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Hatching Plans: Pedagogy and Discourse within an El Sistema-Inspired Music Program

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Hatching Plans: Pedagogy and Discourse within an El Sistema-Inspired Music Program

Nicolas Dobson

In this article, I draw on my experience as an instrumental tutor with a music program inspired by and explicitly linked to El Sistema, to explore new perspectives on Sistema-based pedagogy and management. Detailed ethnographic description of an orchestral session provides a first-hand account of the program's pedagogy, which I then contextualize within an analysis of the written directives and conversations that shaped and constrained practice. I argue that this program, a deliberate attempt to replicate the El Sistema model, recapitulates authoritarian, teacher-centered modes that marginalize the potential for children's creativity and agency, while obscuring these dynamics within an ideologically incoherent and ambivalent discourse that employs tropes of progressive education. I also demonstrate how tensions concerning the autocratic nature of the management structure and the program's instrumentalism and high ambition play themselves out in the written record, analyzing the discursive strategies which authorize the program's methods and the points at which they are vulnerable.

Keywords: *orchestra, El Sistema, teacher-centered, authoritarianism, managerialism, instrumentalism, agency, creativity.*

To this rule that a concept denoting political superiority always resolves itself into a concept denoting superiority of soul it is not necessarily an exception ... when the highest caste is at the same time the *priestly* caste and therefore emphasizes in its total description of itself ... its priestly function.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*

Our sensations and perceptions, in full and continuous appearances, contain repetitive figures, concealing them. Thus, sounds, lights, colours and objects. We contain ourselves by concealing the diversity of our rhythms: to ourselves, body and flesh, *we* are almost objects.

Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*

The following essay constitutes an extended investigation into a prominent music education program inspired by and modeled on Venezuela's El Sistema. In it, I employ a dual methodology based on autobiographical narrative enquiry and discourse analysis to provide a recent-historical view of my experience as a music teacher within this program, and subject it to critical scrutiny. The program's allegiance to the values and practices of its Venezuelan predecessor is explicit: its commitment to replicating the Sistema model is a defining feature of its publicity materials, and was repeatedly articulated in a range of documents to which I had access during my employment. For example, the handbook teachers were issued quotes Jose Antonio Abreu, the founder of El Sistema, extensively, and highlights the support the program received from a charity that promotes a local adaptation of El Sistema's values and working methods. Music programs claiming to align themselves with El Sistema now exist across North America and Europe, but debate around the original program, long overdue, is also gathering momentum after years of uncritical and often rhapsodic treatment of its claims in the media.¹

By providing a view of the inner-workings of a prominent music program inspired by El Sistema, including its ideological and administrative machinery, I hope to make my own contribution to this discussion, in the process giving readers the opportunity to navigate the issues that comprise it with greater ease, insight, and confidence. To achieve this, I first provide an ethnographic account of one of the definitive teaching contexts within the program: the orchestral rehearsal. This is then followed by discourse analysis of the documents and correspondence constitutive of the project's written record during the period in question. These sections are intended to be complementary: the ethnographic account – with its detailed description of a context central to the program's politics of space – aims to lend particularity and vividness to the discursive and theoretical analysis performed in the latter section, and to provide the reader with material with which to contextualize the claims subsequently made. I do not pretend to an impossible neutrality, but I do hope that from the fine-grained picture of Sistema-based pedagogy in action which comprises this essay's opening section the reader can derive a sense of agency, which may then be employed in weighing up the analysis which follows.

These arguments may be evaluated in the light of my “subject position,” to utilize the terminology which Michel Foucault (2002, 55–61) employed in shedding light on the origins and status of the those authorized to speak in a certain way, and to acknowledge the importance of such a stance for understanding the “specificity of a discursive practice” (60). My teaching experience is broad, but has a common theme in generally having been orientated towards community education and disempowered or vulnerable social groups. For two academic years I was an instrumental teacher and ensemble leader for the Al-Kamandjati music school in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with much of my work taking place in the Jalazone, Al-Amari, and Qalandia refugee camps. Previous to this, I taught music in a publically-subsidized community program, worked as a Learning Support Tutor at a music college, mentored children in a deprived inner-city district, and volunteered teaching English to refugees and asylum seekers. My experience in music beyond teaching is perhaps even more diverse: I received training in classical violin at a prominent conservatoire as a teenager while simultaneously teaching myself the drumkit and playing in local rock, punk, and jazz bands. Since then, I have participated in a variety of contexts within Western art and popular music traditions, in the latter case within those sometimes described as “DIY,” deriving largely from an ethics of autonomous cultural activity and occurring within decentralized networks without significant funding or institutional support. Experiences within such networks have shaped my understanding of culture to a considerable extent, and the relationship of culture to teaching practice. I have also taken graduate seminars in Philosophy of Education, from which I derived a largely sympathetic – but not uncritical – orientation to progressive education and teaching processes driven by experimentation, experience, creativity, and play.²

With this context in mind, the paper begins with a micro-portrait of an orchestral session, based on those rehearsals that occurred during my period of employment with the Sistema-inspired music program. The orchestra is the locus of the boldest claims advanced by both El Sistema and its international emulators, the epicenter from which so many individual and social goods are said to radiate (though see Baker 2014, particularly 111–32, for counter-arguments), and it was accorded pivotal status within this program. For the children participating, weekly attendance

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at orchestral sessions was mandatory and understood to be the immediate goal of instrumental tuition. To look at how such orchestral training might appear in action, we relocate to an elementary school, where my fellow musicians and I have recently arrived to teach the afternoon music classes. The scene that I will describe now draws on orchestral sessions for this age group that occurred roughly two months into the program, corroborated for authenticity against teaching plans and other documents in my possession.³

The Orchestral Session

It is a bright, breezy Thursday in April, just after lunch, and the first orchestral session of the afternoon will begin shortly. The instrumental teachers are first into the room that we use for the five- to seven-year-old children, one of two halls designated for this purpose, the other being used for the orchestra of their older peers. It is large and fairly well-lit, with a row of long windows affording a view onto the tarmac courtyard and the children's playground, which is packed with colorful equipment for climbing, swinging, and rocking, and full of children scampering eagerly and noisily around when I arrive for the afternoon session (some children running up to the fence to greet me). One of the musicians, Michael,⁴ checks over his notes, and then busies himself plugging his iPod into the sound system and cueing up the tracks. He is one of the two session leaders today. My fellow tutors, who will participate in, supervise, and rally their various orchestral sections, are peering behind the long curtains which hide racks of cellos in their neat wooden frames, made locally to order and fitted with wheels for easy maneuver. We bring them out, removing the cellos from their separate berths in the racks, and lining them up on the floor; we also fetch wooden stools from the same place and wooden casters – also made for the project: solid, functional, well-crafted – to place under the stools' legs and adjust their height. Laura – the patient, calm, softly-spoken double bassist who will also lead today – has begun to tune the cellos as some of the children arrive and take their places.⁵ Pegs are slipping; unable to intervene directly, the children sit there, slouching on the shoulders of the instruments, backs forming incongruously clerk-like domes and faces registering little in the way of emotion, passively waiting as they are for adult assistance (or what might as well be engineering; some remote,

specialist savvy) with what they understand to be unprepared, or in some way noncompliant, tools. We haul the piano out of the way to make more space and the leader places his violin on its top.

