



2019

## Applying “El Sistema”: An Analysis of The People’s Music School in Chicago, Illinois

Elizabeth Schmidt  
*Butler University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses>



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Elizabeth, "Applying “El Sistema”: An Analysis of The People’s Music School in Chicago, Illinois" (2019). *Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection*. 476.  
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/ugtheses/476>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Honors Thesis Certification

Please type all information in this section:

Applicant Elizabeth Marie Schmidt  
(Name as it is to appear on diploma)

Thesis title Applying "El Sistema": An Analysis of  
The People's Music School in Chicago, IL

Intended date of commencement May 11, 2019

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Penny Dimmick 5/8/19  
Date

Reader(s) Betsy Harris 5/8/19  
Date

Date

**Applying “El Sistema”: An Analysis of The People’s Music School  
in Chicago, Illinois**

A Thesis

Presented to the School of Music

Jordan College of the Arts

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Elizabeth Schmidt

May 6, 2019

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Thesis Description	2
El Sistema in Venezuela	3
Music for Social Change	4
El Sistema USA	6
The People's Music School	7
Albany Park	8
Methodology	10
Findings: Interviews	12
Findings: Rehearsal Observation	15
Discussion	17
Areas for Continued Research	18
Conclusion	19
Appendix A	20
Appendix B	21
Bibliography	22

## **I. Introduction**

Founded in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu in Venezuela, El Sistema is a music education program that gives underprivileged children the opportunity to learn to play a string instrument in a youth orchestra setting. The mission of the program is to promote long-term social change through the character development that accompanies instrumental music education. El Sistema has since grown to include over one million students in Venezuela, and its mission has inspired educators in the United States to create similar programs. These El Sistema-inspired programs serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, aiming to provide students with hope and teach lifelong skills like punctuality, responsibility, and resilience.

This program has received a lot of attention primarily due to the work of Gustavo Dudamel, a conductor who came through El Sistema in Venezuela and is now one of the most famous conductors in the world. His ‘rags to riches’ story is inspiring and reminiscent of the American Dream, which may explain why some educators in the United States have been enamored with and inspired by the program and its mission. Many of these educators have chosen to model their own music education programs after El Sistema, resulting in a network of sixty-two El Sistema-inspired organizations in the United States. This network, named “El Sistema USA,” is quickly growing.

In the United States, Chicago, Illinois currently houses the most El Sistema-inspired programs within this network: The Chicago Arts and Music Project, Chicago Metamorphosis Orchestra Project, Sistema Ravinia, and The People’s Music School.<sup>1</sup> Considering the efforts and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Members Directory,” El Sistema USA, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://elsistemausa.org/member-directory/>.

successes of El Sistema in Venezuela, music educators in Chicago identified the value of such a program in their own communities.

What educators may not have considered when first implementing El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States are the changes that would be necessary to make the mission of El Sistema work in an American context. Although these programs use the name “El Sistema” in their descriptions, they function differently than the original program in Venezuela. A social outreach program like El Sistema cannot be transplanted from one society to another and look identical, because the program is meant to serve its society in response to cultural context. As such, a change in location necessitates a change in function. For this reason, programs like The People’s Music School adapt the original mission and process of El Sistema from its Venezuelan context in order to fit the community they are serving in Chicago.

## **II. Thesis Description**

In this thesis, I will discuss both the research that led up to my observation and interviews at The People’s Music School location in the Albany Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois and my subsequent findings. These findings suggest that a program meant to inspire social change will not remain exactly the same if taken out of its original societal and cultural context. Instead, the program evolves to meet the needs of the community it serves.

