

On Behavior Management

by Paloma Udovic Ramos, Program Manager, Harmony Project, YOLA @ EXPO Orchestra

Classroom management is always a challenge, particularly in the beginning stages of a program when there are no older students to model desired behavior, as is the case in many El Sistema-inspired programs in the U.S.. How do you create a culture of focused and productive students from scratch?

Good teachers and administrators must be committed to the time-consuming process of creating and maintaining a holistic culture of positive student engagement.

It is crucial to be prepared from the very beginning with a list of behavioral policies and a strict discipline plan, but the most effective path to mastering classroom management may lie in the tools for its prevention.

1. Don't just teach; exchange ideas. Good teachers do not only teach. They enter the classroom excited for an exchange of knowledge and ideas, and expect to learn from their students as much as their students will learn from them.

2. Get to know your students and families and learn cultural nuances. Not everyone relates immediately to classical music. Find out what else interests your students and their families, and use that to help create community. Throw potlucks, play a soccer game, celebrate cultural diversity with a multicultural event. Always take time for small talk; it makes big discussions easier.

3. Respect your students and their families. Discipline plans must be strict, but they must also come from a place of respect and compassion. Ask students for their opinion and then value it. If a student misbehaves, ask her what she thinks the appropriate punishment should be.

4. Increase individual responsibility. It is easy to get lost in a large orchestra. Give responsibility to as many students as you can, to show their individual strengths and make them feel necessary. Start a mentorship program to encourage leadership and involvement from older students.



Paloma Udovic Ramos listens to a YOLA @ EXPO student

5. Pay attention to age and external stresses. Separate students by age more than by ability; classes will be far easier to manage. And be hyper-aware of difficult periods in students' lives, like changing schools or middle school in general. Do whatever you can to keep them from quitting during these transitional times. Parents will thank you immediately, and they will thank you later.

6. Give breaks and play games. We all need a break sometimes. If a student is having a hard time in class, give him a short break. If a whole class is having trouble focusing, stop what you are doing and play duck duck goose.

7. Listen. Take time to talk with students and families. Particularly when students begin to misbehave, find out immediately what in their lives is causing so much stress that they can't focus in class. Often these conversations begin uncomfortably, so be prepared to be silent with them if you need to. If you wait long enough or ask enough times, they will open up.

And last but not least, the final step to preventing behavior management:

8. You can't. At least, not all of the time. Allow yourself missteps; they can be valuable learning experiences.

A personal anecdote: my parents think it is hilariously ironic that I am in a position to discipline children. Apparently, I was a difficult teenager. The most important gift they gave me was a place where I could safely make mistakes. Perhaps the biggest difference between my students and me is that if they fail even a little, there are few supports to help them get back up. It is important to discuss with older students the heavy fact that because of their neighborhood, their accent, the color of their skin, their gender, many mistakes will have consequences difficult to reverse.

So create a safe space for failure in your program. If a student misbehaves in class, practice some forgiveness, even if it doesn't seem warranted. Remember the second chances you received, and give a few in appreciation.

FROM THE EDITOR

Classroom management as teachers' number one concern – that was a key finding of the survey of U.S. Sistema-inspired programs conducted by last year's Sistema Fellows. Hence the focus of *The Ensemble* this month on a subject that doesn't usually appear on symposium agendas but is always on the table when teachers get together.

Paloma Udovic Ramos's article leads us in an interesting direction: instead of discussing right and wrong ways to go about classroom management, she writes about how to prevent it from happening at all.

I'm used to thinking about classroom management as a given: one has to manage one's classroom, and the only question is how. But Paloma's choice has me thinking about the ways in which the very phrase is at odds with the spirit and goals of El Sistema.

Sistema-inspired programs are not in the business of managing children. We are in the business of leading them, nurturing them, opening new possibilities for them. The concept of classroom management arose in the context of the public school paradigm, for the purpose of control. It's fundamentally different from what we might call El Sistema's "positivity paradigm."

This isn't to diminish the daily challenge of dealing with disruptive children. But contrasting the two paradigms can remind us that the very practices that distinguish Sistema work – encouraging kids to teach as well as learn, fostering mentor relationships, creating a space of beauty students inhabit daily – are themselves, in the long run, powerful antidotes to disruptive behavior.

It takes time, of course, to build this alternative culture. In the short run, says Eric Booth, teachers' anxieties can make things worse; often, disruptive incidents loom larger than they should. Keep your eye on the main priority, he advises, and maintain the joyful forward movement of the whole group.

Replacing the management paradigm with a positivity paradigm seems next to impossible in our control-driven educational culture. But "next to impossible" is, after all, exactly the place where El Sistema flourishes.

