

Learning From El Sistema: Insights for Community Building in Music Education

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Every individual is a complex human being. Our identities are shaped by an unimaginable breadth of influences. It is the intersectionality of these life experiences and identities that form who you are. Intersectional identity, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams (1991), is one framework used to understand and acknowledge the different factors that make up our identity and being. As educators, being aware of our identity (personal, professional, etc.) is critical to our development, growth, and success. From the first day of an education degree, the importance of reflection is a dominant and pervasive theme: reflecting on our teaching, our beliefs, our practice, our emotions and feelings, and the content we teach encourages us to grow and evolve as members of society and as human beings, shaping who we are and become as teachers. Through a reflective exploration of personal experiences and academic findings, this paper examines the multifaceted influences that inform and shape my identity as a music educator. Drawing from autobiographical experiences and educational theory, it highlights the significance of intersectional identity and community engagement in music education. By breaking down and sharing this, I hope to invite you to perform a similar process as I have, based on Mentor and Sealey-Ruiz's (2021) *Archaeology of Self*, to get to know yourself and venture beyond.

Central to my analysis and understanding is my own life experience. I grew up in a musical family. I started piano lessons when I was in grade 2, switching to saxophone when I was in grade 5. It was in this grade 5 year that my family did a teaching exchange to rural New South Wales, Australia, and I had the opportunity to start taking saxophone lessons and participate in the community band. This was my first experience with community music and music education. Following our return to rural Manitoba, Canada, I continued taking private lessons as my middle school was too small for any music program. By high school, I was able to

go to a larger school and participate in band, jazz band, choir, and school musicals until COVID-19 shut music down in grade 11. Now, as a university student, I actively participate in university ensembles.

As I come to understand myself better, I can then look outward at other sources of inspiration I can draw from. This paper will look at El Sistema and community music as a model to learn from and inform my teaching practice. El Sistema-inspired programs across the world are derived from the original Sistema program in Venezuela, taking the ideas, curricula, and structure, and translating it or adapting it to fit diverse international communities and needs. At its core, El Sistema is a community music education program, typically based in lower-income areas, that provides free music education, free meals or snacks, free instrument use to its participants, and free concerts to the families and community around them. Not only does El Sistema benefit the children enrolled in it, but it also provides extra support for parents and guardians with the supervision of their children and healthy food for the students; and benefits the broader community around them through concerts and support for kids as they grow up into the community. By providing intensive and inclusive musical education programs, El Sistema programs worldwide aim to effect social change in the pursuit of musical excellence (Tunstall, 2012).

Access is a two-sided story, looking at not only who is taking advantage of something, but also who is not: Who is the intended audience of something and who is actually consuming it? I was lucky enough to have some level of music education, a largely private one that provided me with what I needed to pursue music in a post-secondary institution. A lot of people across the world do not have the same access to music education as I did. El Sistema's music education is primarily targeted at lower-income areas worldwide, bringing access to underserved

communities and doing well at serving their intended audience. By access, here I mean opportunity uninhibited by ability. Just as private music lessons and high school music classes were available to me and provided me with access to music education and other opportunities, El Sistema offers barrier-free programs that open up access and opportunities for children who typically would not have access to formal music education worldwide.

Many articles seem to suggest that El Sistema programs operate with inclusive practices at their core, but there is very little discussion on what “inclusion” and “inclusivity” mean or how they can be measured. While programs largely do include a diverse range of neurodiverse children in different ways, Bell’s (2017) article suggests that the types of inclusion implemented in many Sistema programs have room for improvement. There is a tendency to only tackle the issue of involvement rather than the deeper engagement of learners, a surface-level approach rather than an approach dismantling systemic barriers (Tunstall, 2012; Yerichuk and Krar, 2019). Rather than a focus on gender or ability-based identifiers, El Sistema has a specific intended audience of lower-income youth. For smaller programs, learners with higher neurodivergent and physically atypical needs might not have the same type of support that a larger program does and can lead to their exclusion (or more kindly put, encouragement to seek alternative music education) because of a lack of resources or funding.

