

## Venezuela's National Music Education Program *El Sistema*: Its Interactions with Society and its Participants' Engagement in Praxis

**MICHAEL UY**

Merton College | Oxford University | UK\*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Venezuela's government-funded, national music education program, El Sistema, has attracted worldwide attention because of its purported success in 'saving' children from lives filled with drugs, violence, and crime. It does this by giving them the opportunity to play in an after-school orchestra, one to four hours a day, five to six days a week. This article describes the program's organizational philosophy and mission, and accounts for its day-to-day activities in order to explore how these programmatic aspects may positively contribute to participant engagement in Paulo Freire's notion of praxis, that is, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire and Ramos, 2004, p. 51). Additionally, other programmatic aspects of El Sistema are highlighted to help link the program with previous research on improving students' social behavior and cognitive development. Finally, the article discusses some of the program's strengths and weaknesses and how it plays a role in Venezuelan society, interacting not only with the community of students and parents, but also with national and local governments and the private business sector. In doing so, El Sistema is contextualized within its social environment and conclusions are drawn on the potential for success and replicability in other cities and countries.

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\*Merton College, Oxon, Oxford OX1 4JD, UK

## INTRODUCTION

El Sistema, an abbreviation of *La Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela (FESNOJIV)*, is the outgrowth of a Venezuelan social music education program established by José Antonio Abreu in the 1970s. Today, El Sistema annually provides over 300,000 children with instruments, one to four hours of daily after-school lessons, and participation in one of 200 orchestras. These orchestras are situated in núcleos – the primary sites where lessons and rehearsals take place. Núcleos are located throughout Venezuela but most are concentrated in the capital, Caracas. Núcleos can serve anywhere from 100 to 3,000 students. Since its inception, organizers have claimed that the program was aimed not to produce professional musicians, but as a national social project to “rescue the children”.

According to El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu, “an orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, the aspiration to success” and music teaches “citizenship, social awareness, and an aesthetic sense of life” (Apthorp, 2005). Students are placed in situations where they must learn to work together, no matter what social, economic or cultural differences they may have. Rodrigo Guerrero, El Sistema’s officer of international affairs says, “When you have an orchestra within a community, the orchestra empowers the community to such a level that the orchestra becomes its clearest form of expression” (Eichler, 2010). The program has received government support because it is considered a social institution first, and a musical institution second. These social and political underpinnings and sentiment are evident in its motto, *tocar y luchar* – to play and to fight.

In recent years, the prominence of El Sistema has risen significantly on the world stage. This is evident in the international success of distinguished alumni and in the recognition bestowed by renowned dignitaries and institutions. For example, international superstar and El Sistema alumnus Gustavo Dudamel began his directorship of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009. Double bassist and El Sistema alumnus Edicson Ruiz became the youngest member of the Berlin Philharmonic at the age of seventeen. In 2008, El Sistema was awarded prizes by the Prince of Asturias for the arts and from the Harvard School of Public Health for its impact as a social institution. In 2009, Maestro Abreu, El Sistema founder, was awarded the TED Prize for his vision to transform the world through music. And in 2012, the first book on Dudamel and El Sistema for a popular audience was published by Tricia Tunstall (2012).

Sensationalized stories about El Sistema, particularly in the media, have also increased the number of those interested in replicating its success. According to one recent account (Eichler, 2010), 70% of El Sistema’s students come from families living below the poverty line. Current media coverage and the documentary *Tocar y Luchar* are replete with stories of how this program has saved lives, focusing on cases where clarinets and trumpets have replaced guns and needles. Other cities and countries have unsurprisingly become interested in accomplishing the social benefits that El

Sistema, as a social music education program, claims it has achieved in Venezuela. Programs have already been established in Los Angeles, Boston, Stirling County (Scotland), Lambeth, Liverpool, and Norwich (England) and Portugal.<sup>1</sup> Yet El Sistema, the original program, has attracted little qualitative study of its model and activities.