Caracas, Venezuela and Chicago, Illinois in the United States provide very different cultural backdrops for programs with the same name; however, there are key similarities that allow the greater mission of El Sistema to apply to both. The details of ‘how’ this mission is accomplished at The People’s Music School in Chicago is different than it is accomplished

elsewhere, but adapting to meet the specific needs of the community it serves has allowed the program to thrive for decades, with growing enrollment numbers and a one hundred percent high school graduation rate.<sup>2</sup>

### **III. El Sistema in Venezuela**

La Fundación del Estado para el Sistema Nacional de las Orquestas Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela, often shortened to ‘El Sistema’, was founded by José Antonio Abreu in 1975. The program began with eleven students in an underground parking garage in Caracas, Venezuela with the mission of ‘music for social change’ through tuition-free orchestral training. This broad goal is applied in a variety of ways but tends to take on one of two forms: the teaching of social development skills that are crucial to being a part of a larger orchestra and outreach to the larger community as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

One of the founding concepts of El Sistema was that of the “núcleo.” As it relates to El Sistema, a núcleo is a local community music school that serves a particular neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> The program “particularly looks to offer opportunities for the disadvantaged and is based in núcleo centres, and is thus a manifestation of, and rooted in, each local community.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, each orchestral program varies slightly based upon the community that it serves. Today, El Sistema has expanded to serve over a million students across 443 núcleos in Venezuela.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> “Our Approach,” What We Do, The People’s Music School, last modified 2018, <https://peoplesmusicschool.org/what-we-do/>.

<sup>3</sup> “¿Qué es El Sistema?” Sistema Nacional de Orquestas y Coros Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela: Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar, accessed March 4, 2019, <http://fundamusical.org.ve/que-es-el-sistema/>.

<sup>4</sup> “What is El Sistema?” Sistema Europe, accessed April 14, 2019, [https://www.sistemaeurope.org/What\\_is\\_El\\_Sistema/](https://www.sistemaeurope.org/What_is_El_Sistema/).

<sup>5</sup> “What is El Sistema?” Sistema Europe.

<sup>6</sup> “¿Qué es El Sistema?” Sistema Nacional.

One orchestra from a núcleo in Caracas, Venezuela, the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar, has risen to international renown. After its performance at the BBC Proms in 2007, under the direction of Gustavo Dudamel, it has become the face of El Sistema.<sup>7</sup> This has given the orchestra and its members a platform with which to make known to the world the truth of the political turmoil in Venezuela.

#### **IV. Music for Social Change**

Part of the original mission of El Sistema, and a defining feature of an El Sistema-inspired program, is an emphasis on music education as a means of stimulating social change. “Music for social change” is a fairly broad mission with various possible interpretations and implementations. This open-endedness is part of the reason why El Sistema has been contextualized in many different countries in order to fit the needs of a particular community. Dependent upon the societal context in which an outreach program is created, the perceived needs for social change can vary.

In Venezuela, El Sistema is associated with political resistance.<sup>8</sup> In such a politically charged environment, how can it not be political? At the same time, the last several presidents of Venezuela, including Hugo Chávez, have openly approved of El Sistema and its mission.<sup>9</sup> How is that possible? El Sistema does not proclaim a political agenda, but it gives its members the tools

---

<sup>7</sup> “Prom 48,” Proms: The World’s Greatest Classical Music Festival, BBC, August 19, 2007, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ewqzc8>.

<sup>8</sup> Rachele Krygiar and Anthony Faiola, “A young Venezuelan made his violin an instrument of resistance. The government hit back,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/a-young-venezuelan-made-his-violin-an-instrument-of-resistance-the-government-hit-back/2017/08/25/2a087628-8813-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f3f7ab40cbef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/a-young-venezuelan-made-his-violin-an-instrument-of-resistance-the-government-hit-back/2017/08/25/2a087628-8813-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb_story.html?utm_term=.f3f7ab40cbef).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel J. Wakin, “Music Meets Chávez Politics, and Critics Frown,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/arts/music/venezuelans-criticize-hugo-chavez-support-of-el-sistema.html>.



to express what they believe in a powerful statement. This is a sort of quiet subversion on the part of the administration of El Sistema. In Venezuela, there was a need for a mode of nonviolent protest, and almost incidentally, El Sistema is meeting that need.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the outreach aspect of the program meets the perceived needs for social change based on its societal context.