The violin students, of whom there are around thirty, now file in two-by-two, instruments still in cases, their gait in general cautious, even subdued, though in some cases they seem to derive pleasure (observable in a quiet attentiveness) from the weight of the full case, how the handle and hand form a pivot or rotating axis, the way the instrument resists a steady alignment. The children have been organized in this way by one of their classroom teachers; she is there by the door, ushering them through, a sharp word or two sufficing to keep them moving forward to their allotted space.⁶ Her face has assumed a sour-ish expression: she seems tired. In the first two months this teacher would stand at the back of the hall and look on, but now that she has her own instrument she will also participate, if not with great enthusiasm, then reasonably gamely, with a kind of “make-the-best-of” fortitude. Ten adults are present, not an unusual figure for this type of session. There are two session leaders; three instrumental tutors standing with the children and facilitating the transmission of instructions from the front; two classroom teachers, who participate in the activities with the children and play their own instruments;⁷ and a spectral clustering of project managers at the back of the room enacting a smaller and more casual presence, largely absent as they are from the unfolding activity and diminished by their place at the periphery of the spatial organisation, but at the same time supervisory, watchful, alert.

The children are all here now, seated for the most part complaisantly,⁸ some on the ground with their legs crossed, cased instruments placed in front of them, hands on laps, as we have asked them to do – as, indeed, seems to be normal school policy, with which we also aim to comply so as to reinforce, rather than undermine, the usual rules and procedures. There is some wriggling into position as the instrumental teachers try to arrange the children, arrayed in uneven, roughly wafer-shaped lines radiating outwards from the leader’s position,⁹ but lacking physical coordinates bar the colored hoop in which the leader will stand and those formed by the chairs of the seated cellists. Faces are mostly turned to the front as Laura, the first leader, steps into the hoop, and we have ensured that all bodies are in the

mandated position, roughly equivalent to those assumed within a conventional orchestra, though there is some talking. Some children are distracted by the instrumental teachers at their sides, or continue to investigate their cases: the flapping handle, the zips. The tutors turn some cases over, so that the instrument will not be facing down. It is over two months into the program and the mood is not one of great curiosity, still less excitement, although curiosity has always been present as the students encountered – slowly, as authorized – their instruments in the course of the past weeks. There is waiting, watching, a kind of uncomplaining expectancy – perhaps a more innocent juvenile prototype to the adult stoicism we have observed, the children at present unstirred, settling into their passivity – and some post-lunch fatigue.¹⁰ Still, this age group appears more receptive than its older peers (for whom signs of disaffection are more common during their own orchestral sessions), and responds cheerfully to the presence of adults at their side, if, it seems, more guardedly to the directions proceeding from the front.

There are warm-ups led by Laura who performs elaborate gestures of exhaustion,¹¹ swings her arms, and blows out her cheeks theatrically: the children copy, clearly with some pleasure – too avidly, it seems, eliciting from her a gently admonitory “sensibly.” Next, we do call-and-response routines based on simple rhythms, and a game where the children copy the leader’s rhythm, except when it is the one derived from the phrase “don’t clap this one back.”¹² There is stamping and clapping; one of the children is called to the front to lead, and the sense of focus is sharpened as the others turn to look at her: this spills over into laughter and a brief, and quickly shushed, flurry of excited chatter. The girl next to me with pigtails and a bright scrawny grin is moving her head around in exploratory loops; I call her name and gently direct her attention back to the leader, now Laura again, the common focus. She often causes me to perform this function as I observe her looking at the apparatus – sensory, tactile, and mechanical – at her disposal, within her immediate control. Making the small movements she is capable of performing without getting into trouble, and exploring the texture, shape, and flexibility of the violin case and its components, she tests my ability to triangulate between the role I am expected to perform and my instincts. I look over at my colleague, Peter. His face is more resistant, less giving; he will not be so casual with the children; he seems to be more

accepting of these codes and the discipline they require, perhaps because his background in music is more exclusively rooted in the classical tradition (with all its associated forms of pedagogy) than mine. Peter reacts to minor infractions of the expected silence, orientation, and concentration with a glance from which all warmth appears to have vanished, or he studiously ignores the disruption and maintains the punctilious, taut bearing with which he tries to galvanize the children and direct their focus to the hub of which they are spokes.

We reinforce what is known as the hoop rule. (Teaching and reinforcing “ground rules” concerning where to stand, when to play, and the bodily sequences comprising various actions have been prioritized during the initial period of the project, codified precisely in the schemes of work we must follow and aligned with the school’s standard procedures.) For the purposes of this exercise, the children are initially permitted to make as much noise as they like, but must be instantly silent when the leader returns to the hoop. They respond with raucous enthusiasm, and the hall is briefly full of the merry cacophony of their voices before Michael – who has taken over the leader’s role – steps back into the hoop. The children are not unanimously attentive, and someone is still shouting; Michael reminds them to concentrate on the hoop, and we go through the same procedure three times more until there is an instant silence as he assumes his position and raises his arms.

Now, having undergone the requisite preparation in following the correct, unidirectional sequence of stimuli and response, the children are instructed to remove (“carefully, sensibly!”) their violins from their cases, and to return to the cellos and double basses which have been resting on their sides. As they do so, there is a pleasant buzz of activity, and then we sing the song that is to remind them of the procedure they have been taught. Michael begins, to the tune of “Oh When the Saints”:

You put the case, flat on its back. You put the case flat on its back. Then zip the zip, and lift the cover. Fit the sponge and off you go.

The children join in, spontaneously now, and the air rings with high, cheerful voices.

Throughout the session, and beforehand – some of us arriving well in advance of our paid hours to do this – the tutors have been surreptitiously tuning the instruments, moving rapidly and crablike through the sections (although for the

initial period of instrument use this was not seen to be a priority, visual identification of strings deemed sufficient at that stage). Now, however, we are keener to ensure an approximate accuracy of pitch for the strings they will pluck, although the time-pressed circumstances often make this difficult, and it is deemed in our planning an unambiguously secondary concern to questions of spatial arrangement, movement sequencing, instrument care, and responsiveness to the leader (that is, if tuning can be said to have been formally organized at all; there is no evidence in writing for its planned inclusion, unlike the aforementioned themes, repeatedly emphasized and allocated benchmarks for attainment).

