to a better management of each other's expectations. Further music education research viewed through the theoretical lens of role theory may also help advance teachers' understanding of the influence and consequences of early childhood parental roles in music learning. Role theory scholarship could then contribute to research concerned with interpersonal relationships between parents and teachers in early childhood music education.

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Note

1. Malaysian children begin formal schooling at the age of 7 years.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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