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# Improving Literacy And Reading Comprehension Through Music Instruction In An El Sistema-Inspired Violin Program

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# IMPROVING LITERACY AND READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH MUSIC INSTRUCTION IN AN EL SISTEMA-INSPIRED VIOLIN PROGRAM

by

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the incredible students at Ascension Catholic School who push me every day to be a better teacher, a better musician, and a better human. You inspire me.

## EPIGRAPH

"Perhaps it is music that will save the world." –Pablo Casals

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

In 1975, musician and economist Jose Antonio Abreu started a music program in some of the poorest neighborhoods of Caracas, Venezuela. This was a new kind of music program- a program with lofty goals and a unique vision. It combined the intensity of a conservatory with the mission of the social services. Funded not by the Ministry of Culture but rather by the Ministry of Social Services, it is a music program that commits itself to advocacy and social change. El Sistema changed, and continues to change, the way teachers and music programs across the world see their roles, not just as teachers of music, but as advocates for improving the lives of students and the communities in which they live and teach.

Though it started with only eleven students, it did not take long for the program to take off. Today nearly half a million students from some of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Venezuela participate in this intensive program. Three to four hours a day, five to six days a week they meet to make music together, to build community, to avoid the violence of the streets, and to produce incredible musicians and kind, generous, contributing members of the community.

The El Sistema movement has gotten a great deal of attention in the United States in recent years. In 2009, Gustavo Dudamel, himself an El Sistema Venezuela alumni, was named music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As one of the youngest and most charismatic classical conductors of the time, Dudamel became an international face for

the cause of "music for social change." He conducted and toured the most advanced El Sistema orchestra around the world to sold out audiences and raving reviews, which encouraged some of the top names in classical music to travel Venezuela to see what was happening. Shortly thereafter, the New England Conservatory, one of the most prestigious music conservatories in the United States, responded by creating a graduate program called the "El Sistema Fellows" program. This program sent performers and teaching artists to Venezuela to study El Sistema with the goal of starting their own El Sistema-inspired programs back in the United States. Because of this program, we have some of the best musical programs in the country: Play On, Philly!, the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles, and OrchKids in Baltimore, to name a few. To date, El Sistema has spread worldwide with music programs in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, all with the goal of dramatic social change through music.

My own road to this somewhat unusual pairing (that is, classical violin and the social services) has been anything but direct. I started studying the piano formally at age seven, and violin at ten, when a string orchestra program was offered at my elementary school. I fell in love with the violin; I loved everything about it: the sound, the way it vibrates under the chin, the way the bow grips the strings, the culture, the pomp and circumstance of performing, the smell of the rosin, everything. At twelve, I quit taking piano lessons to focus on the violin. I took private lessons, went to summer music camps, played in youth symphony, and gave concerts in Bolivia and Chile. I studied violin performance at the University of Wisconsin- Madison and gave concerts in the Czech

Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Germany. I attended a summer- long classical music festival in Brevard, NC three times, and played in professional orchestras in Wisconsin, Illinois, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. And then, just as I was about to finish my Masters in performance and pedagogy from UW-Madison, something started to gnaw at me. Who was I helping? How was I making a difference in the world? I started to doubt that the people who could afford to hear me play were the ones that I felt called to reach. This is when everything changed.

In 2004, with a final project still left of my masters at UW, I joined an AmeriCorps Volunteer program at Covenant House in New York City. Covenant House is the largest service provider in the United States for homeless, runaway, and trafficked youth. Every year they provide shelter, food, clothing, medical services, education, and advocacy to nearly 60,000 youth in thirty cities and six countries. If I was going to find somebody to help, this was the place. And so, for a year and a half, I worked as a full-time volunteer at Covenant House New York, which houses on average 350 homeless kids a night. I spent time working in the crisis shelter with kids coming directly off the street and in transitional housing with moms and their children. Later, I was hired at "The 9 Line," Covenant House's 24-hour, national, crisis intervention hotline, where we took calls from children and adults struggling with homelessness, abuse, mental health issues, substance abuse problems, and suicidal ideation. Additionally, we were the only hotline in the United States certified by the US government to take calls from victims of human trafficking. It was desperate, scary, fulfilling, exciting, and overwhelming work. And

while I can say that I helped a lot of people, I missed the violin, and I found myself lost again.

