



Part 5:

The Challenges of Offering Group Class

By Nancy Mitchell, Elizabeth M. Guerriero, Kathleen Einarson, Karin S. Hendricks, and Patricia D'Ercole

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 percent 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 percent of teachers surveyed), with the number of teachers offering group classes decreasing for intermediate and advanced students (44 percent and 38 percent respectively). Only 2 percent of teachers reported not offering group classes at all for beginning students; however, 26 percent 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 to offer these classes on a regular basis. These included:

- Scheduling/student attendance and commitment
- Differentiated instruction/meeting diverse learning needs within a single group
- Lesson planning
- Classroom management/student behavior
- Parental valuing of group classes
- 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



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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 One 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 diagram on page 6.

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>

Organizational News, continued from p. 4

Calendar of Events

September 1, December 1, March 1, June 1	ASJ Ad contracts due (Artwork due within 30 days after contract date)
September 23-25	SAA Board meeting, Oak Park, IL
September 25	Established Institutes preliminary dates due
October 15	All Institute applications due
October 31	Final date for Premier Membership Renewals
December 31	Final date for 2016 SAA Donations
2017	
January 13-15	SAA Board Meeting, Location TBD
April 21-23	SAA Board Meeting, Boulder, CO (tentative)
May 25-29	SAA Leadership Retreat, details to come

ASJ Article Submissions

We welcome article submissions on Suzuki-related topics. Deadlines are November 1, February 1, May 1 and August 1 for the winter, spring, summer, and fall issues, respectively, but we accept manuscripts year-round. We accept emailed articles, either included in the body of the message or as .doc or .docx attachments and manuscripts on disc by mail. Please do not send articles as PDF attachments. Email manuscripts to editor@suzukiassociation.org. Please include a short bio and author photo with your submission. Contact publications@suzukiassociation.org for more information.

Parents as Partners, continued from p. 5

And, a note of appreciation to those whose talks were replayed during the 2016 series:

Alyssa Hardie Beckmann (Pop your Ears!), Joanna Binford (Simple Suzuki Stretches), Meret Bitticks (Prioritize!), Zachary Ebin (Forget Soccer, I want to practice!), Brittany Gardner (Advice and Encouragement for Suzuki Parents), James Hutchins (Guarantees for More Progress During Practice, Part 1, 2, 3), Ed Kreitman (Ownership), Rebecca Martin and Suzuki parents (The Suzuki Triangle Relationship), Leslie Mizrahi (Time, Tiempo), Mark Mutter (Raising Independent Musicians), Ian Salmon (Tech Talks 2015: Bringing your Suzuki Experience Up-to-Date with the Latest Gadgets and Apps), Lucy Shaw (Dry Ideas! Make it visual using the dry erase board), Nicolette Solomon and Donna Davis (Teens, Tenacity and Technique), Kathleen Spring (Is My Child Talented?), and Ed Sprunger (Pardon the Interruption).

Thanks to SAA Staff Members

Chris Davis, our publications designer for 13 years, has moved on to other artistic endeavors. We miss her, but she remains involved as our newsletter cartoonist and as an enthusiastic Suzuki mom.

Christie Felsing completed a two-year staff position recently. We appreciated her excellent work on Parents as Partners Online and our newsletter Short Score and her support for the Retreat and the Conference. She is now teaching and doing teacher training at the Hartt Community Music School. We wish to thank both Chris and Christie for sharing their talents with the SAA.

The staff has welcomed Cheryl Armstrong as our new publications designer. She comes to us from a career in association publications design in the Denver area. We will soon welcome Margaret Watts Romney, whom many know as a Suzuki Cello teacher in Salt Lake City and a Suzuki alumna. We look forward to adding her to the staff as well.