Flashing back to my first year of playing saxophone, I was invited to join the community band, despite my beginner ability; it was my first real time playing an instrument with other people. I can vividly remember struggling to play even the first note of the first song because of the overwhelming smile on my face during the performance. It was our first time coming together to play, and as a performance, it was an incredible feeling. A mix of school kids and elderly folk, the band had a wide range of members, the experienced supporting the less

experienced, and the less experienced bringing a youthful joy to the rest of the band. My father joined the community band along with me, and we were able to be part of this community ensemble together. Being part of the band gave us a feeling of welcome to this new town, so far away from where we were from - a feeling that is often associated with music programs and groups by many.

By high school, I was quite convinced that I wanted to pursue music education and playing with the school band became my favourite activity. Not only would I be extra dedicated in class, but I would also show up early mornings for jazz band, and spend any spare periods in the band room playing with the other grades. One of the moments that clarified my trajectory was when I got to sit in on the university's rehearsal and was welcomed in with open arms, immersed in the music, learning environment, and dedication of all the musicians around me. It is bewildering to look back at that moment and recognize that I am now one of those musicians who would have welcomed me in and am now in the latter half of my degree. The community found around music is something special that is unique compared to other areas of education, similar to that of sports.

The seeking of alternative forms of music education leads to the discussion of opportunity. It is important to look at the types of opportunities provided to the students and how they might help a student pursue their goals and aspirations. For some, the opportunity can be as simple as being enrolled and engaged in the education El Sistema, or other music education programs can provide. Other opportunities could be the chance to perform concerts with El Sistema and get recognized for their music skills. El Sistema and music education in general is a vehicle for so much more personal development (MacFarlane, 2022); "the aim of the orchestra is

to raise and develop human beings and citizens” (Tunstall, 2012, p. 31). Even famed conductor and graduate of El Sistema, Gustavo Dudamel, says,

It's about connection. In the Sistema everything is connected; the musical and social aspects of playing music — they are never separated. Playing music together is connected with being a better citizen, with caring about other people, with working together. The orchestra, you know, it's a community. It's a little world, where you can create harmony. And of course, when you have this, connected with an artistic sensibility anything is possible. Everything is possible. (Tunstall, 2012, p. 24)

It is evident that El Sistema's impact—and more generally, music education's impact—extends far beyond music. Dudamel's experience, both as a product of El Sistema and as a teacher, leader, and role model, is a testament to the system's ability to nurture not only musicians but also dedicated, hard-working individuals who continue giving back to the community and programs long after they have aged out of the program.

Even beyond the program, providing students with some steps forward, after they are done with the program, to enter community, regional, provincial/state, and even national ensembles can open up many opportunities for students. Venezuelan El Sistema programs also include formal luthier training, teaching students between the ages of fourteen to twenty-four how to make and fix instruments (Tunstall, 2012, pp. 39-41). The purpose of this is to recruit more adult instrument makers to continue providing instruments for their programs as well as giving students a career path. Making sure students know what is available to them and how to pursue those opportunities is an often-overlooked part of the music education and general education experience, even neglected by higher institutions like universities. By building a

community that has common interests and goals, El Sistema programs are able to direct their students to paths that attract them.

Similar to the close communities built through music and music education is the community of small towns. Growing up in rural Manitoba, I experienced firsthand the value of tight-knit communities and the profound impact they have on individual development. In my childhood, I knew all of the kids in my school as well as all of the older folks in the community from Church, volunteering at community events, and a not-for-profit heritage site. The lessons that can be learned from listening to and watching the elders in a community can teach you a lot. The incredible feats of development that a community can implement when motivated, mobilized, and organized are inspiring and a framework that can be followed and improved upon. I enjoy and value my small community, and have had the opportunity for a couple of summers to work under a government grant for the communities, giving me even more opportunity to see how community is built and maintained. Additionally, I took a course in Rural and Community Development, among many other Political Science courses, that taught me a lot about critically viewing and understanding the processes of different examples of community development across the world, contributing to my identity as a keen steward of community.

