

Fundamental Elements of Venezuela's El Sistema Which Inform and Guide El Sistema-inspired Programs

Eric Booth, January 2013

The purpose of this document is guidance. These ten fundamental elements described (which are continually being refined) are neither a checklist nor a set of requirements. They seek to distinguish some of the most distinctive elements of El Sistema in Venezuela, for those inspired by it to attend to as they follow its beacon on their home soil. El Sistema is not a program or a curriculum; it is an inquiry. These elements help identify the El Sistema-ness of the inquiry by suggesting some of the key accomplishments of our friends in Venezuela. Many fine music learning programs share similar values and practices; however the 38 years of exploring the most effective ways to achieve their youth development goals through these priorities have produced an unprecedented scope of accomplishment. Those committed to El Sistema-inspired work aspire to these goals, *all* of them; they provide our beacon. And we find a way toward that beacon in our own ways in our own cultures.

[This document revises a May 2010 report, which was a synthesis of observations and study of the workings of El Sistema in Venezuela by colleagues in the U.S. movement, especially Mark Churchill, by the 2009-2010 class of Sistema Fellows (at New England Conservatory), and others, in consultation with the Venezuelan leaders of El Sistema. This update revises that original work with my own continued learning, in ongoing dialogue with many, but without benefit of group consultation on the changes. – EB]

El Sistema is ... a set of inspiring ideals which inform an intensive youth music program that seeks to effect social change through the ambitious pursuit of musical excellence. El Sistema focuses primarily on children with the fewest resources and greatest need.

Core values:

- Every human being has the right to a life of dignity and contribution, filled with beauty.
- Every child can learn to experience and express music and art deeply, can receive its many benefits, and can make different critical life choices as a result of this learning.
- Overcoming poverty and adversity is best done by strengthening the spirit, creating, as Dr. Abreu puts it, "an affluence of the spirit," and investing that affluence as a valued asset in a community endeavor to create excellence and beauty in music.
- Effective education is based on love, approval, joy, and consistently successful experiences within a high-functioning, aspiring, nurturing community. Every

child has limitless possibilities and the ability to strive for excellence. “Trust the young,” informs every aspect of the work.

- Learning organizations never arrive but are always becoming – striving to include: more students, deeper impact, greater musical excellence, better teaching, improved tools, more joy. Thus, flexibility, experimentation, risk-taking, and collegial exchange are inherent aspects of every program.

1. Mission of social change. [Tocar y Luchar; To Play and To Strive]

El Sistema is a social change/youth development program that uses ensemble music to enable every child to experience being an asset within her or his community, inside and outside the “nucleo.” El Sistema develops citizens not musicians – responsible, joyful, contributing citizens. Students feel an ownership of the music making process, taking responsibility for both individual and group improvement. This is why they take on teaching roles themselves starting at an early age – peer-to-peer instruction is omnipresent as a practice, as a habit of mind, both in designated mentoring roles and in the constant impulse to help others improve their level of musical excellence. The “feel” of the social mission is captured in the slogan “to play and to strive.” This work is not effortful nor discipline-driven; it is the serious play of an artist in “flow experience,” which research affirms is optimum engagement in any endeavor, and which leads to optimum performance and learning. El Sistema nurtures a powerful intrinsic motivation in learners, which fuels the ambitious work ethic and drives learners to deep commitment, to values and practices that change their lives over time.

2. Access and excellence.

El Sistema includes as many children as it can, bringing young people into its centers whenever possible, as young as possible, for as long as possible, whatever their background or abilities. As El Sistema strives singlemindedly toward musical excellence in including all students, it also provides intensive, accelerated training at “Academies” for the most committed and gifted, preparing them for conservatory learning, for the highest-level city and national orchestras and cultivating them as teacher-leaders in their own communities and beyond. In this way and others, the ideals of access and excellence are maintained in a productive, dynamic balance that maximizes both the fullest success for all *and* highest accomplishment for some. Those with the most celebrated accomplishments do not veer out of the Sistema into careerism and individual celebrity, but all their superstars feed their success back into the Sistema, pouring new energy and expertise back in for wider access and greater excellence. The music learning ecosystem in the U.S. and many other countries presents programs with heartbreaking choices between access *or* excellence; El Sistema shows that a healthy interconnectedness is possible.

3. The nucleo environment.

The nucleo is a physical location, within the neighborhood where students live, that vibrantly embodies the values and goals of El Sistema. It is a haven of safety, fun, joy, and friendship, with an ethos of positivity and aspiration, where all students are encouraged to explore their potential. The nucleo's walls are porous membranes, open to the community, with community members often volunteering, and using the facility often to support other community needs. The distinctive quality of the learning environment is more significant in achieving El Sistema-inspired success than any particular pedagogical practices used within it. The atmosphere, created by all faculty, staff, students, and volunteers, and intensified over time through traditions developed in generations of commitment, is paradoxically safe and charged at the same time; indeed it is *very* safe and *very* charged at the same time.

