

The Power of Many: Collaborative Research Findings

by *Dennie Palmer Wolf, Steven Holochwost, and Judith Hill Bose, WolfBrown Associates*

The news is in! Three years, twelve sites, 764 3rd- to 5th-graders, a research team from WolfBrown and the Longy School of Music, and hours of collaboration have yielded robust findings – and big questions – for the field of El Sistema-inspired teaching and learning: Here are some of the most significant findings.

🎵 Students exhibited significant growth in their ability to play their instruments. We measured musical growth using internationally accepted standards, with established inter-rater reliability on familiar and new excerpts. Young musicians show the steepest rates of growth during their first two years. By the third year of study, students are still exhibiting growth, but at a much slower rate.

While it is important to be able to show that our students are growing as individual musicians (as well as ensemble players), and to reach beyond anecdotal reports of musical progress, the findings also raise important questions for the field. For instance, is a steep incline followed by more gradual growth a to-be-expected pattern of acquiring a complex skill, or should programs think differently about how to challenge and engage older players?

🎵 Students in El Sistema-inspired programs for 2 to 3 years report higher levels of growth mindset than their peers who do not participate in an El Sistema program. After only one year of participation, El Sistema students report rising levels of growth mindset when they describe how they take on challenges as musicians. By their second year in the program, young musicians also report higher levels of growth mindset for themselves in school (as compared with their peers who are not participating). Growth mindset is the belief that one's basic qualities – such as intelligence or musical ability – are due to one's actions and efforts rather than to a fixed trait or talent. This is an important finding, as there is increasing evidence that growth mindset may be a vital ingredient in both school and life success.

Based on this evidence, it is well worth asking if the field can identify and share the daily practices that produce these growth mindset gains. Would students experience even more benefits of adopting a growth mindset if it were more consciously nurtured in their musical studies? If it takes 2-3 years for children to experience the deepest benefits – those that seem to transfer beyond music – how does that change

our thinking about program retention? What can programs do to help students persist, so that they are able to reach the full potential of this development?

🎵 Boys in El Sistema-inspired programs exhibit higher rates of growth in cooperation, perseverance, and academic self-concept than their peers who are not enrolled. This correlates with findings of a recent study completed in Venezuela, and also speaks to how many classrooms struggle to engage boys.

Does this finding ensue because demanding music programs provide an unusually active and embodied setting where boys can take up these skills? Or is it because current measures are particularly sensitive to detecting changes in young males, while not equally well attuned to changes in young female students? Where should we be looking, and with what tools, to discern possible changes in girls and young women?

Perhaps the biggest takeaway is the following: When unequal access to arts learning cuts some children off from sustained arts education, they lose more than the chance to play an instrument (or act, or draw). Those inequalities also exclude them from settings where they can flourish emotionally and socially, developing engagement, growth mindset, and self-regulation – skills that will matter throughout their lives.

The study has yielded more than research findings. By working together as a collective effort, sites and researchers have developed a set of measures that can be effectively and authentically embedded in El Sistema-inspired programs and administered by program staff. These measures can be used in a wide range of settings to investigate the effects of early orchestral experiences for elementary-age children. You can now access all of these measures, as well as detailed descriptions, instructions for implementation, and reference materials, at:

<http://wolfbrown.com/news/a-national-collaborative-evaluation-of-sistema-inspired-music-education>

Colleagues at 12 different sites across the country have paved the way for all of us to join together in a continued effort at a national evaluation of El Sistema-inspired learning in this country. For the first time, this allows us to understand not only the variety of development at our individual sites, but also the growth and challenges of our national movement.

FROM THE EDITOR

The first nationwide research about El Sistema-inspired programs in the United States: are we paying enough attention to this?

We should be paying a lot of attention. Rigorous independent research at 12 sites across the country, with many hundreds of students involved – this is a big deal. It gives us a new way to understand and reflect on what we've accomplished and where we need to go from here. The researchers themselves are ideal partners; WolfBrown is respected for its meticulous standards and commitment to the arts, and the Longy School of Music is a leader among conservatories in its tenacious emphasis on community-based arts teaching and learning.

Our lead article describes some of the major findings of the study and some of the questions they raise. There's reason for optimism here, and grist for reflection. But what I want to focus on is the set of measures developed and honed in the course of the study. Click on the [link](#) in the article, and you'll have this toolkit. They're yours. They're ours. And they give us the capacity to evaluate ourselves not only program by program but also as a national field, a country-wide movement.

If every Sistema program in the U.S. adopted and implemented these measures, we would have a vast trove of information about our collective impact. We would know what our strongest achievements are, and could make the case for Sistema-inspired programs with a clarity and force we've never been capable of before. We would know what our weaknesses are, and could address those as a field rather than in scattershot isolation.

I understand that as individual programs, each of us wants to measure ourselves against the goals most relevant to our kids and communities. But I strongly feel that along with such evaluation efforts, programs should adopt these common measures. As long as we keep measuring ourselves separately, fundraising separately, and advocating separately, we will keep ourselves powerless on a national level. In effect, we're saying: we fervently want our program for our community, but when it comes to arts education and social justice as matters of national policy...we just don't have time.

So please, click on that [link](#). It's a step toward national potency.