Building community can encompass all types of community, from the community of kids who find comfort and belonging in music spaces, to the music parents' association, and the entire town. As a community is built within the classroom, the school can bring a forced sense of community that some may not love (Bartleet, 2023). Understanding and respecting the boundaries of students informs how we, as teachers, can help a student and approach their engagement in the classroom. While not everyone has to be friends, there are important skills in the hidden curriculum that direct the teaching of how to work together, respect each other, and

function in society even in disagreement (Apple, 2004; MacFarlane, 2022). As the community extends to families, music events provide a space to socialize and become friends with each other as well (Ehrlin and Gustavsson, 2018). Many El Sistema and El Sistema-like programs have many different types of days and events for the community and family to get involved beyond a typical three or four concerts a year with events like monthly “Friends Days” for parents and siblings to watch all the teachers and students of different levels play with and for each other (Ehrlin and Gustavsson, 2018, p. 38). The bringing-together of everyone is a special opportunity and one that a music educator might consider taking inspiration from.

In terms of my identity as an educator, I come from a family full of educators, with a father and aunt who are teachers and administrators, as well as my mother being an education assistant. I had many opportunities to see my parents at work, exposing me to the behind-the-scenes of teaching, and learning from their models. As I have entered the field of education, I have valued the ability to have important and meaningful conversations with my family about education, teaching, and everything else related. Taking a keen interest in education and music education courses at university has come together to shape and contribute to my own identity as an educator. My first experience in the field was with my student teaching practicum at the end of my second year of university. This experience gave me a chance to find and establish my teacher identity further, seeing firsthand what worked, what I could work on, and what I could learn from others.

As my dedication was funnelled into a path of music education, nothing else demonstrates the dedication of families and students to music more than my experiences in student teaching. Not only was there a dedicated parent council of music student parents, but the students from the high school I was teaching at were dedicated to organizing and helping the

middle school's concert as well. It was a shock to me to show up to the middle school concert and see so many of my students around, cooking hot dogs, handing out programs, and setting up chairs. The community built in that town was something truly unique, with the connection between students, families, and community encompassing the high school, middle school, and even elementary school. As such a strong community, the middle schools that were feeder schools to the high school all had strong support and connection to each other, creating a coherent music program throughout the school division. The teachers have developed excellent relationships with each other, their students, the students' parents, and the community as a whole. This community is a large inspiration to me and my practice, and will stay close to my heart.

Just as schools create communities, El Sistema effectively implements both space building and community building. While space building typically focuses on the physical environment, community building extends into the social environment as what I would suggest is a branch of space building. Ciucă and Zăvoianu (2024) identify four primary areas of educational resilience in which, I posit, community building occurs: the Student-Teacher dynamic, Peer Influence, Family and Community Engagement, and School Environment. Students build social skills and friendships with their peers and build relationships with their teachers, who, in turn, engage with parents. Parents form connections with other parents, while both students and parents form connections with the school. Ultimately, the entire community connects to the school and its music program in a multitude of ways. In summary, El Sistema programs create many different interconnected communities within the larger, unifying community of El Sistema. Bell and Newby define music as a “group of people who share a connection that binds them together” (Bartleet, 2023, p. 36), which can be either an active choice or involuntary.

Relationships within the Sistema are primarily formed actively by participants, teachers, and families, who voluntarily choose to join the program or take on those roles. In contrast, the broader Sistema community is involuntarily involved—not in the sense that they do not wish to be, nor as a result of proximity, but because they are members of El Sistema and, by association, part of a larger community with other Sistema members from elsewhere. The numerous opportunities to share with families and communities afforded by Sistema programs foster the development and growth of the communities and environment as a whole.