Tricia Tunstall

**"Teach children the beauty of music and music will teach them the beauty of life."
– José Antonio Abreu**

News Notes

Advocates for Community through Musical Excellence or **A.C.M.E.** launched on Oct. 1, 2012 in North Minneapolis, Minnesota at Nellie Stone Johnson Elementary School. Founded by current Sistema fellow Sara Zanussi and two other local music teachers, Kelly Carter and Tricia Morgan-Brist, the program starts with 25 first graders, and includes a general music theory course, paper orchestra, and choir, with a strong emphasis on solfege literacy four days a week. A.C.M.E. partners with Minneapolis Public Schools, Schmitt Music, the musicians of the Minnesota Orchestra, and Beacons Afterschool Program. This is the first El Sistema-inspired site in Minnesota, and the founders hope to add more schools in the future. For more information, contact info@acme-music.com, visit their website at www.acme-music.com or like them on Facebook.

For a week this past summer, Allentown Symphony's El Sistema Lehigh Valley (ESLV) piloted a weeklong El Sistema-inspired program at **Camp HERO** (Here Everybody Really is One) – specifically **targeting 45 deaf and hard of hearing children** (DHH) hosted at Camp Victory in Pennsylvania. The culminating performance by the children brought together some 150 people from the community, family members, and friends of the program. The ESLV partners included the Music Therapist Associates (MTA) of Whitehall, Youth Education in the Arts (YEA), and percussionist Marcus Santos. While Camp HERO has a long history of work with DHH students, the core of the programming was offered by MTA and Marcus Santos, with design collaboration from ESLV program director Steven Liu. YEA provided REMO drums (i.e., Tumbanos/Ngano/Bahia) designed to be played directly on the floor, which helped the DHH children



ESLV's Steven Liu and Camper at Camp HERO.
Photo: Nienke Izurieta

feel the vibrations of the drums more effectively. For information, contact ESLV Program Director Steven Liu: stliu@allentownsymphony.org

For two weeks, the halls of Our Saviour's Atonement Lutheran Church in Washington Heights (New York City) were bustling with over 70 children at the **2012 WHIN Summer Choir and Orchestra Camp**. Students ages 4-18 participated in music theory classes, private lessons, sectional coachings, introductory violin instruction, chamber groups, and yoga and movement; but as the 250+ audience members found at the final concert, the main focus was to bring the community together within the choir and orchestra experience. Founder and Director of **Washington Heights and Inwood (WHIN) Music Project** David Gracia writes, "This thrilling start to a new school year and a bright beginning for **WHIN Music Project - El Sistema Uptown**, would not have been possible without the 950 hours of donated time and effort from parents, The People's Theater, Columbia Urban Experience, WHIN teaching artists, and Orchestra of St. Luke's musicians, as well as to the support of Our Saviour's Atonement and the Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance (NoMAA)." davidgracia1906@yahoo.com

Resources

At the recent **Worlds Together conference** in London, researcher Shirley Brice Heath (longtime friend to the U.S. El Sistema movement) gave a keynote speech pertinent to our work. In discussing claims about the impact of arts learning, she said, "...any consequential learning that is sustained and transferable to other fields will come through arts participation only under three conditions:

- 1) Participation must begin early and be sustained across the years.
- 2) Arts participation must involve artists who are themselves creators of the arts. They must know what they know by having produced art forms that have gone before viewers, audiences, and critics.
- 3) Finally, arts participation (including practice as well as seeing and hearing models and exemplars) must be both intensive and integrated with other pursuits at least 10-20 hours per week."

A transcript of her speech is available at: http://shirleybriceheath.net/pdfs/WORLDS_TOGETHER_posted.single.pdf

The Benefits of Logic

By Lorrie Heagy, Sistema Fellow 2010, Founder and Director of JAMM, Juneau, Alaska

While visiting El Sistema initiatives in Venezuela as a Sistema Fellow, I witnessed Gustavo Dudamel use storytelling to help connect members of the National Youth Orchestra of Venezuela to a challenging passage they were rehearsing in Mahler's Symphony No. 1. He explained that the first few phrases were like the protestations of a young girl turning down the advances of a young man, but in the final passage she can resist no longer and the couple falls madly in love. Dudamel's expressions of the starry-eyed lovers made this orchestra of adolescents burst out laughing, but then they played the passage to perfection with Dudamel's story running through their minds and fingers.

There is a reason that stories are such an effective teaching tool: they embody the same five factors that Eric Jensen ascribes in his book *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, to getting the brain's attention and keeping it. These five factors are pattern, novelty, emotion, movement, and relevance. The brain searches for meaning and familiarity through pattern recognition. All stories have a pattern: a beginning, middle, and end. Patterning helps reduce stress when taking in new information, and allows the brain to connect new information to an existing framework. This balance of familiar and novelty serves as the perfect mix for learning. In the classroom, this balancing act means teaching new content with a familiar process or familiar content with a new process. For example, when teaching solfege, introduce this new process by attaching it to familiar content, like Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

Emotion, movement, and relevance are equally important. Emotionally charged events etch longer-lasting memories with greater accuracy. And as Dudamel demonstrated in his humorous love story, content must be relevant to hook an audience. Add motion and students pay even more attention. Stories are moving pictures in our minds. Here is a [sample lesson](#) of how story is used to teach proper technique of the violin bow hold.

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"Model the way! Be the musician and citizen you want to see in the world: passionate, respectful, thoughtful, and kind." – Katie Wyatt, Founder and Director, KidZNotes, Durham, NC