MUSIC EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: CRITICAL DEBATES

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Background: El Sistema, Venezuela's National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras and Choirs, and Sistema-inspired programmes around the world use music education as a vehicle for social action. Sistema programmes are founded on the idea that community social development goals may be supported through collective music-making that is characterised by trust, support for self-esteem, empathy, a team-based approach, commitment, structure and discipline. Teachers in Sistema programmes are charged with supporting their students' holistic development, including musical, cognitive, social and creative. The Sistema movement has sparked many debates relating to the ideology, principles and practices that underpin this approach to music education.

Focus of the enquiry: This paper summarizes a global review of literature concerned with El Sistema and Sistema-inspired programmes. We aim to map the existing evidence against the core principles that underpin the ‘Sistema ideology’, highlighting areas for future research and issues that have been the focus of critical debate.

Methods: Research, evaluations and theoretical papers concerned with programmes that self-identified as ‘El Sistema’ or ‘Sistema-inspired’ were included in the literature review. We reviewed documents written in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French and a limited number in German. In total, we included 85 research and evaluation papers, representing 44 Sistema or Sistema-inspired programmes in 19 countries.

Theoretical framework: Five overarching core principles underpinning the concept of ‘music for social change’ were identified. These were music for social change, learning through ensemble, accessibility, frequency, and connectivity. In this paper we provide examples from the literature review, illustrating the evidence and debates relating to each.

Findings: Overall, our key finding is that El Sistema has fostered a remarkable renewal of interest in the transformative potential of music education, generating important dialogue and debate about effective practice. Critical debates focus around: 1) ownership of the ideology, with a focus on the relationship of Sistema programmes with the wider music education communities; 2) issues relating to exporting the Venezuelan model to diverse cultural contexts with specific local community needs; 3) tensions between the goals of musical excellence and social inclusion; and 4) the privileging of western classical music as a vehicle for social change. We highlight the need for partnership working and for teacher professional development, particularly relating to an inclusive pedagogy that will support the social and personal development to which Sistema programmes aspire.