One of the most interesting examples of an El Sistema-inspired program is in Elsipogtog First Nation, New Brunswick (Sistema NB, n.d.). Sprouting from the neighbouring Moncton El Sistema program, enough kids from Elsipogtog were taking the long journey to Moncton that the community decided they would like a program of their own. This community-initiated development of a Sistema program is fairly unusual, usually originating from people in the program wanting to expand, rather than the community showing interest first. The Elsipogtog Sistema is also unique in that it is entirely based on a reserve and therefore, exclusively serves Indigenous children. Serving traditionally white classical music to an Indigenous community is, of course, a contentious topic, but the program works together with the community to incorporate Mi'kmaq culture, instruments, and songs into their teaching to not only give the students a formal music education but also help them continue their culture (Sistema NB, n.d.). Working with community elders, the teachers of the Elsipogtog Sistema use the Mi'kmaq language for counting, simplified traditional songs to learn on their violins, and traditional drums to learn rhythms when appropriate (Sistema NB, n.d.).

As I asked the music educators around me about El Sistema, I found that several people I know were or are currently involved in the Sistema. I was able to reach out to one of my former

professors who had moved to teach at the Elsipogtog Sistema program, and in my communication with him, I was surprised at how young the program was, but excited to see where it goes next. Operating out of the Elsipogtog Elementary School, the Sistema program can only support 28 students up to grade 8, though they have hopes to expand and hire more staff. After graduating from the program, students have the opportunity to get involved in more community-based and regional ensembles. Having a clear direction of development for the program, an inclusive curriculum, and direction for students after they can serve them seems to show promise. It is too soon to see any statistical difference in student behaviour and success, but it will be interesting to follow.

When building community and relationships fall by the wayside with formal music education in schooling, programs will inevitably dwindle. Losing the support of families and communities can kill programs, especially in a subject that already often struggles to keep its head above water. With schools trending back from a principle of partnership to a principle of separation between family and home in terms of guardian engagement in students' education (Ehrlin and Gustavsson, 2018, 40), El Sistema could provide some inspiration on how this can be reversed and improved. El Sistema programs' frequency of community engagement and events could lead to more engaged families, benefiting the students' overall education (Ehrlin and Gustavsson, 2018). Alongside frequent communication with families, a school teacher, especially a music teacher, could benefit from bringing in families and the community more.

So, what does El Sistema provide for us as school music educators? El Sistema is a model that we can take and learn from, but that does not mean we need to take everything from it. Just as we learn from external experiences or information, we can leave behind areas we like less or disagree with. For myself, I opt for a more constructivist, student-centred approach over

the authoritarian style and structure of El Sistema. While there are some aspects I may not want to use in my own practice, many ideas can still be taken for inspiration or be twisted into something new.

Access to education is not only our right, but children are required to be educated. Just because the government has technically made education ‘accessible’ for everyone in the province or country, does not mean the education is actually accessible to all (Bell, 2017). El Sistema’s free service is inaccessible in a similar way. The goal for us, as educators, should always be to have inclusion for every person. While cost is not typically a barrier to our free public education, the larger issue appears in who can participate. When systemic barriers prevent people of minority races, genders, physical ability, or mental ability from participating, we must address the root causes and not only find ways of including everyone equally but also remove those barriers entirely. El Sistema removes a barrier of cost, but as Yerichuk and Krar (2019) suggest, removing financial barriers is still relatively surface-level and neglects to address the deeper causes of those issues.

El Sistema, as a hub of community, does an excellent job at bringing people together, serving as an exemplar for public school music educators. Performances increase family and student engagement, creating a positive cycle that fosters community-building and friendships. Building students’ self-esteem is a core focus of El Sistema, heavily supported by the carefully structured environment envisioned by Maestro Abreu and implemented by Sistema educators, mentors, and leaders (Tunstall, 2012, p. 33). By engaging the community and families more, participating in and hosting more events and concerts, communities support the programs more, parents get more involved in their child’s education, and students make friends, improve academically, and build their self-esteem (Ehrlin and Gustavsson, 2018). As teachers’

communication with families changes with the times, whether for the better or worse, we must find ways to re-engage families and establish regular communication for everyone's benefit.

