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International Research Symposium on Talent Education, Part 5: The challenges of offering group class

D'Ercole, P. D., Einarson, K. M., Guerriero, E. M., Hendricks, K. S., & Mitchell, N. (2016, Summer). International Research Symposium on Talent Education, Part 5: The challenges of offering group class. *American Suzuki Journal*, 44(4), 6.

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International Research Symposium on Talent Education Part 5:

The Challenges of Offering Group Class

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This is the fifth installment in a series of articles reporting on a large-scale demographic survey of North American Suzuki teachers. The last article in this series examined some of the perceived benefits of group class. In this article, we will review participants' perceptions of the challenges of group class. Participating teachers were asked to respond to the open-ended question, "What is the greatest challenge of group class?" Their responses were coded and analyzed for important themes.

Approximately 83% of the teachers who participated in the survey offer some type of group class. Weekly or bi-weekly group classes are offered most often to beginning students (59% of teachers surveyed), with the number of teachers offering group classes decreasing for intermediate and advanced students (44% and 38% respectively). Only 2% of teachers reported not offering group classes at all for beginning students; however, 26% reported not offering classes for advanced students.

Teachers described a number of challenges to offering regular group classes that may explain why not all teachers are able offer these classes on a regular basis. These included:

1. Scheduling/student attendance and commitment
2. Differentiated instruction/meeting diverse learning needs within a single group
3. Lesson planning
4. Classroom management/student behavior
5. Parental valuing of group classes
6. Logistical concerns/finding a suitable physical space

The following quotes illustrate some of the themes that emerged in the participants' responses. Many address several challenges at the same time.

For one participant, finding a suitable time and place for the group class had proven to be very difficult:

*The **logistics** of it. In a perfect world, I'd have group every week, on a weeknight, and everyone would come. However, **scheduling** group and **finding a space** that would rent to me were the greatest challenges in establishing my studio. I'm not a non-profit, so churches wouldn't rent spaces out to me. I live in a city where some people spend 45-60 minutes driving through **rush hour** traffic to get to my house for a 5:30 weeknight lesson. Many families have two **working parents** and kids in multiple activities.*

Ultimately, parents have a strong influence on whether the group class is a priority for individual families, as evidenced in the following responses:

*Getting **parents** to bring their kids to group classes has always been a challenge. Even when we bundle the group classes into their tuition (non-refundable), many parents opt out or **come infrequently**.*

*Compared to 20 years ago...families seem to be **very busy** including so many more activities in their lives and so we see **other activities** taking students out of the class for several weeks out of the year.*

Even teachers who were successful in scheduling well-attended group classes encountered some challenges. Many teachers described feeling unprepared to deal with the unique challenges of group instruction.

*As someone who did not complete a degree in music education, **classroom management**/dealing with **disruptive behavior** is somewhat of a struggle - particularly when the student(s) is from another teacher's studio.*

*Teaching theory/reading to an active group after school hours--they are all **antsy** from a full day of school and sitting on the carpet watching the white board is sometimes **tedious**.*

The following participant quotes address issues of meeting student needs in the group class. Planning engaging activities, particularly for groups which contained wide ranges of ages and/or playing ability, proved challenging for many teachers.

*Creating time and energy from teachers to make group class so **compelling** and **fun** that this is the primary motivator for perfect attendance, rather than program policy (warnings, disallowing participation in the program due to insufficient attendance). Staying true to the **Suzuki philosophy** of a range of abilities within the class for modeling and leadership, while addressing **educational need** for and parent desire for a narrower range within each class.*

*Book 1 group class has ages 3-11 roughly. Although the musical level is the same, the **developmental levels** are different. I want to present activities in an **age-appropriate** way, but also keep the more mature students engaged and excited.*

*We have a large cohort of pre-teens who are not progressing as fast. They feel stuck and it leads to **behavior problems** and **retention problems**. We are currently looking at ways to engage these students by offering a **multi-level** group class where students from 10 – 13 could explore improvising, learn about composers, other art forms etc.*

The challenges described by the respondents can also be represented visually in the following diagram:

[Note to editor: Please insert yin-yang diagram here]

Challenges of Group Class

The teachers who responded to the survey remained committed to the idea of group class in spite of the challenges. While some of the challenges are difficult for individual teachers to overcome (e.g., over-scheduled students or lack of suitable physical spaces for classes), other challenges such as classroom management, lesson planning, and differentiated instruction could be addressed through focused professional development. The benefits of group class (as described in the previous article) are

such that it is certainly worthwhile exploring solutions to some of the challenges so that more students can experience engaging, enriching group music classes.

*Free Download! To download a PDF of the Suzuki Yin-Yang Diagram, go to:
<https://www.uwsp.edu/suzuki/Pages/IRSTE/default.aspx>