The questions that revolve around El Sistema's replicability ultimately touch upon critical questions of government's role in the arts, art's value in society, and how to address problems of social ills and poverty. What government officials and arts advocates around the world are trying to understand is *how* El Sistema achieves its apparent results. What are the students learning and how are they being taught? Which aspects of the program are most effective in reducing street crime, drugs and violence? To be able to answer these questions we need to understand what takes place in the núcleos on a daily basis and how these núcleos work within a community to create a national system. The aim of the study presented here is also to describe and explain how El Sistema's pedagogy, administration and organization fit into recent research on the positive social and cognitive effects of participation in after-school music programs.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Over a period of five months in Venezuela in late 2008, I was able to gather this information with the help of a research grant from a major American university. On a personal note, I grew up in one of Southern California's public school systems with a free, curricular, music education program, and music has always played a tremendous role in my emotional, social, cultural and academic development. My interests and concerns are reflected in the aspects of El Sistema on which I have focused in this study, namely, the interactions between the program and public and private community interests. My aim is also to elucidate some of the 'everyday' aspects of the program that may go unnoticed or are taken for granted. In addition to the primarily ethnographic aims of the fieldwork research, I spent three of these months teaching and leading rehearsals in El Sistema. I conducted interviews with El Sistema administrators, núcleo coordinators, students, parents and teachers. Interviews with administrators and coordinators were organized with the assistance of El Sistema's Department of International Affairs. The three months working in El Sistema were divided into two- to three-week segments at four núcleos: Puerto Ordaz, Chacao, La Rinconada and Los Chorros.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I suggest that one way of interpreting the social transformations occurring within El Sistema is through Paulo Freire's idea of praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire and Ramos, 2003, p. 51). The idea of praxis can be usefully applied to elucidate the cultural and philosophical aims of El Sistema as participants engage in the program. As I will show later in this article, it is through

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<sup>1</sup>These programs include: in Los Angeles, Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (The Harmony Project and the Los Angeles Philharmonic); in Boston, El Sistema USA; in Scotland, The Big Noise; in England, the In Harmony project; and in Portugal, Orquestras Geração. These are only a few of the many programs around the world.

reflection upon ever greater and more critical ways of participation, in conjunction with applying this reflection into greater action, that administrators, teachers, students and parents are able to ‘transform’ their environment. I should make clear here that this is just one possible interpretation of how El Sistema can be seen to work, and is not a specific strategy or philosophy used by El Sistema administrators. Still, I believe this interpretation of the program can be usefully applied to help us understand what is happening. This is perhaps most evident in El Sistema’s student-teacher scheme, which enables greater levels of extended participation and engagement, and in the parent organizations that have emerged out of private initiatives by parents to contribute back to the program. Allsup (2003) interprets Freire’s utopian goal as leaving the world better and happier than we found it. This is accomplished through participants’ greater realization of their own humanness – including their ontological and creative and imaginative presences in the world – and this is arguably what is being developed when El Sistema as a whole, composed of all the above-mentioned actors, places itself in the historical and local present. As Freire (2003) explained, “Human beings *are* because they *are in* a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it” (p. 109, italics in original). I will present evidence in this article to suggest that students, parents and teachers, through greater engagement with and contribution back to the program, are finding ways both to reflect and act critically upon their environments. This is also, one should note, consistent with El Sistema’s vision of developing an institution that is “open to all of society, with a high conception of musical excellence, and that contributes to the integral development of being human”, with the emphasis on “being human” paramount.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these more societal and environmental changes, over the past fifteen years we have learned of more cognitive improvements and prosocial developments (that is, concern, empathy and caring for the welfare and rights of others, and acting in ways that benefit others) occurring within the *individual*. Recent research has shown that with music education there are improvements in spatial reasoning, with improved mental imagery, temporal ordering and 3-D spatial rotation (Rauscher, 1997) and academic performance, particularly in the area of mathematics (Catterall, 1999). In a study of 533 young people living in England, music was identified as the third source of hope after family and friends, and was valued more than religion or sport (Warwick, 2006). Perhaps most significantly, serious artistic instruction was shown as a necessary component in fine arts intervention programs to promote prosocial developments in youth, defined as inculcated values of concern and empathy toward others (Stone, 1998). A decade-long study of 30,000 students in the United States showed that arts-based, after-school group activities were effective in instilling pro-civic and prosocial values, a strong locus of self-control, independence and a strong sense of self-efficacy for future goals (Heath, 1999). These after school programs were successful in these measures because they provided roles, rules and risks (the Three R’s) in safe environments. Related to these cognitive improvements is music’s crucial role in promoting ‘social inclusion’ in effective learning environments between children regardless of social, class, ethnic, religious, linguistic or gender

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<sup>2</sup>Retrieved from FESNOJIV’s webpage, <http://www.fesnojiv.gob.ve/>.

differences (Bamford, 2006; Dillon, 2006). One programmatic feature common to most of these studies is the importance of learning and playing music as a *social* experience, whether in a choir or in an orchestra or smaller chamber group. The *social* experience is what possibly inculcates and transforms particular *individual* values. This important aspect will be further explored in this article and hopefully contribute to the current scholarly dialogue that explores the critical components of successful arts and music intervention programs.