In Venezuela, Wuilly Arteaga, a Sistema musician, exemplifies this nonviolent political protest through music. On the front lines of an anti-government protest, Arteaga played his violin.<sup>11</sup> The symbol of a violinist amidst clouds of tear gas has inspired other Sistema musicians to follow suit.<sup>12</sup> Music creates a very public stage for protestors, which can be incredibly powerful in furthering a movement. This kind of publicity is also very dangerous, and musicians have been put in prison or even killed for these acts of protest against the Venezuelan government.<sup>13</sup> El Sistema has given its young musicians a new mode of responding to the political turmoil around them.

Many El Sistema-inspired programs, including the Chicago-based program I examined as a part of my research, interpret the “social change” aspect of the El Sistema mission to mean teaching life skills and positive behavior in addition to musical content. Music education advocates often identify responsibility, punctuality, and resilience as skills developed through music participation that are applicable in many areas of life. The notion that participation in music programs can develop positive social behaviors in children is not unique to this specific interpretation of El Sistema’s mission; however, this particular interpretation highlights an

---

<sup>10</sup> Krygiar and Faiola, “A young Venezuelan made his violin an instrument of resistance.”

<sup>11</sup> Gabriela Saldivia, “Tear Gas Doesn’t Stop Venezuelan Protester From Playing The Violin,” *National Public Radio*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/12/528072958/tear-gas-doesnt-stop-venezuelan-protester-from-playing-the-violin>.

<sup>12</sup> Krygiar and Faiola, “A young Venezuelan made his violin an instrument of resistance.”

<sup>13</sup> Krygiar and Faiola, “A young Venezuelan made his violin an instrument of resistance.”

important difference between El Sistema-inspired programs and El Sistema in its original Venezuelan context.

## **V. El Sistema USA**

The story of El Sistema continues to inspire educators about the possibilities of music education. Educators understand that many programs struggle to reach students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or have challenges in their lives outside of school. Factors like these tend to contribute to lower graduation and college enrollment rates. A program like El Sistema that promises long-lasting social impact through music education not only contributes to advocacy for similar programs, but also provides hope for students and educators alike.

El Sistema has proven to be especially effective in Venezuela given the presence of societal challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, marginalization, exclusion among children, and political unrest.<sup>14</sup> These provide the opportunity for a social change organization to make a significant social and cultural impact. Some neighborhoods in the United States may have similar characteristics, so the mission of El Sistema readily applies.

More and more educators are implementing the mission of El Sistema in their own music education programs in the United States. Many choose to associate their program with the growing network, El Sistema USA. Being a part of a larger network provides educational organizations with a community of support and a way to share ideas and resources. El Sistema USA believes “that El Sistema is an ongoing inquiry into the most effective ways to achieve the youth development goals that we all share through the rigors and rewards of orchestral music

---

<sup>14</sup> “¿Qué es El Sistema?” Sistema Nacional.

instruction.”<sup>15</sup> The network includes 122 El Sistema-inspired programs across the United States, and it is quickly growing.<sup>16</sup>

## **VI. The People’s Music School**

I knew from the earliest stages of my research that I wanted to focus on a school or schools in Chicago, Illinois. There are various reasons for this: some practical and some personal. Given that I was conducting this research while I was a student at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, location was a factor in deciding where I would focus my research. Chicago is relatively close to Indianapolis, and it is one of the biggest cities in the United States. The city also demonstrates some of the same properties that contribute to El Sistema’s success in its Venezuelan context. In Chicago, there is a significant economic divide between the upper and lower classes, and there are oppressed groups of people within the community.<sup>17</sup> Personally, I am from the northwest suburbs of Chicago. Having spent a lot of time in the city growing up, I am interested to find out as much as I can about its culture of music education, especially since I am considering the prospect of returning to Illinois when I begin my teaching career.

The next decision had to do with which school to research. Chicago currently has four that are officially recognized by the network El Sistema USA. The People’s Music School was founded in 1976 by Rita Simo, and it has grown a great deal in over four decades. The school has sites in four locations, three of which serve specific neighborhoods rather than the city at large. Additionally, the school boasts impressive statistics, including 100% high school graduation and

---

<sup>15</sup> “About,” El Sistema USA.

