Reaching New Heights of Musical Excellence
with Karen Zorn and Gretchen Nielsen

Key Points:

Q1: What are the techniques that we employ to take a group of students from one level to the next?

Table Group Conversation

- Little baby steps, encouraging
- For me to individually perform I always put in extra work and encouragement.
- Performance, small scale or community scale. Something that develops the intrinsic motivation of the student.
- High expectations, making sure that they have the tools to get themselves there.
- Pressure, setting goals for the group of students
- Mark Woodward arranges pieces that are of increasing difficulty. Intentional process that corresponds with the children's learning.

Comments from All Tables

- Gigs and performances that the students need to perform at
- High expectations of students
- Landmark concerts, creating repertoire that is aspirational and achievable
- Curriculum designed to promote musical literacy rather than just pedagogical material
- Having both intrinsic and brute force methods of motivation: we can't take the kid to the next level, but we can create a framework that allows them to do this. Being able to hold the bar high and require them to do it. Students don't get better on accident

Additional Comments

- Former students returning to offer master classes/mentoring. Thorough curriculum design and classroom procedures and rituals. Expose to quality music and musicians.
- Have a more advanced group that the kids can aspire too. Setting up a culture that is group oriented as opposed to a pure individual focus.
- Assigning repertoire that will make the group get better.

Q2: What prepared your kids to take on a special challenge? What did your program do to support them?

Table Group Conversation

- Learn the music for Sistema conference and use it in personal schools/take a stand
- Posters all over the school or printed materials to hand out and share with the families- Printed fact sheet with collateral information prepared by Sistema – in English and Spanish
- Treat them like professionals- it is professional preparation
- Have an info session at the schools: tell them all of the basic information about the program and get them excited about it.
- Private teachers
- Recruitment events where the students are playing
Entire Group Conversation

- How do we get the larger community around them to support them in this endeavor?
- Also, what would you need to turn a “singular” experience into a nucleo-wide impact?
- We should create simplified versions of the festival repertoire that the students in individual nucleos can play.
- Community to fundraising
- Consider the PR element of promoting these festivals. i.e. “Please connect with your local nucleos and find out how you can support them.”
- Student testimonials - writing, drawing, videos.
- Viewing parties where the kids are taking part in the experience. Kids introducing themselves at the national conferences.
- Swag - Every kid gets one whether they attend or not. Every kid who goes has the other students sign their t-shirts.
- Leadership training with the students at the national festival.

Question 3: How to turn a “singular” experience into a nucleo-wide impact?

- Sistema-wide Tchaikovsky project, for example.
- Point of pride for nucleo – we, not I.
- Individuals represent nucleos – pride, not competition. Sense of belonging. Celebrate!
Crafting a Vision for Social Excellence
with Elsje Kibler-Vermas and Leni Boorstin

**Key Points**

What comes to mind when you think of “social excellence”?

- Helpfulness
- Respect
- Tolerance
- Communication
- Connecting to and contributing to community
- Empathy
- Ability to verbalize emotions
- Commitment from teachers about importance of being part of community they’re working in. Not savior mentality.

How do you create an environment that promotes social excellence?

- Small Group Discussion:
- Building citizens, care for team
- Community-building time at beginning of every day: gratitude circle, compliment circle. Use conflict as teaching opportunity.
- Two weeks of “boot camp” community time: games, rehearsals, building sense of duty to each other.
- High school students went on a retreat for three days: community-building, some musical activities. Focused time together even before the program begins.
- Promote copying and helping others: peer mentoring. Not hoard your own work (not I) but share what you know (we).
- Playing one-by-one, if someone is struggling, send student out to help them
- Practical, immediate improvement, peer support.
- Important to have regular routine, kids know what’s expected of them.
- Conflicts between students: important to teach positive problem-solving techniques. Modeling this through thinking out loud in front of kids.
- Outreach with students: playing in community. i.e. Play on Philly dress-rehearsal performance in community center, also service project component.

**Large group discussion:**

- Philadelphia: direct discussion about what it means for kids to be black and poor – what does this mean for how they learn, how they engage with others, implications of predominantly white teachers. Social understanding, cultural empathy.
- Santa Barbara: Rewards for positive social behaviors, i.e. picking up trash without being asked. iCAN store where they can use rewards to buy extra rosin, private lessons, etc.
- Have students create a mission statement that complements mission of public school. Enhances leadership skills and sense of belonging to community. (For programs that are linked to schools.)
- “El Sistema kid of the week” to reward positive behavior
Relationship between social excellence and musical excellence – What does musical citizenship look like?

- Striving for musical excellence is motivator for getting students involved. Musical excellence helps students take ownership.
- Some of musically highest-achieving students are biggest detractors because of boredom.
- Sometimes musical excellence and social excellence aren't the same on an individual basis.
- Must improve and enhance the team.
- Need to deal with social issues first before getting to the music - “you can't play if you're hitting each other.”
- How music affects the brain: i.e. how brain responds to rests in music, same response as behavioral restraint. We use music for social goals because it's what we know. Social first, music second.
- One of biggest challenges: level the field, laying down common rules, no favoritism.
- Life skills curriculum, financial management, academic help.