Even more recently, and from more international perspectives, researchers have shown cognitive skill improvements in high-risk elementary school children in Israel participating in music enrichment courses within “mediated learning environments”, and greater social inclusion and respect for diversity amongst students in Northern Ireland (Odena, 2007; Portowitz, 2009). Employing Reuven Feuerstein’s Theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability (SCM) and Mediated Learning Experiences (MLE) (Feuerstein, et al., 1988; Feuerstein, et al., 2006), researchers have applied these concepts to examine how studying music facilitates the identification of patterns, holistic perception, intentionality and reciprocity, and the mediation of meaning and excitement. The impact of globalization has created similar problems of social equality, attainment targets and “learner disaffection”, which music is able to overcome with its emphasis on social inclusion, as evidenced by programs in Sweden, Spain, Australia and the United Kingdom (Burnard, 2008).

In this article, I will focus on the programmatic characteristics I see as most consistent with a Freireian interpretation of reflection and action in active participation and engagement by students and their interactions with the people and places of their community – that is, how El Sistema can be seen to inculcate more general social changes. And I will also concentrate on those programmatic qualities I view as particularly conducive to changes within the individual, in terms of positive attitudes toward society and cognitive developments that could positively influence academic performance. Considering the former (community interactions), I will examine El Sistema’s interactions between student participants and their parents, as well as the involvement of national and local governments and private businesses. What I argue is most critical, is the establishment of parent organizations, while also acknowledging that these organizations work in conjunction with governmental and private sponsorship in financial, managerial and logistical matters. Considering the latter (academic performance), where I will begin, I will look into El Sistema’s pedagogical philosophy and how its consistent and broad level of engagement provides a fruitful foundation for positive social and cognitive changes within the student. I will analyze how students become incorporated into the social philosophy of the program from the very beginning, before they are even enrolled, and then discuss class schedules, strategies for motivating students to stay in the program, the reincorporation of students as teachers, and finally, ways that El Sistema can be improved in these areas.

## MUSIC PEDAGOGY

Before beginning the program, students and parents learn about the roles and rules of participation. El Sistema's pedagogy emphasizes the importance of participating within a group, communal and orchestral context. We can interpret this programmatic priority in terms of priorities towards social inclusion, dialogue and extended involvement. Students are also motivated through different kinds of rewards, including excursions, giras (tours), concerts and becas (scholarships). Finally, student teaching allows students to become resources (rather than problems), to reflect, act and engage, in addition to providing a means for extended participation.

### INSCRIPTION PROCESS

The inscription process to enter a núcleo typically begins sometime between March and May for the following school year beginning in September. Students apply to the núcleo within their local community, if one exists, or to a núcleo in a neighboring community. New families learn about participation requirements during this inscription process. Parents learn about the schedule of picking up and dropping off their children on a daily basis, and they are given a list of núcleo guidelines and procedures that details what is to be expected of the child and the parents, including practicing, attendance and participation in concerts. Before the students even begin, they and their parents are told that participation requires active involvement and commitment.

The list of general rules given to the parents outlines requirements for students to come prepared to study, that they participate in all activities, and, in return, they will receive proper attention. The list also cites the schedule and the available transportation to and from the núcleo. The students agree to respect the facilities, the instruments, the equipment and the teachers and staff. The establishment of these 'roles' and 'rules' for the students and parents are consistent with two of Heath's (1998) "R's": procivic and prosocial values and a strong locus of control by establishing parameters for efficient time management, focus and discipline. Students and parents must abide by these schedules, and failure to comply could result in dismissal. Focus during class and commitment to the program are required; while these may be difficult to instill in the beginning, over time they can become routine. Furthermore, the consistency of the program can lead to better time management and organization skills adopted by both the parents and student. As one parent said of her daughter (personal communication, 3 November 2008), "She has been in the program for three years, and in three years she has become a person who has matured and speaks like an adult, with *responsibilities* like an adult" (italics added). These 'rules' and 'roles' are, thus, a critical part of the responsibilities contingent upon participation in El Sistema.

### STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULE OF MUSIC CLASSES

Most, if not all, students begin their education singing in the choir; this is in conjunction with their lenguaje musical (musical language) classes that teach them the basics of music. Students are taught how to sing notes through the use of solfege

syllables. They are not taught vocal techniques per se, but teachers sometimes emphasize basic voice production skills. Many students also begin on the flauta dulce (recorder), an inexpensive, plastic, mouth-blown instrument where they can learn the discipline of how to read and play music before entering an orchestra. To teach rhythms, percussive instruments like drums, the triangle, maracas and the tambourine may also be used. The infant programs at La Rinconada and Montalbán begin children in music classes with a parent (usually the mother), first with basic clapped rhythms and sung melodies, and then in the second phase with the violin. After several months participating in the choir (and also possibly in flauta dulce classes), depending upon whether positions are available in the orchestra, students may advance and choose their desired instrument. Some students may choose to remain in the choir and only sing, while others may choose to participate in both the choir and the orchestra. The majority of the students, however, will choose to leave the choir and participate in only the orchestra.

Students can spend anywhere from one to four hours per day, four to six days per week at the núcleo. Núcleos usually begin classes at 2pm and will continue open until 7pm. Since many of the class times are staggered, different group lessons and rehearsals can begin at different times. Class time is usually divided into three categories: talleres (workshops, instrument sectionals), ensayos generales (general rehearsals, the entire orchestra or by strings/winds) and lenguaje musical (music theory and some music history, albeit minimal). About 45% of the time is spent in talleres, 45% in ensayos generales and 10% in lenguaje musical.

The talleres usually take place two or three times per week, in group classes ranging from two to fifteen students, depending on the instrument and on attendance. The teacher reviews the orchestral music currently being played and is also in charge of the student's technique and applying some of the material taught in the student's theory classes (e.g. scales, rhythms, note reading). The ensayos generales usually take place two or three times per week, and sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays. The director of the orchestra rehearses the pieces to be played for the next concert, mostly attending to problems with tuning, playing together, rhythm, tempo, balance and phrasing. The repertoire is a mixture of Western classical symphonic works and Venezuelan and other Latin American orchestral pieces.

Private lessons are allocated depending on the availability of teachers to provide these lessons to students. El Sistema philosophy, however, dictates that younger students all begin in group/orchestral lessons to foster a sense of community rather than in individual lessons. This philosophy envisions the orchestra acting as a microcosm of community, with everyone participating together and contributing towards a single goal. One young student explained this to me after rehearsal one day (personal communication, 19 November 2008) "The orchestra is like a team, with various instruments and people. Having a soloist is really rare, so it is important to work together as a team". The emphasis is on orchestral and symphonic repertoire, not concertos, chamber music, or instrumental sonatas. From an early age, students can conceptualize themselves as part of something much larger and greater. Very few, if any, receive individual lessons from the outset of their participation. And, as already

mentioned, 90% of class time is spent in either group or orchestral rehearsal. From the beginning, students base their experiences of music and performing through the mediation of a group (the orchestra). On a daily basis this is what their perception of participation is based upon, and over time this prioritization of the group and musical community can be internalized and possibly even extended on a greater social level. When we additionally consider the diverse backgrounds students come from, the importance of emphasizing group work may also have other socially positive outcomes.

Social inclusion involves the integration of students not just of different socioeconomic backgrounds, but also of different abilities, cultures and ethnicities. Pettigrew (1998) outlines a sequential model of conflict reduction between communities that ultimately – through interpersonal interaction, decategorization of the individual, and extended contact – leads to a redefinition of the two communities into a new larger group. While students may come from different backgrounds, their extended and consistent engagement with each other on a daily basis, and in concentrated group rather than individual activity, could be in line with this model of conflict reduction. Focusing on the group, that is, the orchestra, and decategorizing the individual, that is, the soloist, can lead to redefinitions of multiple communities into a more harmonious – yet still diverse – single entity. Extended on a much larger scale, El Sistema has the possibility of providing greater means of social inclusion on a national level, a point I will make below. This is a considerable philosophical and programmatic strength that should be recognized.

Furthermore, as has been argued earlier, a significant factor in El Sistema's success is its consistency. Not only is the program year-long, coinciding with the academic school year, but the program is also consistent regardless of the student's grade level or school. This is in line with the research of Stone, et al. (1998) as a "best practice" of serious fine arts instruction programs. As they argue, "The arts interventions receiving the highest ratings for prosocial impact were more likely to allow participants to repeat classes and were more likely to offer ongoing sessions that continued indefinitely" (Stone, et al., 1998, p. 19). Students are allowed to stay in the program as long as they wish, they may continue to participate in higher, more challenging levels of orchestral repertoire, and they can also return to teach younger students. Through El Sistema, regardless of which school a student attends (public, private or parochial), he will always have access to a free music program that acts as a stable and consistent outlet through which he can engage in the arts.