4. Intensity.

Students spend a lot of time at the nucleo, many hours per day, almost all days of the week, often over four hours per day, six days per week – with extra time for special opportunities like festivals, seminarios and camps. Rehearsals are fast paced and rigorous, demanding a durable commitment, personal responsibility, and a strong work ethic. Through the intensifying boost of frequent performances, students have many opportunities to use performance to excel and to share their accomplishments with their peers, family and community. The intensity is an expression of aspiration and intention more than a sense of discipline or of any specific elements of curriculum; it is not imposed, it is born of each individual's hunger to create the greatest possible beauty, and an unspoken agreement between everyone to achieve it together. The totality of the commitment, expressed in a delicate balance of personal responsibility within interdependent group aspiration, provides the internal motivation to make the intensity sustainable.

5. The use of ensemble.

The learning in El Sistema is based in ensemble experience, group learning and practice, sectional learning, frequent performance, and as well as consistent (but strategic) individualized attention within and beyond the group setting. Individual lessons are prized and do contribute (especially as students develop into more accomplished orchestras), but the ensemble is the main learning tool. The orchestra acts as a model society in which an atmosphere of competition between individuals is replaced by shared aspiration and investment. [Dr Abreu: "The orchestra is the only group that comes together with the sole purpose of agreement."] Smaller ensembles of many kinds and choruses adopt the same group-minded ethos. Students' primary musical identification is as an ensemble member, more than as "a violinist."

6. The CATS teacher model: Citizen/Artist/Teacher/Scholar.

Those who work at the nucleo take on many jobs and multiple roles in relationship to the students. By acting as citizens, artists, teachers, and scholars (the CATS model was a suggestion from the first cohort of Sistema Fellows), these adults encourage their students to develop holistically: as active musicians, helpful educators, inquisitive learners, and responsible civic contributors. Students see their teachers pro-actively working in their communities to advance the work of the nucleo and for other social improvements. Students see their teachers perform, frequently, in classroom demonstration, and as often as possible in orchestras. Students see their teachers as learners, experimenters, as curious students, and thus we might call them scholars. Using my adage “80% of what you teach is who you are,” the visible embodiment of these roles instructs young musicians about how to participate fully in life. Becoming a music teacher is seen as a great accomplishment in life.

7. The multi-year continuum.

El Sistema provides a progression of learning processes, supporting its students from early childhood into adulthood. Despite variation in resources and practices, all nucleos work toward a full program of this kind. The sequence is exquisitely attuned to the learning abilities and needs, aesthetic and social interests, to keep students learning and succeeding at their developing edge of delights and aspirations. It organically uses musical play, singing, discovery of instruments to eliminate the hurdles of learning standard notation and gaining mastery of the instrument over years. The “Academies” and other national teams have formed lists of sequential repertoire, orchestral levels, and pedagogical practices that create a through-line for every child’s learning. Although each nucleo is encouraged to develop programs that suit its community, a shared teaching and learning-community set of practices and unified vision allow El Sistema to provide its students with a continuous, consistent, and coherent musical experience across their years and stages of development.

8. Family and community inclusion.

Family participation is an essential aspiration of El Sistema. Siblings often go to the same nucleo, parents attend classes with the youngest students, family members are taught ways to support student learning, and families form an eager and enthusiastic core audience at all concerts. Many sites have parent musical ensembles, and all nucleos actively work to involve the community at large through outreach concerts. The nucleo walls are highly porous membranes, and there is a constant flow and exchange between the inside-work and outside-relevance and value.

9. Connections and network.

Although nucleos run independently and customize their programs, they are strongly connected to the national leadership organization, which provides financial resources but more importantly gives the network a unified vision, and tools. Additionally, each nucleo is indispensably tied to the many other nucleos that form the El Sistema network. These interdependent relationships are manifested through events such as “festivals” and “seminarios,” which are intensive, project-based musical projects where orchestras share repertoire, streamline techniques, and build personal and institutional relationships. By uniting students and teachers from disparate parts of the country, the nucleo network embodies the El Sistema ideals of sharing and learning, and adds up to more than the sum of its parts. A student whose family moves can pick up in the new town’s nucleo right where she left off at the other.

10. Ambition and achievement. El Sistema work is more than merely good for young people. It aspires to transform young lives, and widely succeeds in setting a healthier, fuller trajectory for stressed young lives. In trying to distill the key element that makes that crucial difference in impact between being positive and being transformative, no single element alone is the catalyst, all the elements above are essential. However I am coming to conclude that the catalyst for such life-transformative impact is not just the aspiration for excellence, but the degree of hunger driving the aspiration for excellence; it always leans toward the highly-ambitious end of every opportunity, sometimes bordering on the outrageous to the norms of Western classical tradition. What changes young lives is being a part of an aligned and committed community (teachers, students, community included) that reaches unreasonably high together, regularly, taking risks to achieve excellence that matters to them and to others. This cycle of ambitious yearning and achievement, repeated consistently for the sake of beauty and contribution to community, changes, over time, the thousands of small and larger choices a young person makes in creating her life. This builds to a belief in each youngster that he or she can take on really difficult challenges and succeed – challenges such as finishing school and avoiding dangerous options, developing lives of their own choosing. And the cycle of ambition and success that leads to new beliefs like that is fuelled by sustainable supply of accomplishment and joy.