Tricia Tunstall

News Notes

In March of 2016, [Bay Area Music Project](#) (Alameda, CA) choir students collaborated with and grew to know young instrumental music students from [Music Heals International](#) (Port au Prince, Haiti) through videos and meeting together. Teaching artists from both programs chose two songs (“We’re Going To Be Friends” by the White Stripes and the Haitian folk song “Panama Me Tombe”), and brought each group to record in a professional studio for the first time. The songs will be released on music streaming services in October to raise funds for both programs. The entire experience is the subject of a documentary film called “[Fingerprints](#),” made by BAMP Board member Don Hardy, that will be premiering at the [Mill Valley Film Festival](#) in October 2017. *The Ensemble* will provide information about future showings of the film in later issues.

While rehearsing a Beethoven concerto with the Winnipeg Symphony, Itzhak Perlman took a break to visit with ten young string players from [Sistema Winnipeg](#) (which now has 160 students). The kids found him inspiring when he played and delightfully personal and playful when they visited.

Two students (both play tuba and drums, sing, and teach) from Peabody’s [Tuned In](#) and The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra’s [OrchKids](#) travelled to Austria, Italy, Germany, and England this summer to participate in the [Alpine Brass Band Camp](#) and the [Sistema England Young Leaders Program](#). Keith Flemming (age 15) and Lowrider James (age 12) were accompanied by Dan Trahey, who led Collective Composition and Low Brass at both camps. At both camps, in addition to chamber music, British brass band music, orchestral repertoire, and collective compositions, the trio immersed the European young people in America-born music such as New Orleans jazz and hip hop. Both students were financially responsible for 25% of their travel costs and earned money through teaching, playing gigs, and doing yard work. They will return to Europe in the Summer of 2018 for The Zywiec Trombone Festival in Poland and for the Sistema Europe National Youth Orchestra residency in England.

In August, the music learning site [MusicalU](#) launched a new twice-a-week program called [The Musicality Podcast](#). It features interviews with diverse musicians and educators. The podcasts are free and include transcripts – some students, as well as teachers, may be interested in subscribing. <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/topic/podcast>

Resources

[Createquity](#), an independent arts research-based thinktank, is a resource you should know about and subscribe to. Here are three recent reports with some relevance to El Sistema-inspired programs:

1. A just-released report looks at [the research on music, singing and wellbeing](#). We hear many claims about music’s physical and psychological benefits. This report analyzes which claims are strongly supported by reliable evidence, and which are only partly or weakly supported, bolstering advocacy but tempering it in places where some may have been over-claiming. <http://createquity.com/2017/09/capsule-review-music-singing-wellbeing>
2. Also, see Createquity’s report (noted in the last issue of *The Ensemble*) about [the impact of arts organizations that make commitments to take civically-minded actions](#): <http://createquity.com/2017/08/createquity-arts-research-prize-winner>
3. The research summary “Why Don’t They Come” explores [why people with lower incomes and less education attend the arts less frequently](#). <http://createquity.com/2015/05/why-dont-they-come>

[ACM Lifting Lives](#) is the philanthropic arm of the Academy of Country Music. It funds music-focused nonprofits that promote education and healing, with a special interest in music education programs in schools, especially for at-risk, underserved populations. Move fast – the application deadline is October 4, 2017. <https://www.acmliftinglives.org/>

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Radical Musical Reciprocity

by Dalouge Smith, President/CEO, San Diego Youth Symphony

The theater director [Peter Sellars](#) spoke four years ago at the L.A. Phil and Barbican-sponsored “Future Play: Music Systems in the 21st Century.” He called for the democratizing of classical music and music education. “I have to ask the classical music world to respect reciprocity, which is the basis of all human interaction. And not have this one-way flow of all these kids will learn to play Beethoven... We have to move into radical structures of reciprocity.”

This summer’s [Take A Stand Festival](#) Orchestra demonstrated the beauty, joy and empowerment that arise when radical reciprocity is achieved. The Festival Orchestra was overwhelmingly comprised of teen musicians of color. They had clearly trained and dedicated themselves to perform the Western classical repertoire programmed for them. They infused it with musicality and confidence. Yet it was an action by a small set of these musicians that revealed the power of “radical structures of reciprocity.”

At the [Take A Stand Symposium](#) earlier that day, concerns had surfaced about the narrowness of Western classical pedagogy. Festival faculty members, most of whom were professional musicians of color, shared their own experiences confronting the cultural limits of classical music training. They admitted to committing “cultural suicide” and segregating their musical lives from their own cultural identity in order to stay focused on classical music. Discussions about classical music’s aesthetic barriers to inclusion of other cultural idioms revealed that young musicians in Sistema-inspired programs may experience cultural self-erasure. A sense of anxiety that this could be the ultimate outcome for thousands of young people was absolutely present by the end of the Symposium.

Fortunately for us all, the remedy arrived in the hands of Festival musicians. After the faculty bows, the tubas initiated an unprogrammed original composition. Clearly, along with their orchestra training, these musicians from Baltimore had been taught to express their own musical point of view. Percussionists and other brass joined the tune, while every other Festival musician danced, filmed, smiled and shared in owning the moment. This finale performance was our 2017 reminder to create “radical structures of reciprocity.” If we don’t, we risk forever dividing our students’ musical selves from their cultural identities.

ACTION FOR THE MONTH: Get the word out about the first national research on El Sistema.

Our movement has advanced, even without solid research. Now we have reliable objective national research findings to add to positive program evaluation. Let people know about [this research](#) (see article above) – affirm the national field and your local success: write a Letter to the Editor, notify local partners, funders, skeptics and friends. Read more about this Action [here](#).