Additionally, the program's consistency also ensures that students are engaging, interacting and "dialoguing", to borrow Freire's term, on an extended and consistent basis with each other and with their teachers. This combines Freire's notion of praxis, the reflection and action in the work of Subjects (students, parents, teachers, administrators) through dialogue, with other research on social inclusion and the reintroduction of the 'national' dimension as a form of identification (Biddle, 2007). Students and teachers as subjects are engaged in dialogue through group work, both in the form of talleres and ensayos generales. Little time is spent on individually focused work, rather, improvements in the individual are meant to coincide with

improvements in the orchestra. The introduction of the national dimension as a form of identification is thus reinterpreted in El Sistema's focus as a national program that also uses nationally based and inspired music.

### **MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO PLAY**

Students periodically go on excursions or fieldtrips sponsored by El Sistema and the núcleo (which pay for transportation and attendance costs). These excursions can range from exhibitions by professional orchestras to school demonstrations. Domestic and international giras (tours) allow students to visit places they may otherwise never have a chance to visit. Even giras to neighboring areas or communities expose students to how others are learning and playing music, as well as give them an opportunity to showcase what they have learned. Overnight giras also foster a sense of family and community between orchestra members; these trips are often their first trip away from home. The concertmaster of one youth orchestra described what a tour is like:

When we go on national and international tours, listen, we share many hours together in the bus with forty people who are not just your colleagues, but so much more. If I get sick, everyone will help me, attending to me in the airplane, giving me medicine, water with sugar... It's like practically becoming a family – like an orchestra and your friends becoming a family. (personal communication, 21 November 2008)

This reflection is consistent with El Sistema's focus on the group as the main site of social transformation, and with the positive behavioral changes that can occur within students as they express greater concern for others and their well being.

Monthly or bimonthly concerts also serve as an excellent motivation for students. One El Sistema manager explained this during an interview: "We are always preparing to play in a concert and we are always invited. It's about always maintaining the expectation of we have a concert, we have a concert, we have a concert" (personal communication, 20 November 2008). El Sistema inculcates in the students a culture of performance and sharing. Students and directors work towards the goal of a concert, no matter how inexperienced or young the students are. Thus the concerts are viewed as a means of demonstrating to others what they have learned – usually a final product that they can be proud to share. Additionally, concerts provide the third and final "R" in Heath's study: risks. Concerts provide risks for students to demonstrate their skill and be open to critique in a relatively safe environment, teaching them to "learn to expect the unexpected", which can ultimately prepare them to be adaptable critical thinkers in the future.

A final form of motivation is a beca, or scholarship, which is given to most students at the juvenile level, with the amount depending on the resources of the núcleo and El Sistema. The typical monthly beca ranges from 200 to 1000 BsF (Bolívares Fuertes) (\$100-500) and is based on daily attendance, participation in concerts, and whether the student also teaches younger students. While these becas are meant primarily to assist with the costs of transportation and instrumental supplies, they

also provide a financial motivation to the students and their families. As one parent described:

[The becas] are a motivation because they are like a prize for effort.. For the children the money is a very large quantity, so it means a lot. Also, there are students with two or three brothers in the orchestra and so the beca would be multiplied by three, and this helps the family with its resources. So it is also a motivation for parents. (personal communication, 1 November 2008)

Instead of taking an after-school job, a student may consider the orchestra as his employer. Furthermore, it places the students in a system of meritocracy, with those working the hardest most often receiving the benefits, thus drawing a direct link between time/effort and reward.

### TEACHERS AND STUDENT-MENTORS

As most El Sistema teachers are themselves graduates of the program, there is little training provided to them. Many teachers are either current conservatory students or semi-professionals playing in orchestras. Student monitores (mentors) are used more frequently in the interior núcleos of Venezuela (outside of Caracas) because of a greater shortage of teachers. These advanced students in the juvenile orchestra or in the city's semi-professional orchestra are recruited by their teachers to lead the talleres of students at the pre-infantile or infantile level. Monitores undergo a brief apprenticeship with a teacher before they are placed in charge of their own classes. This is usually an observation period of a few lessons that emphasizes how the material is taught. Monitores teach the same material as standard teachers at other núcleos, including the review of orchestral pieces, bowings, notes, scales and tuning. They are also in charge of supervising the students' technique.