In January of 2008 I moved back to Minnesota and got a job teaching music at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis. MacPhail had an opening in their School Partnerships department, and they hired me to teach violin to small and large group classes in three different schools in the Twin Cities. This is where the true merging of classical music and the social services began. I started to see the incredible disparities between different schools and neighborhoods in the Twin Cities. I began teaching more often in schools in North Minneapolis and saw the violence and poverty that my students were living in. I saw how hard it was for them to learn when they lived with so much trauma and I began to ask myself: "Can music help them? And if so, how?"

In 2012, my colleagues at MacPhail and I began researching El Sistema Venezuela. We also visited Play On, Philly! and OrchKids, reached out to leaders at YOLA (Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles) and Bravo, Waterbury!, and partnered with ComMUSICation here in Saint Paul. This allowed us to see the ways that El Sistema and El Sistema-inspired programs used music to not only create incredible young musicians, but to build community, teach emotional regulation and body control, encourage cooperation and kindness, and keep kids safe and accounted for. When we began to implement these goals into our programs in North Minneapolis, we watched our students thrive, flourish, change and grow in ways beyond what we thought possible. Frankly, it was intoxicating.

Today I work with 3rd-8th grade students in an intensive after school program at Ascension Catholic School in North Minneapolis. The program consists of about fifty students, mostly of African American and Hispanic ethnicity. Many of them live in poverty, and nearly all of them live in neighborhoods with some of the worst violence in the city. We meet three days a week for two hours at a time, and many of the children also participate in a Saturday full orchestra program called MNYO (MacPhail Northside Youth Orchestra), which meets for two hours at Ascension every week.

Last year I noticed that I was struggling to meet the needs of many of my students because they were so often being pulled out of my class for tutoring, specifically my English Language Learners (ELLs) who were getting extra help in reading. I started to consider it further and realized that the majority of their English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction was happening after school, during my class, in the form of reading tutoring. Though my students attend a private school, I did a little bit more research and found the statistics for reading proficiency for Minneapolis Public Schools as a point of reference. Appallingly, only 22% of African American students in Minneapolis Public Schools tested "proficient" in reading in 2016. Only slightly better, 27.1% of Hispanics and Latinos were proficient and 12.7% of ELLs were proficient. And white students, doing significantly better than their minority classmates, still only represented 77.1% proficiency. This is not ok. (Minnesota Report Card, 2016).

All of this- my classical music training, crisis work at Covenant House, work at MacPhail, interest in El Sistema, Masters in ESL from Hamline University, and finally

my incredible students at Ascension Catholic School in North Minneapolis- has culminated into this research project. My research questions are: how can I use the content area of music in an intensive, El Sistema- inspired after school string program to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension for my students, and how do goals for increased literacy and improved reading comprehension align with an El Sistema-inspired program with goals for social change? It is my assumption that we can use music to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension, and that we must, especially in the El Sistema movement. If our goal is not only to create great musicians but to really and effectively create social change, we must attempt to address the obvious reading proficiency gap of our students, along with our musical goals and goals for self-sufficiency, self-awareness, and community-building.