The session will now try to refine the second of these primary objectives: movement sequencing. Michael has fetched his violin, placing it in rest position. His demeanour in these sessions has none of the elastic warmth, generosity, humor, and collegiality I associate with him in our informal dealings; when he smiles, it takes on a forced, unnatural quality, and his expression is quickly reset to zero when the children's attention is called for. When they are all watching – and there is inevitably some disruption, a kamikaze bridge collapsing, or a child struggling to fit a sponge with the rubber bands we've provided – Michael intones “one-two-three-four” as he demonstrates the procedure for moving the violin from its berth in the cradle of his arm to playing position. We (those children and adults with violins) join in, in unison: violins are held out with the left hand, right hands find the button at the bottom of the instrument, the instrument is swivelled to its balancing position on the collarbone and shoulder shelf, then the right hand loops out and over and lands on a string, ready to pluck. It is a dramatic moment with all the instruments aloft, almost martial in its symbolism, but with none of the electric commitment or absolute uniformity of a drilled military move; some of the drama likely comes from the anxiety of musicians seeing so many instruments wielded precariously by young children, whose concentration is faltering. The move is copied but does not give the impression of having been willed; the arm-appendages shoot out, violins attached, but often askew: there are small collisions, with the hard, open sounds of wooden instruments clashing; a droppage occurs, causing an instant, reverberative hush. This time, there is no serious damage and we continue.

The session now moves, finally, to its more overtly musical focus: “Trepak” from Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*. Michael cues up the iPod, we go through the four-beat procedure for assuming playing position and suddenly the music bursts from the speakers in a whirl of sound, energy, and clashing cymbals, catching some children by surprise. As they try to play along (with open-string pizzicatos), the violin tutors lean in to their sections, dramatizing the plucking motions the children are to perform and the beats they must mark with exaggerated circular movements of their arms, violins raised high and brought swooping down in great exhortatory flourishes. I turn my attention to the girl with pigtails described earlier. Her violin is – from the perspective of classical pedagogy – much too straight, sticking out almost forward from her chin. She stares down at it, fixated, fully engaged in the effort of playing along. The effort and determination make her rigid; she grips harder. She tries to copy the larger movements that the instrumental teachers are making, but those fluid, expansive, almost whip-like gestures become awkward and stiff as she mimics them. Some of the other children are performing the larger movements with more ease, grace, and facility, but with equal doggedness manifested in their serious faces and close attention to the task; swept up in the general motion, the notes are – in general – falling on the correct beat, or close to it, if not on the correct string. Next, there is a short interlude during which we march along to the music, instruments tucked under arms. Then, in the four bars before the refrain is reintroduced, musical tension building, the children – following Michael closely – dramatize the movements to assume playing position in time to the minor thirds that suddenly puncture the melody, and we repeat the first section.

Rhythm more or less secure as the children resume their pizzicatos, I now turn my attention to pitch, this time helping a different child. I take his finger and direct it to the correct string to pluck (which he has not succeeded in locating); after we have done this together, I bring my violin close to his and call out the string names as I pluck them, two Gs followed by four Ds, two Gs again, three Ds and a G. The other teachers are similarly occupied, simultaneously galvanizing their sections, channelling their attention towards the conductor by modelling the correct orientation and focus on his movements, and homing in on individuals and the technical aspects they are struggling with. This necessitates a great deal of swivelling

and stooping as well as the bold energized movements that define the rhythm and comprise violin technique in its most basic, foundational form. These children are largely engaged, at least insofar as this can be ascertained from their studious, determined expressions and the effort they make to perform as directed. There is a sense of culmination, if not quite catharsis, after all the preparatory work they have undergone to ensure that they are watching the conductor and observing his directions. The music is exciting, fast, and the pace of the lesson is suddenly transformed: if the first parts of the lesson were defined by the methodical, step-by-step training of rehearsal habits, rhythm, and spatial awareness, this section is a flurry of coordinated actions in real-time, and the children – and the tutors – respond with sudden urgency to the challenge. There is a vibrant show of outstretched arms after the final pizzicato as Michael coordinates a grand, showy climax.

We repeat the piece, but time is now running out, and although we sometimes rehearse individual sections without the audio track, this will not happen today. We ask the children to put their instruments away, and they do this, although the violin tutors often have to remind them to remove the sponges that help to elevate the instrument. It is always strangely fascinating to observe the different ways in which the children organize their cases and the various parts of their violin equipment: some would leave the sponges on, as noted, and we would patiently remind them to remove them; some would tuck the sponges and rubber bands into the outside flap, or stuff them into the small compartment for rosin and accessories; some would jam them by the violin. If my interest in this detail seems out of all proportion to the activity in question, perhaps it is because for so much of the session the children were acting in concert, as uniform parts of a greater whole. Suddenly, a little individuality gleams, and it is as striking as it is, in reality, quite banal. There is one last thing to do, which we always aim to make time for: to warm the children down before they return to class. On this occasion there is one simple exercise: to stretch out on their backs on the floor, and breathe in and out slowly for a minute or so. We all carry this out together, and I relish the sudden draining away of tension and noise. Everyone gets up and finds their instrument again, and the children leave with their teachers as they entered.

The Written Record

One potentially illuminating way of analyzing the five-month period I worked for the Sistema-inspired program is to consider it through the lens of the discursive context – the texts, conversations, and documents that accompanied, shaped, reflected, and sometimes dissembled the reality of the work we were undertaking. The nature of the relationship between the written record and the actuality of teaching and planning a project of this nature is unsurprisingly complex. Written documents in the context of such a program exist partly to determine what takes place – to the extent this is possible – by specifying what is to happen in advance and when. They also exist to provide a means of comparing what actually occurs with an ideal standard, or of imposing on practice a convenient framework with which to interpret it and disseminate its results. They can inspire action by means of an imaginative stimulus, by rhetorical prompting, by drawing on ideological referents with great emotional resonance, or by highlighting laudatory models of past or existing practice – in this case, clearly, the original Venezuelan program itself, or an idealized picture of such. As directives, they prompt, cajole, bluster, flatter, insinuate, even – obliquely, in this case – threaten. As descriptions, they reveal, define, embellish, and obfuscate. All of these functions can be mapped onto this Sistema-based program and its discursive trail in ways that are highly revealing. As I do so, I will draw on all the documents at my disposal – written correspondence, the staff handbook, schemes of work, teaching strategies, and assessment templates – summarizing their content and also quoting pungent, suggestive phrases to provide a context in which to situate, and make sense of, the orchestral session described above.¹³

