

PERSPECTIVES ON EL SISTEMA

From the 2014 class of Sistema Fellows at New England Conservatory

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Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the 2014 Class of Sistema Fellows at New England Conservatory following our month-long residency in Venezuela in November 2013. It has been specifically written in response to a request from Dr. Abreu for the Fellowship to provide El Sistema with thoughts and reflections on our expectations prior to our trip, and our time observing and working with the program¹. As curious and committed learners in the expanding field of El Sistema, we feel it is our responsibility to share our learning with all educators dedicated to social justice through the arts.

Herein we offer a glimpse of our collective insight, immersed in the Venezuelan tradition, as a possible resource to others in this field. In addition, it expresses our ambitions to use these considerations in our future work.

We are eager to present this paper as a token of our great esteem for Dr. Abreu and the immense generosity and kindness we experienced in gaining unparalleled access to El Sistema in Venezuela. We hope our collective voices can reflect our deep appreciation for having been so warmly embraced by the El Sistema family.

¹ This version has been edited for distribution.

Expectations

Before we left for Venezuela, we had the opportunity to speak with numerous similarly fortunate people who had visited El Sistema at the source, and they told us that our lives would be transformed. They encouraged us not to have expectations, but to be open-minded and to immerse ourselves totally in the experience.

However, we had some pre-conceived notions and questions even before coming into the fellowship about what made El Sistema so successful. They most probably came about from watching clips such as “Tocar y Luchar”, “El Sistema” and videos of various ensembles on YouTube, and reading online and printed sources that past fellows and other musicians had written about the program. These are some of them:

Magic - We expected to uncover something remarkably different, a secret, which made El Sistema have such an extraordinary impact.

Target population - Some of us had the impression that the program was designed specifically for children from less privileged backgrounds.

Social change - We believed that El Sistema had been creating large-scale social change, but we did not know how or what "social change" in the context of Venezuela exactly entailed. We expected to come closer to an understanding of the ideas and practices and how we could translate them into our cultures.

Centralization - We thought that there would be a great disparity of musical quality and resources between Caracas and Barquisimeto compared to the rural núcleos.

Societal influence - We were wondering how El Sistema could create a safe and well-structured space within a violent and sometimes disorganized environment.

Takeaways

When asked to identify what struck us the most about our visit to Venezuela, we found that our experiences could be separated into two larger groups: 1. teaching and learning, and 2. culture and community. Below are some of our thoughts on our most distinctive experiences, and how we feel we can apply those experiences to our future work.

Teaching and Learning

Positive learning atmosphere

There is a genuine hunger for growth and a serious respect for the tenacity necessary to achieve. Hard work is transparent and the fellowship and camaraderie of the El Sistema community lend in creating a unique educational atmosphere. Infused in learning is a sense of shared experience and there is joy in this learning. Frustrations and triumphs are met with empathy and laughter. El Sistema creates space for healthy competition, but also supports people in their mistakes so that the greater community improves. There is trust and empowerment in the people who by working together help to create a nurturing and safe atmosphere so that everyone can thrive personally and musically. This is where social action is occurring, in the space provided and exemplified by all community members. The learning atmosphere also allows for the cultivation of a multiplicity of roles as a musician, which has been summarized by previous Fellows as CATS (Citizen, Artist, Teacher, Scholar), but could also include a myriad of music-related positions from administrator to luthier. Indeed, many staff members at Fundamusical and at the núcleos are alumni. Overall, there is a much more relaxed and friendly learning culture; where experiments and changes are supported, relevant music making encouraged, students are given positive encouragement rather than demoralizing feedback, and mistakes are not seen as failures but work in progress.

Fearless, passionate drive

The pedagogy of El Sistema reflects the notion of fearless, passionate drive. Children perform constantly—often giving multiple performances each week—in an effort to constantly improve upon what they know and are able to do. Students discuss with great pride the challenging repertoire they are studying and the new artistic projects they are cultivating (e.g. a student-led, rock orchestra initiative of *Beatles* music), never daunted by the difficulty of these initiatives nor concerned about having all the necessary prerequisites (i.e. the technical skills or resources) in place prior to starting. Instead, they embark upon their studies with true chutzpah and zeal. Because students develop and experiment at such a fast pace, they are simply striving to do their best—not to obtain perfection—with each new performance and piece learned. Without fear of mistakes, students and teachers are freed to take on new artistic challenges, stretch their boundaries, and enjoy the journey of learning as much as they do the product of their hard work.