The advanced students are paid these extra teaching hours in addition to their becas for playing in orchestras. Student teachers generally reported that the amount they are paid is not substantially large, but is nonetheless significant in comparison to other jobs they might take. An additional reward for them is what they reported as personal fulfillment and a sense of contributing back to the system. As one of these student teachers said, "El Sistema gives us the opportunity to teach classes. For us we love what we do, so it is not about making money. There is nothing more gratifying and nothing that fulfills you as a human being as much as seeing the results of a week's worth of instructing a child" (personal communication, 10 December 2008). In this light, acting as a student teacher allows a young musician to take on yet another one of Heath's "R's": a role. This role allows students to view themselves as *resources* rather than as *problems*. And even further, introduces a new perspective on educational "emancipation" (Biesta, 2008), with the student teacher acting simultaneously as student and teacher. This framework problematizes the traditional Kantian view of tutelage as a form of domination (Kant, 1992); in El Sistema student teachers are not fully "emancipated" but at the same time are seen as capable of "emancipating". Additionally, teaching provides another opportunity for extended and active participation. Student teachers are given the opportunity of even greater levels of engagement, acting in further possibilities of praxis. While the financial

reward may be significant, student teacher responses in my study suggest that their involvement is more a means of contributing back to the system than a purely lucrative form of employment. Their reflection and action may therefore be attempts to transform their local communities, beginning at the núcleo and working through music.

There is one other factor, however, that we should also consider, and that is El Sistema's possible overreliance on student teachers due to a shortage of actual teachers. This is a general obstacle that El Sistema must overcome in the present and near future. (In addition to large shortages of quality teachers, El Sistema also faces the immediate lack of quality instruments and rehearsal and performance venues – this despite the program's tremendous amount of financial resources.) This is not to say that there are no qualified teachers in Venezuela; rather, there are simply not enough of them for the number of students in the program. Many new conservatory graduates choose to become musicians in Venezuela's professional and semi-professional orchestras. The country's most ambitious and skilled musicians choose to audition for orchestras abroad, in the United States and in Europe. Low teacher pay compared to higher salaried orchestral positions means the country's most talented musicians must suffer greater opportunity costs to teach. Remediation of this problem has been in the form of student teachers, and to an extent this has filled gaps in teacher shortages. At the same time, however, these monitores are usually untrained and only go through a brief apprenticeship with another teacher before being placed in charge of their own classes (note also: the fine line between emancipation and frustration). As student enrollment numbers increase, so must the number of teacher positions at each núcleo; if this fails to be the case, student-teacher ratios will continue to rise, and the amount of individual attention each student receives will continue to fall. Jose Antonio Abreu's immediate goal is to open El Sistema to one million Venezuelan children, but without a dramatic increase in the teacher base, this expansion will not be possible. Other obstacles and areas to improve will be discussed below.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

Community involvement is a final important factor in El Sistema's model. Parent organizations create the means for parents to reflect, act and engage on their own terms with their communities. Local governments and private corporations also contribute to El Sistema, and their involvement further integrates the program within the community. The nature of this involvement is described below.

## **PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

Parent involvement is a crucial programmatic aspect that is sometimes overlooked when too much attention is paid to the work of the students in isolation. Parents are also expected to fulfill certain requirements: to collaborate in all of the student's activities, to attend concerts, to take care of the necessary materials for learning music, to be aware of the student's homework, to inform the coordinators if the child

cannot attend class, and to pay for any damages to the facilities or to the instrument that the student may have caused.

Most núcleos also have Sociedades de Padres o Representantes. These informal, voluntary, parent societies are self-elected and self-run. They attempt to fill in the gaps that El Sistema either overlooks or is incapable of undertaking in an expedient manner, e.g. changing light fixtures, cleaning up rehearsal spaces, or painting. These groups also organize after-concert events and parties for the students, provide snacks and beverages during concerts, and supervise students more generally (ensuring that they are where they need to be at whatever time they need to be there). They hold their own fundraising events to help pay for these parties, to help students from less financially capable families with transportation or instrumental materials, and to pay for other expenditures, like the purchase of student uniforms. Not every parent participates; participation is on a voluntary basis, and this is important to emphasize.

These organizations were originally created by parents, usually stay-at-home mothers, who wanted to give back to El Sistema. In interview responses, they cited that they wanted to become more involved with their children's education. One parent explained the organization's origins:

The parents' society emerged out of the initiative and desire of the parents to have a way of contributing to the orchestra... We try to involve as many parents as we can because we always try to support and help more, with painting the building, or cleaning, or repairing the toilets, or fixing the lamps. In whatever way we can, this is what we can do. (personal communication, 1 November 2008)

I would argue, however, that in addition to contributing to the program through daily involvement in the núcleo's activities, parents also may engage in a form of self-empowerment by playing a crucial role that directly affects the lives of their children and themselves. These parents are self-selected to address problems, and they choose to help by focusing on the things they know how to do. This again is connected to Freire's idea of praxis in transforming one's environment through reflection and action: reflecting on what one can contribute to the program and then taking action to perform the task. In Freire's terms, these parents "are" because they are critically reflecting upon their existence (and the existence of their children) and critically acting upon it. In another sense, through their self-election, parents are also realizing their own self-efficaciousness and by completing these actions, may so become self-empowered.