In Chapter 1 of this paper I have outlined my path to this research and its importance. Chapter 2 will focus on four major relevant areas of research: (1) The connection between prosody and reading comprehension; (2) critical pedagogy and critical literacy; (3) the El Sistema movement and its impacts on academics and psychosocial measures; and finally, (4) the connections between musical training and enhanced prosodic awareness and sensitivity. Chapter 3 will outline the project: a curriculum written for 3rd and 4th grade beginning violin players, about 25% of whom are English Language Learners, that will have goals and objectives for music, psychosocial awareness and development, community building, literacy practice, and prosody awareness and sensitivity. Finally, Chapter 4 will discuss how writing this

capstone has changed my teaching and my outlook, and some future goals for further research, expansion, and implementation of the research.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Literature Review

To answer my research questions — how can I use the content area of music in an intensive, El Sistema- inspired after school string program to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension for my students, and how do goals for increased literacy and improved reading comprehension align with an El Sistema- inspired program with goals for social change —, I studied four main areas of research, which I will present in this chapter. First, what is the connection between prosody and reading comprehension? What evidence do we have that a more advanced understanding of prosody correlates with skilled reading? Second, what is critical pedagogy and how does it inform literacy instruction? Third, what is El Sistema, what does it look like in the United States and around the world, and what effect does an intensive El Sistema program have on academic and psychosocial measures? Lastly, is there a correlation between music training and enhanced prosodic awareness?

## Prosody and Fluency/Reading Comprehension

There has been considerable research done in the last fifteen years about prosody and its role in fluency and reading comprehension. Before this, fluency had typically been defined only by rate and accuracy. Now researchers are focusing on this third element: the prosodic features of language. Prosody includes pitch or intonation, volume, stress or emphasis, and duration and timing. Indicators of good prosodic reading include:

a lack of pausal intrusions (inappropriate pauses in length or timing), appropriate length of phrases between pauses, appropriate phrasing, an appropriate duration of the final word of phrases, a change of pitch at the end of a phrase or sentence, and appropriate and meaningful stress and accents within phrases (Dowhower, 1991).

So how do we know that good prosodic features, and therefore reading fluency, also mean good reading comprehension? A study at the Queensland University of Technology examined this connection between the prosodic skills of children and their reading fluency (Whalley & Hansen, 2006). The study included eighty-four 4th grade children (boys and girls) attending two different elementary schools in Brisbane, Australia. Their reading ability, phonological awareness, prosodic sensitivity, and non-speech rhythms were assessed.

Reading awareness was assessed using the Word Identification and Word Attack subtests of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests- Revised (Woodcock, 1987). This test gives scores for reading comprehension, reading accuracy, and reading rate.

Phonological awareness was tested with a task involving three spoken words, one of which did not contain a sound present in the other two. The children were asked to identify the word that was different from the other two words given. This test was given as two different subtests: one where the word in question differed by rhyme and the other where the odd word differed by final phoneme. Prosodic sensitivity was assessed at the phrase and word level. To test phrasal prosodic sensitivity, the children were given a test including three different phrases. The first phrase was a movie or book title familiar to

the children. The other two phrases each contained a syllable in the phrase that was replaced by the sound “dee”. One of these phrases matched the prosody (rhythm and stress) of the spoken phrase, and one did not. The children were asked to identify which of the two non-word phrases matched the first. Prosodic sensitivity at the word level was assessed using two sub-tests. The tests assessed whether children could discern a compound noun from a noun phrase that differ only in prosody. In the first test, the children heard one phrase that could be identified as either two or three items depending on intonation, stress, and pauses. The second test was similar except that the compound nouns and noun phrases were given in a sentence that provided no pragmatic meaning. Lastly, non-speech rhythm was assessed using two patterns of drumbeats. The children were asked to identify whether the two patterns presented were the same or different.

The results showed correlations between phonological awareness and the non-speech rhythm scores and reading accuracy but not comprehension. Both prosodic sensitivity tasks showed a significant correlation with word identification and accuracy. Performance on the Deedee task was significantly correlated with reading comprehension.

These results indicate that phonological awareness and non-prosodic rhythm helps children to decode words and read them out loud correctly, but does not necessarily lead to better comprehension. Alternatively, skills in phrasal and word prosody (pitch, pauses, and stress) corresponds significantly with comprehension.

