

Needs Assessment Data – and Meaning

By Ben Fuller and Jennifer Kessler, Sistema Fellows at New England Conservatory, 2011-2012

Back in January, the 2012 Sistema Fellows surveyed self-identified El Sistema-inspired programs across the country. The information gathered in countless hours speaking with program directors is a September 2011-January 2012 snapshot, representing a broad overview that is neither comprehensive nor perfectly accurate. We hope you'll look at this data as a launching pad to further investigate what we need to be successful in our work.



Jennifer Kessler and Ben Fuller working on this article, even as they head to their Fellowship graduation ceremony.

daily?: 68% reported classroom management, 19% reported student attendance, and 13% reported teaching to mixed abilities.

There were mixed responses regarding type and amount of parental support,

which included parents volunteering to organize events, serve as chaperones, and in some cases, serve on parental network committees: 61% of programs reported strong parental involvement, 24% reported some parental involvement, and 15% reported no parental involvement. Most sites feel that the relationships with parents and families are excellent, and parental roles seem to mature as organizations grow.

Across all budget and years-in-service groups, program directors feel that the top key skills their students are learning are musicianship, discipline, self-esteem, and teamwork.

However, we were interested to discover this: most programs are not evaluating anything. Programs that are evaluating tend to be focusing on musical evaluation. We wondered how programs know the skills that their students are taking away if they aren't evaluating the non-musical skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Some principal findings of our survey are that evaluation and funding are really important, and that sharing resources such as repertoire, teacher training, and best hiring practices would be helpful to most programs. Perhaps more important than our findings are the questions raised. Why are we mainly in schools? Why are we mainly serving elementary kids? When do we expand, and why? As Beth Babcock says, "Bigger is not necessarily better; better is better."

Most important, what are the best ways to measure the outcomes of our work, in relation to the youth and community development values we all share? Clearly, we are at the beginning of our journey toward understanding how to fulfill our mission to make a difference in the lives of children.

FROM THE EDITOR

The Sistema Fellows' 2011-2012 survey reported in our lead article is the first-ever survey of all El Sistema-inspired nuclei in the United States – and for this author, its findings have a whiff of the miraculous. The number of U.S. nuclei in late 2009, when I began working on my book about El Sistema, could be counted on one hand. Two and a half years later, the exponential quality of our growth is breathtaking.

The article's authors point out that our growth is not yet accompanied by success in developing evaluation tools – a critical problem in an environment where sustainable funding depends on the ability to prove positive results. While some pioneering programs are beginning this work, many are still unsure of how to create meaningful assessment tools, or too stretched to do the work of finding and creating them. And the Sistema's deepest values – the development of psychic wholeness, the strengthening of empathic connection, the enrichment of spirit – are precisely the hardest results to measure.

Last week I attended the spring concert of the Corona Youth Music Project in Queens. Before the concert began, a very small boy in a very pressed white shirt complete with clip-on tie climbed into his mother's lap, next to me, and lay in her arms as he tucked his tiny violin under his chin and began to play open strings. Each small sonic change registered as a different shade of delight on his face. His mother seemed to experience it with him – the dig-in, the lift-off, the warmth and power of the press of bow on string. So much here is immeasurable!

Although we cannot measure ineffable moments, it is possible to measure social consequences. That may be our most important challenge now: to find or create research models that evaluate success in building children's self-esteem, team-working skills, academic performance – and to produce research results persuasive enough to move funders, to win grants, and to continue our essential business of creating un-measurable moments.

Tricia Tunstall

BASIC FACTS

- Approximately 7,000 students in 54 U.S. programs
- 54 programs with 91 sites (second sites are most often started in organizations 3+ years old)
- 9 hours of instruction/week on average (information on how many weeks per year was not obtained)
- Serving students from ages 2 to 17 (predominantly elementary-school aged)
- \$1,800/child average expenditure
- 16 programs in the Northeast, 13 in California, 10 in the South, 9 in the Midwest, 6 in the West
- Sites include: 48 public schools (in- or after-school not indicated), 18 community centers, 5 charter schools, 2 churches, 2 Boys and Girls Clubs, 1 Catholic private school, 1 library

JUCIER INFORMATION

Programs overwhelmingly stated youth development, community development, music, and access as core values of their missions. Descriptions of the biggest successes of programs reflected their core values: 41% of program directors cited youth development, 32% cited musical growth, and 27% cited community development.

The most frequently cited "biggest challenges" were financial sustainability and funding (organizations with budgets greater than \$500K listed "growth" as their greatest challenge). Almost all programs reported challenging issues related to hiring qualified teaching artists and guiding them to implement the vision of the program.