<sup>16</sup> “Members Directory,” El Sistema USA.

<sup>17</sup> “What We Do,” The People’s Music School.

college attendance rates. How can a program with next to no requirements for entry achieve such excellent results? I had to find out.

Before stepping foot in the school itself, I looked into the school's mission to consider the similarities to, and potentially the differences from, the mission of El Sistema in Venezuela. According to the website, the school's mission "is to deliver access to the benefits of high-quality, tuition-free music education. Through intensive instruction and performance, our students achieve excellence in music that transfers to other areas in life. They grow musically, socially, emotionally and intellectually, and develop a foundation of responsibility, self-esteem, resilience and purpose."<sup>18</sup> This is a noble pursuit, and the aim of many music education programs, but I noticed that there is no reference to large-scale social change in the community. This peaked my interest to find out whether or not the school was reaching out past its program to the community, and if so, how?

## **VII. Albany Park**

When I first arranged to visit The People's Music School, my intention was to examine the main school, located in Uptown; however, I was invited to visit the location in Albany Park as well. As I interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents there, I was particularly drawn to the story of the school's beginning. The location in Albany Park was a separate program before it ended up being connected with the names "The People's Music School" or "El Sistema." Music education students at North Park University, looking for an opportunity to gain meaningful teaching experience, created a program that offered free private lessons to students at William G.

---

<sup>18</sup> The People's Music School, "Our Approach."

Hibbard Elementary School in the Chicago Public School District. The program was mutually transformative for teachers and students alike. Children who otherwise would not have had access to individualized music instruction were given that opportunity, and college students studying music education had the opportunity to build some teaching skills. Eventually, the program grew to the point of needing additional support, and the school partnered with The People's Music School and adopted their vision modeled on El Sistema.<sup>19</sup>

Although the location in Albany Park is a satellite location of The People's Music School, there are a few key differences in how the program functions when compared to the program located in Uptown. In particular, the way that the program serves a particular neighborhood is different than the way The People's Music School originally functioned. Ninety-nine percent of the students involved in the program at Albany Park are enrolled at William G. Hibbard Elementary School, which, as a public school in the Chicago Public School District, serves almost entirely students from the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the demographics of the program match the demographics of the school.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> "Hibbard Elem School (PK-6)", Illinois Report Card, Illinois State Board of Education, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/School.aspx?schoolid=150162990252265>.

**Table 1.** Racial Demographics of William G. Hibbard Elementary School<sup>22</sup>

<b>Racial Demographics of William G. Hibbard Elementary School</b>	
Asian	7.3%
Black	5.2%
Hispanic	79.6%
White	6.4%
Other	1.6%

William G. Hibbard Elementary School is designated as a “Title I” school, because 61.7% of students come from low-income families.<sup>23</sup> In addition, 57.1% of students are limited in their usage of English.<sup>24</sup> Understanding these demographics will allow for a deeper understanding of how The People’s Music School in Albany Park serves its community.

### **VIII. Methodology**

My initial intention was to research the societal context in which El Sistema was created and the goals and purposes for which it was created. I planned to then compare my findings with the societal context and mission statements of the programs in the United States. I hoped that comparing and contrasting these would provide an answer to the question “How do the differences in the historical and social contexts of El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States, when compared with the program’s original context in Venezuela, impact their potential for long-term social change?”

---

<sup>22</sup> Illinois State Board of Education, “Hibbard Elem School (PK-6)”.

<sup>23</sup> Illinois State Board of Education, “Hibbard Elem School (PK-6)”.

<sup>24</sup> Illinois State Board of Education, “Hibbard Elem School (PK-6)”.

Needless to say, that mission was outside the scope of my research. Such a research endeavor would require truly understanding how El Sistema functions in its original context in Venezuela. Travel to Venezuela is expensive, and considering the current political climate there, dangerous. Without extensive research contextualizing the original El Sistema, comparing and contrasting, as I initially hoped to do, would lack supporting evidence.