Community responsibility

Since the very beginning of El Sistema, the musicians in Dr. Abreu's youth orchestra have felt the responsibility to bring music back to the community – not only to their own community, but also to all communities in the country. Their sense of responsibility is so strong that they would spend entire days traveling to reach even the remotest villages. Most of the teachers in El Sistema have once been students; many of them are teachers and students at the same time. They have all experienced how the collective practice of music has transformed their lives. This awareness and their gratitude are the sources of the great willingness of giving something back to the community. For Venezuelans in El Sistema, wherever you go, it is a matter of course to pass on your knowledge and experience to other children.

Culture of leadership

One of the strongest impressions taken away from the experience in Venezuela was the culture of leadership. Throughout the program, administrators, teachers, students and families in El Sistema have faith and dedication in the mission while prioritizing the student in every decision. From the pure intention of one leader, Dr. Abreu helped to create an environment of collaboration, responsiveness, and empowerment that nourishes the very best in humanity.

Humility

El Sistema inspires humility in conjunction with the responsibility to teach. In turn, this creates the insatiable desire to learn. El Sistema fosters familial relationships that blur the lines of student-teacher, 'them' and 'us', but instead reflect the position of friends in a joint musical learning journey. There is no sense of a strict hierarchy amongst members of a núcleo, but instead humility in those who are more experienced sharing their expertise with others, being aware of their own knowledge gaps and wanting to learn more, at whichever level they operate on. For example, we heard of teachers with forty years' worth of experience taking classes at a conservatory with their eighteen-year old students. No matter how many years of experience accrued, distinguished degrees of higher learning achieved, or repertoire performed, Venezuelans of El Sistema constantly seek out ways to improve.

Adapting Teaching and Learning Takeaways

Part of the Sistema family

We have become part of the Sistema family, and with that comes responsibility. We will retain the essence of Sistema to the best of our abilities, while utilizing our own strengths as leaders. We will help create a culture of leadership that empowers each community member to collaborate, strive for excellence, lead, support, and respect each individual's inherent value. We will exemplify dedication and faith in a common mission that will inspire all members of the community. We will trust in our own skills and the skills of others, knowing we may make mistakes, but intentionally support and respect each other. Within us lies the key to creating positive social ripple effects, and beyond teaching techniques or best practices, we believe creating that culture is most impactful regardless of where one is in the world.

Teacher training and collaboration

There are extraordinary and diverse music education programs in the United States and a palpable spirit of collaboration is already underway. While time and resources may be spread thin, focusing on the sharing of experience may lighten the heavy loads we carry. Through commitment to developing engaging and accessible partnerships, music education as a field may better explore the joy found in this generosity and the powerful possibilities of alliance. Arts organizations can provide additional teacher training, providing a space for the teachers to exchange their ideas, observe, and give feedback to other colleagues.

Positive learning atmosphere

To create a positive learning atmosphere, it begins with being transparent with students and staff members about what the leaders still have yet to learn, and asking for help and input in learning these things. This will instill the idea that great accomplishment stems from the constant search for more information, more ways to accomplish the same tasks, and more input and insight from others on how to proceed in order to improve.

Peer mentorship

In the United States, where the cultural differences require more intention to get students to become natural leaders and teachers, it is important to make teaching as routine as scales and posture. Teaching opportunities must be a part of everyday life in the U.S. núcleo. Tools like mentorship, a unified curriculum and peer teaching should be an integral part of our programs. Gradually, students can be given more responsibility in the núcleo so that the trained teachers become facilitators, supervisors and guides, so that the núcleo begins to teach itself.

Culture and Community Takeaways

Resilient spirit

In El Sistema, music brings hope. Experiencing El Sistema at the source and understanding the political and social situation in Venezuela has shed light on the importance this program has. It gives hope to those who have nowhere else to turn, and transforms lives. El Sistema is life to many of the teachers and students. Perhaps it is slowly repairing the social fabric of a country by giving the participants an outlet where they can see that their efforts produce results, where other aspects of society may seem out of their control. They see and believe what they do can have a positive trajectory on their lives.