In El Sistema today, these sociedades de padres are an important part of the overall functioning of the program. And the realization of self-empowerment and self-efficacy has reinforced the community aspect of each núcleo, because parents and students realize that they are equal partners in this relationship: they are not just consumers, but also producers. They believe that the community is strengthened the more actively one participates, engages and gives back to the program. This involvement, therefore, is one of the ways that parents (and their children) can actively transform their environment.

## THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR

Organizationally and structurally, an important long-term strength of El Sistema is its resource base. El Sistema utilizes financial support from both the public and private sectors, while also engaging the local community to work for its cause. National and local governments provide public funding because the program is sold to officials as a social necessity – as a public expenditure equally important as health and sanitation. Private corporations provide additional financial support and rehearsal and concert space to local núcleos. They believe that wherever there is a núcleo, there is also a better environment for economic activity, in addition to the positive publicity the corporations receive.

While most attention paid to El Sistema with respect to government funding is focused on the financial support of the national government and Chavez's presidency, less attention has been given to the contributions of local governments. Local municipalities, like the one of Chacao in the capital of Caracas, also step in financially to ensure that their local community and students have a núcleo. Chacao, one of the richest financial districts in all of Latin America, provides 90% of the costs of its núcleo in exchange for El Sistema to come in and share its experience and know-how of administration and teaching music. The other 10% of the núcleo's budget is provided for by a private corporation, Corpbanca. It specifies its contribution to be part of the núcleo's scholarship program, or for domestic and international tours.

As one El Sistema director said about the program, "it is a shot into society, a vaccine that both prevents and cures social problems" (personal communication, 5 December 2008). More than a "shot" or a "vaccine", however, this program is thought of as providing some sort of revitalization. The areas around núcleos are developing more vibrant communities, with parents and students interacting with other parents and students on a greater level, assisted too by these Parent organizations.

Private corporations, like Corpbanca in Chacao, have witnessed these improvements in the local communities and have seen this as an investment opportunity. Safe and stable areas are a direct economic benefit because they foster healthy markets where business can be more easily conducted. Their investment in these núcleos can take on many different forms. First, corporations may choose to finance all or a portion of the núcleo's becas. This is important because it changes the value of the arts by supporting the 'all-stars' of the núcleo, and provides these students with a source of income much higher than they otherwise would be able to earn from working an after-school job. The scholarship program is structured as a meritocracy: those who perform better and excel, receive higher becas. And those who give back by teaching younger students also receive higher becas. Suddenly, performing as a talented musician becomes an aspiration. Similar to an athletic endorsement, the private corporation would additionally receive the added publicity of supporting the widely popular program.

Second, corporations may provide support to núcleos by offering office space where the orchestras can rehearse, or theater space where the orchestras can perform concerts. For example, the basement floor of the Corpbanca corporate office is also a performing arts theater where paid concerts are frequently held. In addition to the becas that Corpbanca provides to some of the students in Chacao, they also allow the two most advanced orchestras of the núcleo to use the venue at no cost. The students thus get to perform in a professional space for their family, friends and community, while Corpbanca gets the publicity of being mentioned and thanked in the concert programs and at other núcleo events.

## AREAS TO IMPROVE

While program officials may claim that El Sistema is primarily a social program aimed at producing healthier communities and not a cultural program to train musicians, there is no denying that individual attention per student has decreased. Furthermore, one cannot so easily dichotomize between social and cultural advances or priorities when improvements in prosocial behavior are so dependent upon, and intertwined with, musical improvement and success. Any social program based on large numbers faces the challenge of focusing on a purely collective mentality, otherwise the pleasurable aspect of making music begins to fade. If too much emphasis is placed upon the collective and the building of this orchestral machine, then the efforts put into creating a vibrant community will be less successful. Described in the extreme, one former El Sistema teacher who still works in Caracas but now at a private academy spoke critically:

It is a system based on quantity, a system of playing, playing, and playing. And as a system of playing and repeating and repeating and repeating, there is no one with a feeling of individuality. It is too much a process of quantity, quantity, quantity. Yes, some aspects are really good, but others, no. You are part of a machine, it is really sad, but this is what happens. (personal communication, 30 September 2008)

The problem is not just about the higher quantity of students per teacher, but also about the decreased amount of time and individual attention that teachers can provide to students because of these increased numbers. As described above, increases in student enrollment without accompanying expansions in the teaching base lead to higher student-to-teacher ratios; when these ratios increase too much, program quality typically suffers.