Instead, I decided to focus in on El Sistema as it has been interpreted by The People's Music School in Chicago, Illinois. In October of 2018, I visited two locations of The People's Music School, in Uptown and Albany Park, Chicago. There, I observed music rehearsals and interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents in order to learn about the program and its perceived impact in its community as a whole.

I realized that there may be some bias present in the responses I received in the interviews. Due to the nature of the study, many participants are subject to outside influence. Parents whose students are enrolled or teachers who are employed by The People's Music School may feel inclined to share only positive opinions about the program, especially if they believed the information could be traceable back to them. For this reason, confidentiality was of the utmost importance. The only identifying information attached to any of the information collected from the interviews is one of three titles that describes the relationship the subject has to the program: "administrator", "teacher", or "parent". For parents and teachers, this made the data shared practically untraceable to a particular individual. Additionally, an informed consent statement was used, and any individual participating in the study had the right to withdraw from the interview or "pass" any question at any time.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> For lists of the interview questions used, see Appendix A and Appendix B.

## **IX. Findings: Interviews**

Interviewing administrators, teachers, and parents at The People’s Music School in Albany Park provided insight into how the program, and that site in particular, operates. The Albany Park location is a “community site”, so it closely matches the núcleo model of El Sistema. The program primarily recruits from the students at William G. Hibbard Elementary School, which is also where the program is held after school. Programming is specifically after school, from 3:30-5:30PM. A lottery system is used for admission into the program so that all students have a fair chance of being selected, and there are no qualifications, musical or otherwise, for participation.<sup>26</sup>

An interview with an administrator also provided more information about the history of the location of this particular program. The program in Albany Park was started about a decade ago by students at North Park University studying music education who offered free private music lessons to the students at William G. Hibbard Elementary School. An administrator described this relationship between the university and the elementary school as a “perfect marriage because North Park [University] is diverse and in this community”.<sup>27</sup> The program evolved and later joined The People’s Music School as a community location, which provided the program with an experienced administrative team and more focused recruitment methods.

The operations of The People’s Music School depend on parent support. One of the only requirements for admission to the school is that a parent of the student commits to volunteer hours. This volunteering aspect urges parents to get involved, including those who might not otherwise. According to a parent in Albany Park, there is a “sense of community” among the

---

<sup>26</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.



parent volunteers that “becomes like a family.”<sup>28</sup> This allows the impact of the program to extend past the students themselves to their parents.

Involving the parents in a student’s music education is not a new idea. It is especially reminiscent of the Suzuki method, which depends on extensive parental support throughout the learning process for a young child. Parent support, or the lack thereof, can substantially impact how a program functions. Parents are responsible for the transportation of the students each day, and they often provide a layer of accountability for the student to practice at home. In the case of The People’s Music School, the presence of parent support allows the impact of the program on the children to extend past 5:30PM to the practice time at home, extra programming in the evenings and weekends, and the concerts.

One topic that came up again and again in the interviews was the ECCHO core values, which are unique to The People’s Music School’s interpretation of El Sistema. ECCHO stands for excellence, creativity, community, hard work and opportunity. These values outline the specific characteristics that The People’s Music School seeks to develop in its students, and exemplifies one of the ways that the school promotes social change through music education. In the school’s programming, these values are often emphasized during a large group activity time between the end of the school day and the start of rehearsals. One administrator that I interviewed in Albany Park said that these core values could “be taught organically and in activities if planned ahead of time.”<sup>29</sup> Taking time to specifically integrate the ‘soft skills’ related to music into the curriculum is an intentional part of the afterschool program.

---

<sup>28</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

Another aspect of the programming at The People's Music School that makes it unique is its yearly themes that address social and political issues. Last year, the theme was "Raise Your Voice," to empower the oppressed who are often silenced. This year's theme has been "You Belong Here". The community that The People's Music School serves is largely hispanic, and given the current political climate with the project to build a wall on the border between the United States and Mexico, this theme is greatly needed in this community. An administrator in Albany park said that this "has been a challenge in this community in light of politics", but "this is what our community needs."<sup>30</sup> These yearly themes are important to how The People's Music School adapts the original El Sistema program from Venezuela to meet the needs of Chicago.