The methodology I employ in this analysis is unorthodox with respect to discourse analysis as it is usually undertaken. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, my academic specialisms are literary studies and philosophy. I analyzed all the documents at my disposal to identify emerging themes, which became provisional categories of analysis; I then collated quotations which illustrated these themes, allowed them to be explored with greater nuance, or demonstrated contradictory tendencies. This data became the basis of the argument that follows. Of course, this gives the reader no assurance that such data has not been assembled

to fit a preconceived view of the project; to the greatest extent possible I have tried to offset this acknowledged limitation by providing direct access to quotations, and – in places – a sense of where competing interpretations might be feasible, or where the data suggests ambiguous conclusions. Biographical information pertinent to my “subject position” that I have provided, including my major intellectual influences, and the relatively unfiltered portrait of the orchestral session which comprise earlier sections of this account are also designed to maximize the reader’s ability to ascribe weight to my biases and counterbalance any flaws in my methodology, as noted previously. Secondly, the research was carried out retrospectively on the restricted data available to me, and its use constrained within legal limits. This ruled out following a methodology such as Scollon and Scollon’s (2004) Nexus Analysis, which Brent C. Talbot argues is “an approach to discourse analysis that is particularly apt for studies of music transmission” (2013, 55). Nexus Analysis, however, requires a transparent, and ideally collaborative, process of data collection and analysis among colleagues (Scollon and Scollon 2004, 13) – a condition that I was unable to meet in undertaking research after I had ceased to work for the project in question.

One of the most notable features revealed by the data analysis performed is the extent to which affirmative language was deployed by key figures in the program’s management team over the five-month period examined here. By affirmative language I refer to language that maintains – via a tightly controlled semantic field – an upbeat, positive, and optimistic tone; that freely deploys hyperbole, or lexis imbued with strong, positive emotions; that seeks to frame reality as evolving towards an ideal destination; that utilizes rhetorical flourishes to persuade readers, and self, of the salience and accuracy of such a perspective; that obscures or downplays the significance of information which might lend itself to a more circumspect evaluation; and that affirms, and reaffirms, key concepts in the official ideology underpinning practice, as well as gesturing towards those tacit, unacknowledged, perhaps taboo ideologies which provide a de facto framework of operative assumptions. These unacknowledged ideologies shape practices that are specific to classical music but underpin a more general approach described in various ways as teacher-centered, deficit, or “banking” pedagogy, the latter term having been devised by Paulo Freire to describe “a concept of education” wherein knowledge is

perceived as “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (1996, 53).

The function of affirming the project in this way seems to have been taken on by one manager in particular, whose written correspondence abounds in the lexis and rhetoric of a discourse which celebrates the achievements of the program’s staff and students – however minor, contingent, partial, ambiguous, or questionable – while exhorting them on to, and anticipating, even greater successes, typically symbolized by the mid-term and final concerts. The way this role was consistently and quite adroitly undertaken by the person in question suggests that, if not deliberately or explicitly conceived as one of their duties (it is hard to imagine anyone working for the program consciously squaring a function of information management, a kind of internal public relations role, with the belief in the righteousness of mission that seemed to permeate the project), it was nevertheless understood as one of their prime day-to-day concerns and sprang from a powerful source.

Stephen J. Ball’s analysis of the policy context “in the UK, and ... most other western and many developing societies” – which engendered a “major *transformation* ... in the organising principles of social provision right across the public sector” over a fifteen-year period from the early 1980s (2006, 10) – suggests an illuminating context for such a discursive strategy. Of particular relevance here are Ball’s remarks on the “new managerialism” wrought by these changes: “managers become leaders rather than controllers, providing the visions and inspirations which generate a collective corporate commitment to ‘being the best’” (10–11).

Part of the job of this affirmatory stance seems to have been to manage the uncertainty that comes with a project of such ambition and scale. So, for example, in communications that we received, the manager refers to the “unfamiliar territory” into which we are “leaping,” two aspects of which are notable. There is the attribution of boldness, dynamism, and vigor to our activities, as well as the signalling (revealing, but almost certainly inadvertent) of the common phrase “leap in the dark,” connoting adventure but also risk, the unknown, the possibility of failure. One does not, at any rate, “leap” into “unfamiliar territory” without a certain degree of recklessness: the pragmatic thing would be to proceed cautiously and experimentally. Leap, however, with its wholly positive connotations of youthfulness

and agility, makes a virtue out of what might well be regarded negatively, if described in less aesthetic terms. It also invites us to reflect on the relationship between this particular program and El Sistema: why talk of adventure, when El Sistema offers a blueprint? Is it because adventure is part of the Venezuelan program's lexicon, despite the fact that its everyday activities consist of quite conventional teaching, rehearsing, and performing of classical music (Baker 2014)?

We were subsequently told – as if by way of confirmation or acknowledgement of our common experience – that the first two months had been “experimental,” before the implication which this evokes (of the experiment going awry) is countered with affirmative rhetoric encapsulating three central tenets of the program's official ideology – excellence, transformation, and excitement – as well as generous, emotive praise for the “terrific” teaching staff. As an experimental approach (conceived as a process of creative problem-posing-and-solving and data collection that can be used to refine teaching methods) would be a sensible one in unfamiliar conditions, it is striking that the rhetoric which follows this is so amply developed. The earlier correspondence makes use of a similar technique to quell any doubts that the notion of “unfamiliar territory” might raise (and that one might expect to prompt more serious, critical reflection), combining lavish praise for the instrumental tutors (“your great work”/ “the commitment you all already demonstrate”/ “sharing ... expertise”/ “thanks so much”) with the trope of “enabling the children to reach their full potential.”

In the case of the two concerts that took place during this period, the emphasis here given to managing uncertainty via the use of affirmative rhetoric is telling, suggesting the critical importance of these events as indicators – and tangible demonstrations – of success. To some extent, constant affirmation seems to manifest itself as a sharing of the management team's own anxieties; when we receive correspondence stating our manager's confidence that our efforts will lead to a “proud and authentic celebration” of our program at the upcoming concert, or telling us how much of a difference we are capable of making to the children's aspirations, or musing, casually, about whether or not to organise a balloon drop (“Balloon drop or no balloon drop? That's the question”), it is easy to imagine these texts as performing a self-directed psychological function: bolstering the manager's

own belief (and that of the whole management team), consolidating — via an almost incantatory process of repetition — an ideological foundation, or, in the latter case, dispelling anxiety by trivializing what were evidently quite onerous planning decisions in advance of the intended spectacular at the local town hall.