To a degree the emphasis on quantity and numbers has been a result of government support. Government officials who are often not musicians or artists are more concerned with how many of their constituents are being served, rather than the product of the service. If an organization can show that they are serving 'X' number of students more than last year, then they can justify an increase in their budget. Over time the bottom line becomes more about showing officials that núcleos are growing in size and in number, and less about artistic excellence (a less quantifiable measure). And thus over time the núcleo can become less personal, less intimate, and more like a machine. The problem may potentially be solved through concerted efforts to increase the teacher pool, reduce class sizes, and ensure that each student

has the adequate amount of individual attention necessary, in addition to group and orchestral rehearsal. But these obstacles do pose a significant obstacle to improving program quality and may be a potential source of student frustration, thus jeopardizing the active and extended participation and engagement crucial to the program's overall effectiveness.

## CONCLUSIONS

El Sistema's philosophy is one of open access, regardless of class, ethnicity, or talent. The program draws students from both high and low socioeconomic backgrounds. The program does not target low-income students or families. Rather, these communities are drawn to El Sistema because they believe that it will give their children the chance to succeed in life. They believe that active involvement and long-term engagement will take their children away from negative distractions and serve as an outlet for positive action.

Investigating the above beliefs more closely, I have demonstrated how students, parents, teachers, administrators, audience members and supporters of El Sistema are provided the means and opportunity in this program to engage in praxis through dialogue and action. Freire's concept of praxis involves not only the reflecting and the acting, but also the critical interaction between the two. Parent involvement and students' extended participation through advancement, mentoring and teaching allow students and parents the opportunity to engage critically with the program, improve it, and contribute to it through their own praxis. Programmatic consistency and long-term involvement also allow for a continuous period of contact and engagement between many members of society, student and adult. Stone, et al. (1998) show that the broader the involvement in the program, the greater the impact on the individual. In terms of a greater impact on society, broad involvement in the program fits in accordance with Pettigrew's (1998) model of conflict reduction, where through extended and consistent contact and de-categorization of the individual (as evidenced in the emphasis on group and orchestra rehearsal rather than on individual or private lessons), a larger, more inclusive group can be formed. This transformation occurs despite differences in class background, culture, ethnicity or technical ability.

Furthermore, the issue of social inclusion relates to Freire's idea of "dialogue" in the potential realization of one's subjective existence amongst others of similar thought and action – as subject rather than as object, capable of understanding one's world, and if one so chooses, transforming it through one's actions. Extended contact, participation and critical engagement allow for redefinitions of the larger group based on common goal rather than different background; the common goal perhaps seen as the advancement and improvement of the orchestra. Through music these students can choose to reflect and act, engaging in dialogue with their communities by performing, teaching and mentoring. Through music they become their own resources and tools. In Heath's terms, El Sistema provides them with roles, rules and risks that can help them engage in positive self-transformation at an individual level in their social behavior and prosocial attitude toward others. In Freire's terms, El

Sistema allows students, and their parents and teachers, to engage in critical reflection and action in the historically and locally situated present, catalyzing changes on a social, community and even national level. Importantly, this study shows that the prosocial benefits of an after-school music program do not come from simply 'taking kids off the street' and putting them in 'daycare'. The key variables presented here indicate that these prosocial benefits may be derived from music's challenges, from the teaching of life skills, and from the treatment of students as resources and integral components of an orchestra, rather than as problems to be handled.

In developing other successful programs abroad, it is clear from this analysis that financial resources, public and private support, the involvement of parents and the community, and consistent and long-term participation are all key components requiring attention. Yet, at the same time, the individuality of each program is equally important. The best programs are able to engage in a form of praxis, working within the local and historical context of their situations while also learning from the programmatic success of organizations like El Sistema. Only recently have we begun to come to terms with the impact of music education programs on young people and their communities in our social policy programs. Further sociological study of El Sistema should concern itself with issues of social inclusion and how music can work to transform class, cultural, political and geographic differences into greater social harmony and action.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Uy is a graduate student in Historical Musicology at Merton College, Oxford University. His primary research interests are focused on the social, political and cultural origins of twentieth-century government-funded arts and music institutions.

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