It is clearly evident that the program promotes social change internally, but how does this impact extend to the greater community? An administrator in Albany Park talked about how the program seeks to stay involved and aware of how politics impact the community it is serving, and finding ways to constantly support these communities through conscientious and current practices. This is crucial when supporting historically silenced or oppressed communities, such as racial minorities and immigrants. The People's Music School focuses on outreach through concerts and events that give these communities a sense of belonging, safety, and community. Thinking from a statistical perspective, this kind of outreach is especially important in a city like Chicago where there is so much variation in diversity from one neighborhood to the next.

An interesting point to consider when thinking about the program's impact is the perspective and perceptions of those involved. One aspect that I found particularly interesting was that some parents were not exactly sure what it means that the program is associated with

---

<sup>30</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

the El Sistema program in Venezuela. All parents understood that the program promises tuition-free orchestral training, but few knew what the mission of El Sistema entails.

As I interviewed parents during my visit, I also asked, “How has the program impacted your children?” and, “What skills outside of musicianship are taught?” in order to more deeply understand the perceived impact of The People’s Music School. Parents often described the amazing opportunities that the program gave their children to learn music and travel that they would have never otherwise been able to afford. One kept bringing up that her child met the Obama family during an event with The People’s Music School. In terms of skills outside of musicianship, parents referenced managing and prioritizing time, speaking in an articulate way, appreciating the differences of others, and networking.<sup>31</sup>

## **X. Findings: Rehearsal Observation**

When I visited The People’s Music School at Albany Park, I had the opportunity to observe the “Discover” beginning band class. I found it interesting that wind instruments received separate instruction from the string instruments, much like the programs in the United States, since El Sistema is widely regarded as specifically an ‘orchestra’ program. Unlike most band programs in the United States, the students in the program were very young: most were in 2nd or 3rd grade. Due to the age of the students, the instrumentation was limited to smaller instruments, including oboe, flute, clarinet, percussion, and trumpet, that can be more manageably played by an 8- or 9-year old student.

---

<sup>31</sup> Unpublished in-person interview, interview by author, Schmidt, October 12, 2018.

The rehearsal itself seemed pretty typical from what I have seen in my time as a student in band programs. The beginning of the rehearsal focused on warm-ups and fundamentals, and then the rehearsal moved on to repertoire for an upcoming performance. I was impressed with the attention span that the students exhibited. The rehearsal was over an hour long, and spent a lot of time on only two pieces, yet the students appeared to be engaged throughout. Additionally, the content itself was also fairly impressive considering the grades of the students. The music contained extended periods of syncopation and rhythms that are normally difficult for most 2nd or 3rd graders to sing, much less read and play on an instrument.

I noticed that the students showed a very positive attitude toward the rehearsal, and the teacher established an encouraging culture of cooperation. When the students all finished together at the end of the piece, they were so excited that they started cheering. Working together toward a common goal in this way naturally teaches many of the social characteristics outside of music that El Sistema seeks to teach.

Even though the rehearsal seemed long for the age of the students when compared to typical class lengths in the United States, the program length is short compared to the programs in Venezuela. The average program in Venezuela runs about four hours, six days a week,<sup>32</sup> much longer than the program at The People's Music School which runs about two hours, four days a week. Is it difficult for the teachers in Venezuela to keep the students focused and engaged for such long periods of time every day?

---

<sup>32</sup> “¿Qué es El Sistema?” Sistema Nacional.

## **XI. Discussion**

At first glance, the program seemed less “revolutionary” than I was expecting. I have observed many excellent music educators, and their rehearsals are similar to the rehearsal I observed at The People’s Music School. The content is no different from any other instrumental music program, a quarter note is still a quarter note. Any music teacher could tell you that involvement in an ensemble promotes the development of character. Also, it did not seem that the program made much more of an effort toward outreach to the larger community than any other music education program. Concerts and parent involvement are not atypical. These points led me to question: have El Sistema-inspired programs oversimplified El Sistema as Abreu had envisioned?