What are the three greatest challenges that program directors believe teaching artists face in the classroom

"We're just getting started. In the future there shouldn't be a single Venezuelan child or teenager left out of music." – José Antonio Abreu

News Notes

Kids In Concert (KIC), established in 2011 on Bainbridge Island WA, serves kids who would otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in ensemble music. While teaching music technique and performance, KIC uses improvisation as a core method, respecting both the individual voice and the spirit of the group and fostering self-expression and collaboration. KIC's partnerships began with the Boys & Girls Club of Bainbridge Island where 50 kids participated in a summer choral and improv program. We found our "home" on the Suquamish Native American Reservation near Poulsbo WA. The Suquamish Tribe is a strong, self-governing, sovereign nation that provides for the health, education, and welfare of its families in ways that reflect traditional Suquamish values. This spring, KIC completed a pilot program in Suquamish with 22 children focusing on choir, rhythm, and improv. A summer program will prepare for a fall afterschool program with 30 kids and the beginning of an orchestral program. michelle@kidsinconcert.org

Allentown Symphony's El Sistema Lehigh Valley will pilot a week (June 29-August 3) of El Sistema-inspired **music immersion for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH)** children, in collaboration with the Camp HERO (Here Everybody Really is One – a camp specifically for DHH children hosted at Camp Victory), Youth Education in the Arts (a REMO sponsored Non-Profit), Music Therapists of Whitehall, and acclaimed percussionist Marcus Santos. The week includes music instruction on percussion and hand instruments, interpretive choir, and dance, leading to a culminating performance. This pilot week hopes to build support for special needs programming throughout the year, and provide a working model to for similar pilot weeks elsewhere. stliu@gmail.com

Resources

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) has released the nation's first online research and policy clearinghouse that documents the educational outcomes of arts learning for students and teachers. The easy-to-use format provides research summaries and contact information for studies about how arts education affects students' cognitive, academic, personal, social, and civic development, searchable by student's age



Children perform for the tribal elders at the end of the KIC spring break program. Photo: Roy Naden

and by in-school and out-of-school time focus. This resource represents four years of work by AEP to make existing research available and easy to find. <http://www.artsedsearch.org>

The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies examines the arts-related variables from four large datasets to understand the relationship between arts engagement and positive academic and social outcomes in children and young adults of low socioeconomic status (SES) as they unfold over years. Conducted by James Catterall (at UCLA) the analyses show that achievement gaps between high- and low-SES groups are mitigated for children and young adults with arts-rich backgrounds. <http://www.nea.gov/research/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf>

My Blue Butterfly/Mi Mariposal Azul by Venezuelan native Mercedes Rodman, who is deeply involved with El Sistema, is the first El Sistema-based book for young people (children and teens). The English and the Spanish versions (in the same volume) tell parallel but separate stories of two 12-year-old girls (one in Venezuela, one in Boston) who establish an email friendship through El Sistema. The girls deal with bullying, with concerns about their looks, and with intense musical competition. Published (\$19.95) by independent publisher Vineyard Stories (www.vineyardstories.com), it is also for sale at <http://mercedesalvarezrodman.com>. The book includes a CD of music keyed to different sections of the stories, composed and performed by Daniel Rodman.

Subscription Information

To ADD or DELETE names in the free subscription list for **The Ensemble**, send an email with instructions to:

TheEnsembleNL@gmail.com

Only Connect

By Arlene Goldbard, writer, speaker, consultant, and activist; author of *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*. www.arlenegoldbard.com

For decades, my focus has been artists and organizations working in community. This field is replete with artists rescuing buried history through projects such as **The Great Wall of Los Angeles** and **Chinese Whispers**; using art to engage urgent social issues, such as **Thousand Kites**; placing artists in community service, such as **MusicianCorps**; finding beauty and meaning in overlooked places, such as **TrashDance**; and infusing work with art, such as the **Arts & Equity Project**.

But it wasn't till last November that I found myself at the intersection of classical music and social justice.

Community MusicWorks (CMW) in Providence commissioned me to take part in the "Music & Civil Society" symposium at Brown University and to create an **interactive publication** capturing its energy, ideas, and voices.

I was powerfully impressed with this string quartet embedded in a stressed urban neighborhood, and with the El Sistema artists I met at the symposium – and nonplussed that we'd never crossed paths. None of the groups I'd worked with and none of the academic programs that use my writing or invite me to speak had focused on classical music.

Why is complicated. Classical music often comes packaged in velvet and marble, and sometimes an air of snobbery. Community artists working in vernacular forms may stereotype classical musicians as elitists, never questioning that snap judgment.

For community artists, CMW's declaration that classical music is not an activity for the privileged is a radical departure. It suggests they might be natural allies, along with community organizers, educators, and others advocating access to social goods.

With few exceptions, though, neither prospective ally has reached out very energetically to the other. Evidently, some classical music groups fear that crossing that boundary will endanger support from the classical music establishment; and most community artists haven't a clue that this phenomenon exists. Want to build a bridge? Let's talk.

"Exchanging notes, planning and sharing with colleagues, this is a golden opportunity to learn and re-energize." – Louise Gandhi, Board of Directors Chair, VYMA, Pasadena, CA