Large group discussion:

- Discipline is not punishment, is the way to achieve a common goal.
- Musical excellence is driven by social skills that we are instilling in the kids. Responsibility drives excellence.
- Creating mental space for kids to be able to receive information and teachable moments. Plan less in terms of music, trust that social investment will pay off, high expectations. Demanding a lot of students leads to them feeling empowered. Create a calm space.
Defining Holistic Measures for Student Achievement
with Rebecca Sigel and Ben Cadwallader

Key Points

What makes a top student?
- Engagement
- Mentor – helping others’ behavior
- Students who have shown change and growth
- Student chosen by other students as their inspiration/leader – peer definition of leader
- Musical excellence
- Good attendance
- Resilience
- Capacity to communicate the music – not just technique
- Good citizen

What does engagement look like tangibly?
- Active participation
- What does leadership mean?
- Helps others
- Serves as a model for others
- Shows initiative
- Courage – can hold their own ideas and values
- Take ownership in orchestra, bring others along
- Change over time – what does that look like?
- Musical or personal
- Developing self-control

Musical excellence?
- We talk about this the least in El Sistema
- To stop time
- Practicing what teaching artists assign – doing their homework
- Not only follow directions, but can also think for themselves when making music
- Technique, sight-reading, counting
- Musically autonomous – mastery and purpose
- Expression
- Commitment to creating good art
- Hungry for more
- Lifelong learner
- Embodying the music with whole body
- Playing together as ensemble
Table discussion: ways to assess which are “top students”
- Kids’ longevity in program, how much they practice, good attendance, good instrument care
- Who can stay all day and still perform well – energy, stamina, age is a factor
- Kids who show extra interest, put even more effort in, enthusiasm, self-motivation

Introduce “model to react to, respond to, tear apart”
- Basic information
- Video audition
- Personal statement: What do you love about your program? Show us the part of your
- Community that you are most proud of.
- Program director recommendation/ranking: need to develop method for directors to use

Table discussion addressing this model:
- What do you think this process should emphasize?
- What needs to be part of this conversation?
- What methods would you develop?

Our table:
- Michelle: Youngest kids, 2nd grade – middle school. Certain benchmarks for different ages
  of kids – to identify kids who are doing well musically, consider: are they making effort?
- Over the summer, lots of assessment, music theory class – useful to see who’s doing
  homework, and who is doing well. Socially over the summer: volunteer program, gave
  students certain jobs. Saw students take a lot of initiative, made it clear who was showing
  most initiative – usually same kids who were high-achieving academically.
  - Improvement seen? Yes.
- Had desired effect – moved more advanced kids up to higher team.
- Isabel: Based in single school, K-5. Over 200 kids, different levels. Each teacher assesses
  students to determine which level they will be in. Younger grades Orff-based, older kids in
  orchestra. Everyone is invited, not selective process – how to differentiate between levels?
- Informal at first, but need more formal system because of parent push-back. Need for
  criteria for each level. Parents want kids on instruments right away, but important to show
  them the trajectory of development in the program.
- Michelle: Often times parents present more of a challenge than students. Attendance is
  helpful record to show parents.
- Has anyone had to kick a student out? Isabel: Process developed: talk to kids about
  expectations, then meet with parents, then dismiss child from program.

“Nitty-gritty” ideas from table conversations:
- Important to consider where the kids are socially in selection process: what is the
  opportunity for social growth for the particular student? This is more philosophical.
- Recommendation should come from outside the program: community member, teacher to
  get a bigger picture of student.
“Nitty-gritty” ideas from table conversations (cont.):

- Letter of recommendation should mirror process for college application, “real-life”
- Video could be sloppy and not well presented, or could be too refined/glossy. Better to have
  - written product in students' handwriting.
- In evaluating written product, what criteria are used to evaluate? Content or conventions?

Issue of English Language Learner writers

- Essay or video – option to choose? At discretion of student?
- Video could be in the form of an interview – kid answering set questions.
- Questions that frame personal statement could frame: overcoming adversity, mentorship values
- Programs running in other languages – would kids be able to apply in other languages?
  - French (Canada)
  - Spanish
  - Creole
- Essay AND video?
- Follow-up with kids who are not accepted – feedback for why they weren't accepted?
  - scores, written feedback?
- Norma: decision of which students are sent should be the teachers’ – process of application
  - is more about the process (benefit to students) than the actual decision-making power.

Philosophical thoughts:

- Important to consider that the same students repeatedly get opportunities.
- Isabel: goal of program in Santa Cruz is to forge community. Right now selection process depends on student ability and teacher recommendation.
- Mike: important to identify what the priority of TASF is: model to motivate our students?
- Fund-raising? Balance of musical and social requirements for acceptance?
- For NTASF, group of 100 students, what do we want that group to look like?
  - Geographically diverse
  - When they return they can reflect together on shared experience.
  - Socioeconomic and ethnic diversity
  - Different selection process from traditional conservatory/festival
  - Process must reflect “take a stand” mission
  - Equitable process
  - Should focus on character-building
  - These students will come back as leaders – important to follow up with students as they return to their programs.
Musical expectations
- Should reflect the pinnacle of El Sistema: contrary to “stuffy, privileged world” of classical
- Repertoire: should include different genres, time periods
- Some other project concurrent with orchestra? Other ensembles/musical performances?
- Risk: if we don’t perform high enough musically, we are discrediting our field. We must showcase the excellence that can be achieved in our programs.

Further Discussion
- Important to consider what music students would audition with – access to solo repertoire?
- Criteria for video auditions needs to be defined. Video audition needs to reflect students’ playing ability.
  - Counter-argument: not known yet what common repertoire students across the country could play.
- Idea is that first component would be conservative/standard.
- What constitutes intermediate? Age, ability?
- Only for students ages 12 and up? At this point, yes.
- Social change is happening in communities, doesn't necessarily need to happen at TASF festival should showcase highest musical level.
- But younger kids should be aware of process to know what they’re working toward.
- For younger kids, could do their own regional gatherings – emphasize all-city, all-state, etc.