Although El Sistema has received international acclaim and been portrayed as pedagogically progressive, Geoffrey Baker’s book, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*, takes a critical stance.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on his fieldwork and interviews in Venezuela, he presents a controversial, though compelling argument that the program is not the force of positive social change that it claims to be. The program seeks to create social change by focusing on teaching children life skills like responsibility and punctuality through music, but this does not address the most pressing social and political issues in Venezuela. Baker claims that this makes it dangerous in a way because it creates the illusion of progress, resulting in complacency, without tangible results on a larger scale.<sup>34</sup> If this is a fault in the original program in Venezuela, it has been magnified in the programs it has inspired worldwide.

---

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Baker, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Baker, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela’s Youth*.

This, however, is not a fault in the El Sistema-inspired programs because they are not meant to function in the same way as the program in its original Venezuelan context. The revolutionary nature of The People's Music School has less to do with content or how the program functions, and more to do with the program's location and the very fact that it exists at all. The program has not only survived but has grown over the past decade because it serves high-need students after school in a neighborhood without similar opportunities. The school has addressed the social needs and concerns of the community it serves and has created a welcoming environment that provides hope for a better future. The People's Music School has not attempted to take the El Sistema program out of its Venezuelan context, expecting it to function identically; rather, the program takes the mission and ideals of El Sistema and differentiates them in a way that is appropriate and valuable for Albany Park.

## **XII. Areas for Continued Research**

My visit to The People's Music School in Albany Park answered some of my questions, but it also revealed many more questioned that are yet to be answered. As is often the case in academia, there are many areas for continued research in this field.

Perhaps one of the difficult challenges in studying El Sistema is determining whether or not the program is successful in its mission of social change. Several scholars have attempted to answer this question, but there is still much work to be done. Such a determination is outside of the scope of this research, but the study of El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States can contribute to a greater understanding of the program's level of success on a global scale.

The nature of this research is that it focuses on one particular El Sistema-inspired school. The People's Music School is one of four such school systems in Chicago, and there are dozens more across the United States. Comparing and contrasting several of these programs that all share the designation of "El Sistema" may reveal more areas of continued research.

In my research, I could not help but notice similarities between El Sistema concepts as they were applied at The People's Music School and the Suzuki method. Starting students from a young age and involving the parents in the music education process are characteristics of both programs, so it may be interesting to compare the origins of each or compare their components and ideologies.

### **XIII. Conclusion**

Much of the current scholarship regarding El Sistema attempts to determine whether or not the program was successful in accomplishing what it set out to do. The mission, "music for social change," is broad, and leaves a lot up to interpretation. The assessment of the program as either a success or failure often depends on how 'social change' is defined.

It is outside of the scope of this research to label the program as a success or a failure; however, it is important to note that the program has survived for decades, and has continued to grow. An education program with a mission founded in social outreach cannot survive unless it meets the needs of its community. The main similarity between The People's Music School in Albany Park and the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar in Venezuela is that the programs arose from a need in the community that was not being met. These programs have had a major impact in their respective communities because they serve that need.

#### **XIV. Appendix A**

##### List of Interview Questions for Administrators and Teachers:

1. In what ways is this program based on the original El Sistema model?
2. In what ways (if any) is this program different from the original El Sistema model?
3. How was this school founded?
4. Was the association with El Sistema a founding principle or was it added later on?
5. How does this program recruit?
6. What are the qualifications for participation in the program?
7. What is the role of the program in this neighborhood in Chicago?
8. Has the program evolved since it was started? If so, how, and why do you think that is the case?
9. What do you believe is the most important purpose of the program?
10. Sometimes, the purpose of El Sistema is described broadly as “social change.” How specifically does this program inspire social change in the community?
11. There are four El Sistema-inspired programs in Chicago. Why do you think Chicago is home to more El Sistema-inspired programs than any other city in the United States?



**XV. Appendix B**

List of Interview Questions for Parents:

1. How did you hear about this school/program?
2. How has the program impacted your child?
3. What is the role of this program in the neighborhood?
4. What skills outside of music does participation in an orchestra provide?
5. What can you tell me about El Sistema?
6. Sometimes, the purpose of El Sistema is described broadly as “social change.” How specifically does this program inspire social change in the community?
7. There are four El Sistema-inspired programs in Chicago. Why do you think Chicago is home to more El Sistema-inspired programs than any other city in the United States?