As students grow through programs like El Sistema or public school music education, they may struggle to envision a realistic future in music. Likely stemming from the realization that the chance of being successful as a performing musician is slim and a lack of interest in teaching, I have noticed that students often forget about their instruments after graduating, even if they had once expressed interest in pursuing music as a career. Whenever I mention studying music education in school, I frequently hear people express how they miss band class or wish they could still play their instrument. Two things we can do better as music educators are showing ways of keeping music in your life after graduating and showing students the possibilities within music for careers; the options are not just musicians or music teachers. More like El Sistema's graduation of students from Sistema to local symphonies, we can direct students to the many opportunities the world presents. Venezuela's El Sistema programs that train students to build and fix instruments, as well as hiring graduated students as teaching assistants (Tunstall, 2012, pp. 33-34) is an excellent way of creating opportunities for students, though less realistic in public education. Educating our students on how to keep music in their lives, whether as a career path or a leisure activity, is crucial for us as music educators. It is not only meaningful for the student's personal growth but also essential for ensuring the future of our programs and fostering generations that continue to value music. This responsibility begins with us and extends to those we teach.

Ultimately, we want to show students we care. We can demonstrate that care in an infinite number of ways, some visible and some not. Even if it is not possible for you, as the teacher, to provide free meals and after-school supervision and teaching for a whole class of students, there

are plenty of strategies listed above that can work together to keep students engaged, out of trouble, and improve the quality of their lives through music. In Venezuela, the “high school dropout rate for teenagers is over 26 percent, but for participants in El Sistema, the rate drops to 6.9 percent” (Tunstall, 2012, p. 37). Music education has powerful effects when utilized properly, and we, as music teachers, can learn a lot from alternative forms of music education like community music initiatives and other global perspectives on music education. By not only looking at El Sistema as an example for our teaching practice, but also reflecting on our own experiences and aspects of our identity, we can find our values, core beliefs, and guiding teaching philosophies. It is the intersectionality of the part of you or me that makes up our identity as educators and, more generally, as human beings in society.

In times when I feel demotivated or dissuaded from music education, reading about and experiencing moments like an El Sistema violin teacher describes in Tunstall’s (2012) book serve as powerful reminders of why we do what we do. In recounting Gustavo Dudamel’s first performance at the Hollywood Bowl with a group of El Sistema students and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the teacher shares the moment when she saw a young girl, Cassandra, “hold her bow right that night for the first time in her life” (Tunstall, 2012, p. 17).

Reflecting on my experiences in my development to where I am now has given me a wider understanding of who I am, what I believe, and why I think or act the way I do. Throughout the process of writing this paper, I have done a personal deep dive into my history, re-exploring the pivotal moments and influences that have shaped my identity as a music educator. This journey of self-discovery has not only enriched my appreciation of the intersectionality of identity, but also enhanced my awareness of my own values and beliefs, and the role of community in music education. This paper has served as a platform for me to

critically examine the principles and practices of community-based music education, namely El Sistema, while questioning some practices and advocating for better practices of inclusivity in the field. As this paper comes to an end, I am reminded of the ongoing nature of this journey – a journey of self-reflection, learning, and growth that extends far beyond the confines of this paper. I encourage you to embark on your own exploration of identity and pedagogy, recognizing that our understanding of ourselves and our practice is ever-evolving with new intersections to our identity. What is important to you today may change tomorrow. This dynamism of identity is important to remind yourself of to encourage regular revaluation and reflection. Once you understand yourself better, take on a new interest, idea, or model to draw inspiration from. Use your newly polished lens to break down things and learn from them - adapt the good and learn from the bad.

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