Casual, informal, and what might be described as “matey” (i.e. presuming a kind of friendly intimacy) registers, in fact, are central features of the documentary record, and overlap with the patterns of emotive, exaggerated, and affirmative discourse surveyed above. At times, the function of these informal registers can seem manipulative, on the one hand normalizing, on the other, obscuring the significance of what might otherwise be perceived as authoritarian and centralized management procedures. Non-negotiable directives — and those which the instrumental tutors found unsurprisingly objectionable, and in my case sought to challenge, such as the requirement to compete for our jobs with external candidates after four months of the program — were smothered in such unlikely but disarming intimacies as “we’d love you to...” (for example, “what we’d love you to do is to send me your expression of interest for next year”). Information about a lengthy set of evaluation frameworks, policies, and teaching strategies was given a veneer of bonhomie with the appending of a whimsical and apparently spontaneous “pew.”

Embellishments and sudden shifts in register of this kind evoke a postmodernism in which “eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture” (Lyotard 1984, 76), but can also be analyzed functionally as methods of concealing heavy-handed managerialism, whether or not they were understood as such. Again, Ball’s (2006) policy analysis seems highly relevant in situating such a discourse in its wider context. He asserts that under pressure from “the disciplines and dynamics of the market form” increasingly utilized by public sector organizations, they were encouraged “to become more and more concerned with their style, their image, their semiotics, with the way things are presented rather than with the way they actually work” (12). Moreover, in developing his concept of the “new managerialism,” Ball writes that it “offers a ‘people-centred’ model of the organization which views bureaucratic control systems as unwieldy, counterproductive ... and repressive,” envisaging a “loose-tight structure” as an alternative to “systems of direct control” (10). “Loose-tight,” seemingly paradoxical,

is actually a good indication of how the “matey” discourse functions within the program’s structure, and in the general context of the “new managerialism,” Ball signalling as much when he writes that is “tellingly termed ... ‘loose-tight’” (10). Such language is buoyant, carefree, even charming, but in a way that blurs the perception of authoritarian management rather than changing it in any substantive way, and perhaps for this purpose.

A more generous interpretation would see such rhetoric as performing the anxiety-reduction function described above, aimed at both participants in the relationship, with the target here less the anxiety engendered by the magnitude of our goals, the prestige of the program, and the scrutiny it would receive, than that accompanying the means by which such goals could be realized. These means, I would argue, were often crude, antidemocratic, divisive, and bureaucratic: in short, oppressive to all involved. They included measures such as short-term contracts for teaching staff, imposed planning frameworks, and, above all, a predominating concept of children — ideologically anathema, and hence not only unrepresented as a component of the official discourse, but actively contradicted — which denies them, and seems not to recognize their capacity for, any meaningful agency or creativity. It is not claimed here that the management tier required to implement such measures and to follow protocols in which children were stripped of decision-making powers was comfortable with its role. The resultant tension that this may have produced would explain the extravagant rhetorical strategies deployed.

Such putative tensions seem to reveal themselves in other ways, too. One senior instrumental tutor would sometimes, in his correspondence, appear to be mocking the centralized, bureaucratic methods of the program and its lofty goals (the staff handbook describes “transform[ing] the lives of children in deprived communities through orchestral music-making”). He described, for example, one provisional scheme of work as a “five step path to Nirvana,” and said that during one meeting he participated in with the management team they “hatched a new plan,” terms which — wittingly or not — evoke conspiracy and revolutionary vanguardism, pointing subtly to the elitism at the program’s core. When he writes like this — with a touch of satire, or contempt — his communications are vivid, compelling, witty, human; when he echoes ideological dogmas (for example, concerning the denuded, illusory autonomy

of teaching “styles” subordinated to a rigid planning framework), the prose is flat, lifeless, without conviction. The dramatic shift in tone and sensibility exhibited in the transition between these poles recalls Lyotard’s prophecy of “a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the ‘knower’” as technology transforms society (1984, 4), as well as the similar claim made by Basil Bernstein that knowledge has become “divorced from inwardness and literally dehumanised” in the growing domination of educational processes by market forces (2000, 86).

Another manager, with a broadly logistical rather than communicative role, tended to rely on hyperbole to convey enthusiasm, with results that sometimes verged on parody, and revealed, quite starkly, the inadequacies of the critical dialogue among senior staff concerning how we evaluated the program. For example, he described as “amazing” the comment reportedly made by one of the cello students about orchestral sessions being too short, a comment that begs various questions: why aren’t we soliciting the views of *all* of the students involved as an ongoing part of the program, however informally, and sharing the results among the staff? Is the comment representative? What would we do differently if the comment were otherwise? Does such a comment, in fact, mean what the manager has interpreted it as meaning – that the student loves the orchestra, finds it fulfilling, challenging, and so on – or does it mean something much less complimentary, like “we spend ages getting ready to play and then it’s over”? A program serious about democratic values would not neglect the fundamental issues raised by this allegedly “amazing” comment at any level of the management or teaching structure. Along with the evidence of teacher-centered pedagogy surveyed in the plans below, and revealed in my account of an orchestral session, it invites us to view the student “Huddle” – a group created, according to internal documents, for the purpose of enabling student “ownership” of the project and transmitting their point of view – and future projects for student participation (including “events and delivery teams” and a “parliament”) with well-warranted scepticism.

The parodic content of various communications reached its apogee, perhaps, in the “theme of the week” introduced by the same manager. The program repeatedly emphasized “passion” as one of its chief affective goals, eventually manifesting itself in an assessment criterion based on “pride and passion” (five levels of which the

children were measured against) and pre-concert injunctions that the children be coached to look like they were having fun, demonstrating “their enjoyment in their bodies and faces,” as one document puts it. Considerations of space oblige us to leave aside the questions this raises about the authenticity of the emotions in question, the extent to which such things are indeed measurable (particularly under the time-pressed conditions in which the tutors operated), or how to distinguish between motivation and encouragement, on the one hand, and manipulation and orchestration on the other, as key as these issues are. The salient point here is that when the theme of the week is “crotchets and quavers” or “up and down bowing” — from all the possible themes that could be derived from the richness and variety of musical practices — it is not surprising that dressage, or the practice of orchestrating displays of emotion, would eventually step into the gap vacated by a child-centered pedagogy, an approach which might have yielded passion, or at least a modest, involved pleasure, among its participants. Such correspondence seems to reveal the paucity of the inspiration available through the Sistema-inspired program, and invites us to consider why this might be so. My subsequent analysis suggests some obvious reasons, highlighting its bureaucratic, centralized, and hierarchical procedures in greater detail. These were characterized above all by a lack of interest in children’s autonomy and creative powers, and removed from teachers the flexibility and time to adjust their methods to individuals (with all the detailed, subtle, and personalized attention which that requires in instrumental tuition) and thus bring alive a subject so thoroughly enmeshed in the evanescent workings of imagination. No wonder the residue of this process might be such joyless, mechanical themes-of-the-week.