In addition, we were inspired by the collective psychological resilience of the students, which was bolstered by an attachment to strong, positive communities. We observed that all of the children in El Sistema wholeheartedly had a mindset of “Sí, se puede,” or in English, “Yes, you can.” Although the majority of them come from underprivileged backgrounds, there was no sense of inadequacy or of constraint by social or physical challenges. Furthermore, we saw children managing and mastering small adversities, a coping skill that they will likely use to navigate heavier stressors in the future. We left Venezuela with no doubt that they would develop into healthy, strong adults with an inherent capacity for optimism and self-confidence.

Lastly, we believe that one of the core components of this resilient spirit is faith. Defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a strong belief or trust in someone or something,” this foundation of faith almost singlehandedly embodies the source of the strength and fortitude of the El Sistema culture in Venezuela.

Community

The present day manifestation of El Sistema is not magic; rather, it is the collective effort of countless, big-hearted people who practice music as deeply as they believe in the inherent spirit of music. The holistic value of communal music making was demonstrated through total access to anyone who wanted to play, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds or physical and mental challenges. Students come to masterclasses with others, expanding the one student per hour lesson to a shared learning experience. Furthermore, it was apparent that the orchestra was the heart and pride of each community and that the strongest were those who gained strength from the simultaneity of supporting and being supported by others.

Fearless, passionate drive

Another integral component of El Sistema’s culture is the pervasive attitude of fearless, passionate drive. Members of the El Sistema community demonstrate a propensity for dreaming big, embracing challenges as opportunities, and having the tenacity to move forward at a feverish pace in order to make their visions a reality. This mentality exists in all aspects of El Sistema, from program structure to pedagogical philosophy to artistic programming. More than one núcleo director we observed exuded quiet confidence, determination, and conviction to help as many students as possible. These leaders believe in the impossible, never overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task at hand. This drive ripples through all constituents of the El Sistema community, rendering them a courageous attitude that provides them the capacity to keep pushing onward and upward.

Adapting Culture and Community Takeaways

Resilient spirit

In our future endeavors as leaders of El Sistema inspired programs, we strive to embody this resilient spirit. El Sistema has shown us that a movement of this scale can only come to life when our whole hearts and souls are poured into it without distractions, such as self-doubt and the attractiveness of greener pastures. We also seek to develop this psychosocial resilience in our students, in an effort to partially address the physical, social, and mental well being of the entire child, and thereby heal entire communities. We strive to empower young people to take ownership of their futures, which is one aspect of El Sistema that can be translated into any youth development program in any culture.

Community

We wish to re-awaken the sense of community, belonging, and sharing inherent in all of us, especially with children. We will create and facilitate processes of inclusion within music making among all children, regardless of socioeconomic class or ability. More than ever, we are aware of the urgency of acquiring relevant leadership skills so that we can model the culture we wish to promote in our communities.

Fearless, passionate drive

It was inspiring to witness how those of El Sistema approach life's challenges with such boundless energy and unrestrained joy, reveling in the process as well as product of their efforts. By pushing themselves out of their comfort zone and giving themselves space to stretch their boundaries, they are able to constantly innovate and transform themselves and their programs. Those in the U.S. can certainly adopt this new paradigm by learning to "let go" a bit more, striving not for perfection, but to simply do their best. In practical terms, this mindset could translate into a program director being willing to start an initiative without having every necessary resource or logistical item in place, having faith in the ability to improvise and make do with what is available. Pedagogically, U.S. teachers could learn to relinquish some of the rigidity of their curriculums and skill sequences, giving students freedom to play challenging repertoire before they have learned every prerequisite technique, pushing students to perform more frequently, and focusing on the emotion of the music as much as the fundamentals.

Conclusion

Our experiences as El Sistema Fellows in Venezuela will continue to inspire and drive our commitment to using music for social change in our communities for many years to come. We acknowledge the remarkable achievements of the program we saw displayed in Venezuela: the positive learning atmosphere, community responsibility, the culture of leadership and humility, the resilient spirit and the fearless, passionate drive of so many Venezuelans. We in turn feel the responsibility of belonging to the El Sistema family, to continue to maintain our connection to Venezuela and to further the work of serving our communities through music.

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