## **XV. Bibliography**

Baker, Geoffrey. *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

BBC. "Prom 48." Proms: The World's Greatest Classical Music Festival. Last modified August 19, 2007. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ewqzc8>.

Bradley, Deborah. "Good for What, Good for Whom?: Decolonizing Music Education Philosophies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy in Music Education*, edited by Wayne D. Bowman and Ana Lucia Frega, 409-433, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

El Sistema USA: A National Alliance of El Sistema Inspired Programs. Last modified 2019. <https://elsistemausa.org/>.

Hollinger, Diana. "Instrument of Social Reform: A Case Study of the Venezuelan System of Youth Orchestras." PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2006.

Illinois State Board of Education. "Hibbard Elem School (PK-6)." Illinois Report Card. Accessed October 12, 2018. <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/School.aspx?schoolid=150162990252265>.

Krygiar, Rachele and Anthony Faiola. "A young Venezuelan made his violin an instrument of resistance. The government hit back." *Washington Post*, August 28, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/a-young-venezuelan-made-his-violin-an-instrument-of-resistance-the-government-hit-back/2017/08/25/2a087628-8813-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f3f7ab40cbef](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/a-young-venezuelan-made-his-violin-an-instrument-of-resistance-the-government-hit-back/2017/08/25/2a087628-8813-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb_story.html?utm_term=.f3f7ab40cbef).

- Lander, Edgardo. *Neoliberalismo, Sociedad Civil y Democracia: Ensayos Sobre América Latina y Venezuela*. Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2006.
- Lesniak, Melissa. "El Sistema and American Music Education." *Music Educators Journal* 99, no. 2 (December 2012): 63-66.
- Lombardi, John V. *Venezuela: The Search for Order, The Dream of Progress*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Marsh, Hazel. "Popular Music and Politics in Venezuela in the Chavez Period: The Case of Ali Primera's Canción Necesaria." PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2013.
- Mora-Brito, Daniel. "Between Social Harmony and Political Dissonance: The Institutional and Policy-Based Intricacies of the Venezuelan System of Children and Youth Orchestras." Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2011.
- Saldivia, Gabriela. "Tear Gas Doesn't Stop Venezuelan Protester From Playing The Violin." *National Public Radio*, May 12, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/12/528072958/tear-gas-doesnt-stop-venezuelan-protester-from-playing-the-violin>.
- Schmidt, Patrick. "Democracy and Dissensus: Constructing Conflict in Music Education." *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 7, no. 1 (January 2008): 10-28.
- Sistema Europe. "What is El Sistema?" Accessed April 14, 2019. [https://www.sistemaeurope.org/What\\_is\\_El\\_Sistema/](https://www.sistemaeurope.org/What_is_El_Sistema/).
- Sistema Nacional de Orquestas y Coros Juveniles e Infantiles de Venezuela: Fundación Musical Simón Bolívar. "¿Qué es El Sistema?" Accessed March 4, 2019. <http://fundamusical.org.ve/que-es-el-sistema/>.

The People's Music School. "What We Do." Last modified 2018.

<https://peoplesmusicschool.org/>.

Tunstall, Tricia. "Another Perspective: El Sistema--A Perspective for North American Music Educators." *Music Educators Journal* 100, no. 1 (September 2013): 69-71.

Tunstall, Tricia, and Eric Booth. *Playing for Their Lives: The Global El Sistema Movement for Social Change Through Music*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Urbain, Olivier. *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

Wakin, Daniel J. "Music Meets Chávez Politics, and Critics Frown." *New York Times*, February 17, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/18/arts/music/venezuelans-criticize-hugo-chavezs-support-of-el-sistema.html>.

Weissman, Dick. *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution: Music and Social Change in America*. New York: Backbeat Books, 2010.

Wolff, Virginia. Review of *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*, by Geoffrey Baker. *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, January 2015.