This disregard for children’s active, creative potential was a logical upshot of the pedagogic authoritarianism manifested in the practice I have described in the orchestral session, but was often occluded ideologically as a feature of the program’s internal discourse by the emphasis on passion, by affirmative rhetoric, by the utilization of tropes of progressive education (“critical thinking,” “creative music-making,” “safe environments,” “remov[ing] hierarchy,” even “freedom of expression”) and by the unwillingness to codify abstract principles which mostly remained implicit. These principles can be collected under the umbrella term

“teacher-centeredness” and include an apparent belief in obedience as a virtue and a suspicion of high energy among children as a source of potential transgression. Perhaps the most relevant of these principles in this case, however, is a crude epistemology in which knowledge is perceived as residing with the teacher, to be transferred to the student who lacks it, rather than something which might be generated by classroom interaction among all participants or created anew. John Dewey describes this as a “habit of thinking of instruction as a method of supplying [a] lack by pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole which awaits filling” (2007, 43). Freire, as we have seen, utilizes the similar concept of “banking” education to describe the pedagogy implied by this view of knowledge as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor”; this “negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” and denies those subjected to it their humanity (1996, 53).

We can find a distinct, if minor, thread of teacher-centeredness running through the communications we received, outlining norms for pedagogic practice that we were to institute. These sometimes emerged from “bottom-up” discussions among the instrumental staff (among whom a teacher-centered culture of instrumental tuition seemed to be unproblematic), although once a decision had been reached, with or without consensus, it was made clear that we were expected to abide by it uniformly. For example, one piece of correspondence instructs teachers to put their bows on their heads to signal that silence is expected, making it clear that this was the result of a joint decision among the teachers who had participated in a meeting that day. The framing of this correspondence is arguably more significant than the practice it describes, which is not, in principle, objectionable as a method of coordinating activity. Describing the purpose of visual cues as being to produce silence or, alternatively, to enable listening suggests very different pedagogical approaches, however, and different priorities. “Silence,” indeed, as an image of student behaviour, is curiously at odds with the tropes of “passion” and “joy” so frequently iterated within the program’s discourse and understood to mean something active and perceptible (hence, as discussed, the concern of our managers to orchestrate passion in the movements and postures of the children in

performance). However, it is not the only time it is viewed positively, and incorporated in guidelines for practice.

Other features of a teacher-centered methodology, based on the above principles, were conveyed to us within directives issuing from the vertical planning structure into which our teaching was tightly integrated, and which heavily qualifies what I mean by “teacher-centeredness.” In a section of the staff handbook focused on setting “high expectations,” we find approval for the “drilling” said to be used by teachers in Venezuela, which, as the handbook explains, involves learning via a process of repetition based on the teacher’s aesthetic preferences and “demanding” force of personality. In the “4 Golden Rules” for “effective learning,” also set out in the handbook, we find an anachronistic-sounding rule stating that the children must pay “full attention to the leader,” watch carefully, “be still and silent,” and “demonstrate good posture.” These examples, however, while unusual enough as guidelines for contemporary teaching practice to be noteworthy, also symbolize how complicated it is to trace manifestations of teacher-centeredness back to the project’s written materials when we examine their full context. The other three golden rules reflect themes that are more commonly associated with child-centered education, including mutual respect and the importance of participation, and have been absorbed into a broad ideological consensus in contemporary pedagogy. It is also suggested that the children’s own ideas might be woven into the proposed rules (although not—apparently—overturn them entirely). Finally, it is stated that these rules derive from agreements reached by the “team,” with the implication that they were not simply handed down to the instrumental teachers.

Even in what could be seen as the most explicit endorsement of authoritarian methods committed to print, where the Venezuelan practice of “drilling” passages of music is cited as a legitimate pedagogical method, the handbook advises caution in use of this approach, which it suggests can only be effective in the context of a relationship in which learners trust their teachers and derive enjoyment from their classroom activities. It is possible to interpret these guidelines — separated from the broader context in which they were issued — in a manner that would permit a limited, contingent form of teacher-led activity to which the students had consented, and that would thereby uphold more child-centered or egalitarian standards of

education. However, these attempted syntheses of authoritarian and progressive ideas generally work to produce a confusing, ambiguous image of what might actually transpire in practice; the familiar tropes of egalitarianism and inclusion certainly dilute the initial impact of the starker teacher-centered methods prescribed, but they also draw attention to their presence – just as affirmative rhetoric is odd, if not actually grotesque, when it is used to advertise the job insecurity of the people it is directed to, and finally serves to highlight the latter in the fact and manner of its juxtaposition. What actually took place behind this strange, ambitious dialectic, and was it reflected in correspondence more closely related to the actual experience of teaching?

Descriptions of the features of a particular class that evoke authoritarianism clearly are relatively unusual, in fact, but those that suggest a child-centered approach are virtually non-existent. Given the extent to which the former approach – when represented at all – is subordinated to, and mostly obscured by, a child-centered ethos in the program’s pedagogical guidelines, as well as in the dominant national educational ideology, it is not surprising that teachers would be cautious about describing authoritarian practice in terms which clearly evoke it. What is more notable, then, is the absence of accounts of child-centered practice. The clearest signals of a teacher-centered, authoritarian stance are usually encountered via an off-hand, but telling, word or phrase embedded in otherwise prosaic correspondence arranging practical matters (such as teaching cover). One teacher talks about “push[ing]” students “quite hard,” “hammering” string names until they have been learned, as well as of the “lively” members of a class who contrast with the “good” children and whose energy, the implication is, may prove disruptive. There are also children to “watch out for” – hardly the language of a caring relationship or one which is based on developing mutual trust. In one piece of communication the children vanish, replaced by their functional parts, its author suggesting that “it would be great to have some rhythm in the bowing arms before the bows hit the string.” Again, Bernstein’s concept of “dehumanised knowledge” seems relevant when we read such oddly-phrased descriptions, a knowledge “divorced from persons, their commitments, their personal dedications” (2000, 86), manifesting itself here in

phraseology which hides from view the all-too-human subjects who must perform, or be made to perform, the actions in question.

However, as Bernstein's theory would also suggest, situated firmly as it is within the context of broader political and economic change – “the latest transition of capitalism” (86) – we should be cautious in interpreting such remarks, and in allocating individual responsibility for the pedagogic approaches they describe. We have already surveyed the ways in which one particular teacher's behaviour was shaped by the pressures exerted on him and the subtle ways in which he may have signalled resistance; in this respect, he was symbolic of a much broader tension between conformity and alienation emerging within the program's structure, if discernible only in discreet patterns of behavior.

