

Shining Light

By Johanna McWeeney



Violin teacher Clare Raybould has just finalised plans to launch the Shining Light violin-teaching project, a Suzuki-inspired music scheme for slum children in India. She talks to Johanna McWeeney about her vision for change.

"It is in our power to educate all the children of the world to become a little better as people, a little happier." **Shinichi Suzuki**

Many children in India have no right to education. Often their parents are migrant workers, travelling to tourist beaches for the holiday season, leaving their villages and living in slums for months at a time. These slums aren't the structured chaos we are used to seeing on television, where families might live in something resembling a room built from scrap metal; these people often live under plastic sheeting in a field with no access to sanitation. They suffer from water born illnesses, lice and scabies. Death is a daily reality. Considered the lowest caste in Indian society, the children have no birth certificates and no official identity. They are born into the hierarchy in a certain place and that is where they are expected to stay.

Last Spring, Clare Raybould went on holiday to a yoga retreat by the Goan coast. Whilst she was there, she was invited to visit the Leading Light School; one of three schools set up by local Goan, Diego Baptist, to educate children from the slums.

"I saw that the children had nothing," Clare says. "This was at a time when lots of people were talking about child poverty in the UK. Initially I thought it would be a valuable lesson for the children I teach to connect with the concept that there's another world out there where people are really, truly poor."

On her return to the UK, Clare set up a connection between the charity Educators' Trust India, who run the schools, and Dulwich Suzuki Group where she teaches. She organised fundraising at the summer concert and some of her pupils became pen pals with the children in Goa. "It's very hard to understand what that poverty is like until you actually go to it," she emphasises, "But there's a real correlation between what Educators' Trust is trying to achieve and what Suzuki teaching is about. That was what first made me want to make the link."

In March this year, Clare went back to Goa for a month, spending much of her time volunteering at the Leading Light School where she was asked to teach music.

"Initially I was a little apprehensive," she recalls. "I teach the violin; I don't have a big repertoire of songs and games and I wondered what I could teach the children that might be of use in the long term.

"Then I remembered that Dr. Suzuki's violin teaching was a response to the needs of a very poor, war-torn Japan. He believed that everyone is born with ability; that learning music should give each child the chance to see his own strengths through the discipline of learning an instrument. Diego, who runs the schools in India, says that once a child is going to school, life can change for the whole family. It allows the parents time to be parents and can give them a sense of possibility, of aspiration. Shining Light will work by taking this education to the children from another angle."

Clare started her lessons with some listening and movement games, ideas she had picked up from observing Dalcroze classes given by London Suzuki teacher, Hannah Biss. Gradually, with games on a tambourine and simple rhythm exercises, she began to introduce the notation.

"They very quickly picked up the sound of the rhythms," she says. "It's quite hard to communicate in the same way as you would here because you can't use as much language or explanation, you have to teach by imitation. It worked though, and by the end some of the children were writing their own rhythms and they'd come up and read them out to me. It was as though they'd grasped another language concept.

"The children want to learn and experience everything," Clare continues. "Seeing the huge smiles as the tambourine came round the circle was wonderful. The expression on their faces was, 'Wow! I really get to play this?'"

On one of her final teaching days, Clare showed the children a short film on her smart phone. The film was of 800 Suzuki students playing their violins at this year's BSI National Concert at the RFH in London. One of the little boys said to her, "You teacher? You bring, you bring." "You want me to bring a violin?" asked Clare. "Yes," he replied. "You bring!"

"So that's what started the idea," she explains. "Because the children were so enthusiastic about what we did.

"I think if people haven't seen the way that Suzuki teachers work they would struggle to understand how the idea of taking a violin to a child who has no experience of classical music is going to turn out, but I've got no doubt anyone can play the violin; that belief is at the heart of Suzuki's philosophy. This project is about teaching the children to learn, giving them self-esteem, allowing them to see their own potential. With this objective it will succeed."

Continuity and the long-term success of the project are vital.

"I went to the Art Will Change the World conference at London's Southbank Centre last month," says Clare, "The message I got from everyone there was that it is worse for children like this to have something and for it to be taken away, than for it never to have existed in the first place.

"That really made me think about how to put a project together and make sure it's running well."

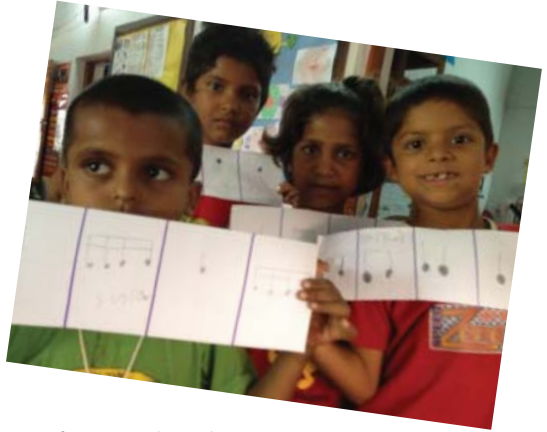
And Educators' Trust has accommodated the idea of lessons being within the school day. As Clare explains, "With the conditions the children are living in, it wouldn't be practical to give them violins and expect them to go home and practice."

Teaching will start in December with the children learning in small groups, five days a week, all year round. "I'm going to be out there for two months getting it off the ground," she says, "And in the meantime I want to get as many volunteer teachers lined up as possible. A clear benefit of Suzuki teaching is that there is a common language between teachers, which will create continuity for the children.

"I also believe that through the worldwide network of Suzuki it should be possible to recruit teachers and raise funds, and it should be quite straightforward to get instruments donated because people often just put their old instruments in the attic and don't know what to do with them."

The Shining Light project might be starting small, but it's easy to forget that the now famous El Sistema of Venezuela began when Dr. Jose Antonio Abreu gathered just 11 children together in a garage in Caracas to play classical music. Like all schemes of its nature, as a means of positive change for the children and their families, it will provide much more than we can imagine.

"This is so important for the children because it's challenging traditional class barriers and creating opportunity where it would not normally exist," Clare concludes. "In many ways the children there seem richer than us because there is so much warmth, happiness and support amongst them, so it's not about giving them a chance to become gimmicks and to earn money. For them, it's the chance to be seen as the individuals they are. It's coming back to Suzuki's philosophy that when he wanted to teach music he wasn't looking to create violinists, he was looking to teach children to fulfil their potential; to aspire to more than what society might call their destiny."



Information about the work at Educators' Trust can be found at:

<http://www.educatorstrustindia.org/index.htm>

For more information about volunteering to teach on the project or to join the Shining Light mailing list, contact Clare Raybould at:

shininglightgoa@gmail.com

Donations towards accommodation costs for teachers can be made at:

<http://www.justgiving.com/shininglight>

Clare Raybould is a BSI violin teacher with the Dulwich Suzuki Group in South East London. We wish her the very best for her forthcoming trip to Goa and for the future success of the project.