A much fuller and more accurate sense of authoritarianism within this program can only be reached by turning our attention to the planning documents and templates that proliferated during its early months. These reveal quite starkly the reliance on antiquated techniques based on behaviorist principles (whose concrete implementation can be seen in the stimuli-response training of the orchestral session), now relegated to the margins of teaching practice due to their lack of cognitive content. Consider a document titled “Step by Step Levels for Instrument Care and Playing.” For each of the goals specified (including “how to leave an instrument in its case,” “opening case,” “packing away,” etc.), an inducement for successfully achieving it is also listed (for example, “singing and fun”), even when they can scarcely be conceived as such (“an intact violin”) and hint at a slyly satirical author, mocking the process's vacuity. The inducements themselves are not objectionable; it is the conception of the pedagogic method, and the results it is likely to promote, that are. When rewards are framed as extrinsic to the task in hand, techniques are devised for separating the content of an activity from its value, and securing the teacher's permission to do or have something depends on compliance with their instructions, then the key learning that is taking place (or rather, that would be, if such a separation could indeed be effected) is that obtaining something desirable comes from pleasing an authority, someone with the power to grant or withhold what is sought by the pupil. The focus is shifted from the activity, and the possibility of developing an individual, creative response to the materials at hand, to

the teacher and her control of social goods. Such a response may, of course, be that of simply integrating a skill which cannot be modified or adapted *qua* skill to an individual concept of its value or utility, in other words, accepting the authority of the skill possessor *for one's own reasons*. For Dewey, the “fundamental necessity” of education was “leading the child to realize a problem as his own” (1915, 151), something which clearly need not preclude accepting another person’s mastery of a skill or subject in the solving of that problem. To offer rational, intelligent, contingent, and provisional consent to authority in this way, however, is very different from being induced to perform a task without a concept of its intrinsic significance.

Moreover, given that rewards like these may not have been very tantalizing for children with limited or no experience of classical music, who were denied permission to explore their instruments (in or outside of class) and authorized only to perform largely decontextualized skills in a strict sequence, it becomes understandable why emotional levers – the withholding of affection, severity, coldness, sternness – were the frequent recourse of some of the tutors, even though the handbook specifies that we speak to the children “with warmth.” Besides the neglect of culture and play, such forms of pedagogy are also explained by the program’s hierarchical structure and the relatively fixed goals to which it was directed. We were under considerable pressure to train children in a specific skillset within a rigid timeframe that was defined for us by our managers (after some consultation, but not concerning the principle of defining a sequence of steps in advance with attainment dates) and was to be applied uniformly, with flexibility for only minor variations in timing (and not content). That this approach persists within teaching practice in other institutional settings – indeed, that manager-driven utilitarianism has become a prominent feature of education in the country in which this program took place, placing teachers under pressures that render various kinds of authoritarian methods attractive – should not exempt the program from critique, particularly when the ends-directed rationality it nurtures has been decoupled from a methodology designed to enhance children’s exploratory and creative powers.

The example discussed above, where “rewards” are explicitly, unambiguously listed as a component of the teaching process (also mentioned as a key aspect of the

school's behavioral management strategy), is only an exemplar of the general approach taken by the program to issues of pedagogy and control revealed in other documents; even in this case, the seeming inadequacy of many of the rewards posited invites us to contemplate the alternative techniques that will effect the skill-transmission, which included various kinds of emotional cajoling and manipulation. Some of these pedagogic methods are, on the surface, thoroughly laudable and desirable. The staff handbook lists communicative techniques which we were to use in our lessons, including: phrasing criticism constructively; praise; focusing on negative behavior, not the individual; emphasizing mutual responsibility; avoiding sarcasm or rhetorical questions; and removing hierarchy and distance. This overview also includes examples of what not to say, and preferable alternatives. Furthermore, the same handbook emphasizes the importance of projecting "warmth, humour and joy" as well as the ubiquitous "passion" in sessions with the children. What is assumed, however, is that such emotions readily transmit themselves to the students, regardless of the context in which they arise, once visibly manifested by the teacher. The trope is of charismatic leadership inspiring an emotional response that flows predominantly in one direction.

This raises, of course, pertinent questions of psychology and philosophy that are beyond the scope of this piece to investigate fully, but worth highlighting nonetheless. How realistically can we expect teachers to transmit joy within the context of a rigidly defined program of specific outcomes, many of which comprise skills stripped of the aesthetic and social context in which they acquire value? What do joy and passion consist of, and how can we recognize these emotions, or modes of behavior? Are they most effectively, or ethically, fostered by direct transmission of the teacher's example? Paul Standish points out that

energy and intensity can pulse ... through quiet and solitary experience: fascination of the engineer with the machine's precision, contemplation of the work of art, puzzlement over a mathematical equation, peculiar turbulence excited by a philosophical problem — all are typified by this intense absorption. (2005, 65)

Questions regarding the nature of emotions, their transmissibility and their perceptibility are of great practical significance in this case — for example, with regard to the program's assessment procedures. As noted above, the criterion of

“pride and passion” was not only to be assessed by teachers against five different levels, but students were also told that these levels represented stages of achievement which they were expected to work towards and progressively attain.

There is also a presumption, in the document quoted above, that enthusiasm, joy, and so on are individual qualities to be summoned at will by teachers, regardless of the constraints under which they are placed or the materials they are using, and a failure to consider what the ethical value of this “summoning” might be if demonstrated emotions are not truly felt, if they are mere simulacra. Finally, there is the claim that, finding within themselves the ability to display these emotions (authentic or not), the teachers will find them reciprocated in the children’s response, as long as – it is implied – all the other guidelines detailed in the handbook are adhered to.

Underlying all of this ideologically would appear to be the belief that what is of ultimate value can be anticipated, at least in theory, by a properly informed elite, and thus controlled by the careful organization of means to meet preselected ends – a highly contentious stance, as strikingly persistent as such tendencies are within the history of philosophy (see, for example, Unger 2007, 10–17). The trope of charismatic leadership inspiring action, one way to imagine exerting such control, contains a dangerous normative principle, as – despite the trappings of humanistic concern in which the staff handbook’s guidelines are swathed, despite the concern (no doubt sincerely felt) for the happiness and well-being of the children – it posits a unidirectional agency which is profoundly antidemocratic. The issue here is not of agency (still less “freedom”) per se, in any absolute sense – it never is – but of the capacity to affect others and be affected: the means available to develop one’s powers of interdependent thought and action in a specific, bounded social relationship, which will in turn affect the autonomy of the individual as they emerge into other concrete, and embodied, contexts.¹⁴ Adult-imposed constraints of some kind will be necessary in children’s education: developing and exercising personal autonomy, as Meira Levinson has argued, cannot be assumed to be the same thing (1999, 36–7). However, questions about how to foster autonomy, and the democratic interactivity this presupposes, cannot simply be set aside in the interests of realizing a future

ideal, however socially harmonious or liberating it purports to be. As Alfred North Whitehead writes:

The mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus. You cannot postpone its life until you have sharpened it. Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever powers you are strengthening in the pupil must be exercised here and now; whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now. (2009, 364)

There is no evidence, in the written record, that such issues were being taken seriously during the early part of the program under scrutiny, and much that it was on the wrong track.

Concluding remarks

In this essay, I hope to have equipped the reader with sufficient information to form her own judgments about the music program in question, and to have widened the debate around El Sistema and projects allied to it, particularly with respect to the notion that this model is in some sense exemplary or beyond criticism. It is vitally important that the claims and counterclaims around a project of such vast international scope, influence, and reputation receive the scrutiny they are due. What I believe that my ethnographic reportage and discourse analysis reveal of the Sistema-based program in question is a project deeply mired in its own contradictions, where humane instincts and notions of social betterment clash with archaic, dehumanizing, and elitist pedagogical tools. Some of these contradictions have arguably been imported from a broader context (nationally and internationally) in which neoliberal models of education have attempted, with some success, to co-opt the language, but discard the underlying principles, of progressivism. However, they may also may be specific to a project derived from El Sistema, refracted as they are through the anxieties of musicians from a classically-trained milieu attempting to re-enact a rigidly conceived program wholesale in a local context with which none of them are familiar, and in which the prevailing cultural values are largely opaque and seemingly irrelevant. The overriding theme of curriculum design and pedagogy revealed in my essay – contested as it was, to some degree, within the theatre of action – is one in which the view of the children who were the program's ostensible

beneficiaries is so dim, so flat, so distant, that finally – dispensing with all progressive platitudes – it makes logical sense to refer to them, as does the correspondence quoted above, as mere functional parts: bowing arms hitting the strings. For those who aspire to a different kind of music education, no less ambitious but centered on another scale of values – one in which children’s imagination, creativity, and personality come to the fore – it is time to rethink the influence of El Sistema.

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Notes

¹ See Baker (2014) and Toronyi-Lalic (2012) for analysis of this media treatment. Quoting the latter, Baker (2014, 15) writes: “Questioning the idea that classical music is better for people, and especially for the poor, than other kinds of music, [Toronyi-Lalic] accused Sistema supporters of ignoring the sometimes unpalatable realities of the professional music world. He also turned his fire on the press, whom he accused of delivering an ‘unthinking whitewashing’: ‘few have thought it appropriate to ask even the most basic questions of the enterprise.... Only blind devotion is permitted.’”

² Particularly influential texts from that period include Standish 2005, Dewey 2007, Levinson 1999, and Whitehead 2009, which are discussed further below. Also helpful were Dunne and Pendlebury 2003, Peters 1966, and MacIntyre 1981. R. S. Peters and his colleagues in analytic philosophy Paul Hirst and Robert Dearden were insightful interlocutors and critics of progressivism whose work helped to frame the debates over freedom and its relationship to education. Joseph Dunne and Shirley Pendlebury exposed me to the epistemological conundrum posed by “doing”: the status of knowledge derived from, and embedded in, action. MacIntyre forced me to consider the role of narrativity in knowledge production (see, for example, his “intelligibility” criterion). More recently, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) shaped my ideas considerably, e.g. concerning philosophical critique and its pragmatic function: see Dobson 2015.

³ The documents to which I had access in carrying out this research included: 1) two full orchestral session plans, with sections specifying “Activity Type and Detail” and “Purpose of Activity” in both; 2) written correspondence referring to the content of orchestral sessions and specifying, or querying, how instrumental classes were to be coordinated with them; 3) lesson plans for the instrumental classes of the relevant age group (including all eighteen of my personal plans, and four of the plans written by an orchestral session leader) with content orientated to the orchestral sessions; 4) a graphic score for *Trepak*; 5) a sheet of activities for warming up and down; 6) a planning document for weeks 3-7 titled “Step-by-Step Levels for Instrument Care and Playing” with sections specifying the “step,” “activity,” and “reward”; 7) a list of the children’s names for each orchestra, matched to their instrument, for the program of the summer concert.

⁴ All names have been changed.

⁵ Up to ten cellos would have required tuning. There were approximately thirty violinists, twelve violists, ten cellists and five double-bassists in this orchestra at full capacity, not including the adults playing instruments.

⁶ This was not an after-school program, at least during the period in question. The music teaching analyzed here took place during normal school hours, with the support and participation of classroom teachers.

⁷ In all cases that I am aware of, the participating classroom teachers started to learn their instruments at the same time as the children: they were allocated instruments as part of the program, and assumed a place in the orchestra according to their respective instrumental section.

⁸ I use “complaisant” here in the sense of indicating acceptance *negatively*, i.e. not demonstrating in their observable behavior any disagreement with or resentment for what they have been asked to do.

⁹ The leader would have been standing at the back of the room, in the centre, facing the children arranged in instrumental sections radiating outwards from her position across the width of the room, as in the spatial orientation of a conductor to a conventional orchestra, and occupying roughly two-thirds of the total space of the hall.

¹⁰ By “settling into their passivity” I mean that the visible signs of fidgeting or distractedness among the children (e.g. those provoked by the instrumental case) tend to lessen, but also that their expressions do not show what I would describe as a pleasurable anticipation or curiosity.

¹¹ “Gestures of exhaustion” refer to the leader simulating or mimicking exhaustion for the purposes of the warm-up procedure. It is not that she feels exhausted in actuality and is making this visible for the children.

¹² i.e. two quarter-notes, two eighth-notes, and a quarter-note.

¹³ See footnote 2 for a list of specific documents relevant to the account given of the orchestral session. In addition to these I had access to 1) a detailed staff handbook; 2) a sheet of learning outcomes for the summer term listing six outcomes to be assessed against five attainment levels; 3) a scheme of work for weeks 3-7 for the violin groups; 4) a draft “string team outcomes and activities” sheet for weeks 1-7; 5) 277 pieces of written correspondence.

¹⁴ The philosophy of John Dewey provides a detailed, rich account of education as a democratic social process, in which the themes I have touched upon here (the importance of taking into consideration local objective conditions, the nature and desirability of social constraints, education as “continuity” and “growth”) are treated at length. See, for example, Dewey 1997, 33–60. Jim Garrison and Alven Neiman (2003, 29) comment: “Dewey favors a dynamic planning over a static planned society. He thought an education that emphasizes community, communication, intelligent inquiry, and a reconstructive attitude can best serve the citizens of an ever-evolving world ... if citizens are to become participatory democrats then the schools they attend must become democratic in the participatory sense he describes.”

About the Author

Nicolas Dobson is a teacher, musician and independent researcher. He has taught and performed in several countries, including the Palestinian Territories, where he spent almost two years working for the Al-Kamandjati Music School.