Another study out of the Netherlands in 2014 aimed to investigate how much variance in reading comprehension ability can be attributed to speech prosody and text reading prosody, specifically after controlling for decoding, vocabulary, and syntactic awareness (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2014). Participants in the study were 106 4th grade students from four different elementary schools in the Netherlands. Their decoding skills, vocabulary, syntactic awareness, text reading prosody, speech prosody, and reading comprehension were all assessed.

Decoding skills were assessed using a pseudo word test. Four lists with pseudo words were given representing four different categories: consonant-vowel-consonant words, double consonant words, two-syllable words, and multisyllabic words. The children had one minute to read as many of the pseudo words as they could. A standardized, multiple choice vocabulary test was given to the children who were asked to choose the correct definition of a word within a sentence (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 1993). To assess syntactic awareness, the children were shown forty sets of four sentences and asked to indicate the sentence with the syntactic mistake. Text reading prosody was assessed using four short stories of approximately one hundred words each. The children were asked to read each story aloud and the readings were recorded and analyzed for expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness (lack of inappropriate stress), and speed. Speech prosody was assessed using two cards, each showing a sequence of eight pictures. The children were asked to tell a story that was depicted by the pictures on the cards. Again, these stories were recorded and assessed for expression and volume,

phrasing, smoothness, and speed. Lastly, to assess reading comprehension the children were given a standardized reading comprehension test (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 1993).

The results of these tests showed a moderate correlation between reading comprehension and syntactic awareness as well as a moderate correlation between reading comprehension and speech prosody. The study concluded that 8% of the variance in reading comprehension scores could be attributed to speech prosody and 6% to text reading prosody. It showed no correlation between decoding skills and reading comprehension.

A third study done with sixty-two, five to seven- year-old children in West Midlands, UK examined the correlation between prosodic awareness and reading comprehension (Holliman, Williams, Mundy, Wood, Hart, & Waldron, 2014). In this study, children were assessed on their non-verbal and verbal IQs, phonological awareness, phonological decoding, prosodic sensitivity, and text reading and comprehension.

Non-verbal IQ was measured using the Colored Progressive Matrices Test of Raven's IQ scale (Raven & Rust, 2008), verbal IQ using the Crichton Vocabulary Test of Raven's IQ scale (Raven & Rust, 2008), phonological awareness using the Rhyme Detection Test of the Phonological Assessment Battery (Fredrickson, Frith, & Reason, 1997), phonological decoding using the Non-Word Reading subtest from the same assessment battery (Frederickson et al., 1997), and prosodic sensitivity using a test developed by the first author of the study, which measured stress, intonation, and timing

at the word, phrase, and sentence level. Finally, text reading and comprehension were measured using the Revised Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA II) (Neale, 1997).

Results indicated that prosodic sensitivity was significantly correlated with phonological awareness and reading comprehension. The correlation existed even after controlling for general ability IQ measures. After controlling for vocabulary, and non-verbal IQ, prosodic sensitivity was still significantly tied to phonological awareness, phonological decoding, text reading accuracy, and reading comprehension.

These three studies all show moderate to significant connections between prosody and reading comprehension. It is not enough, after all, to only define fluency by rate and accuracy, but also by prosodic awareness and sensitivity. Therefore, deliberate instruction in pitch and intonation, emphasis and volume, and duration and timing could potentially lead to higher literacy rates and greater reading comprehension for children. It may seem obvious that greater literacy is imperative for our students, but seen through a critical pedagogy lens, it can mean helping our students break free from oppression. The next section addresses critical pedagogy and critical literacy as a framework through which to understand this project and the goals and objectives of the curriculum.

## Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a view of education and schools as a place for addressing inequalities and oppression due to race, class, politics, sexuality, or gender and to promote social change in the community. It has four main core principles. First, critical pedagogy sees school as a place to empower marginalized students. Second, critical

pedagogy examines the ways that traditional or historical curricular contexts work against marginalized students and continue to encourage inequality. Third, critical pedagogy acknowledges that all educational practices are created and experienced within a historical context, and that helping students to identify and acknowledge current cultural contexts helps them to find ways to change the path forward. Fourth, critical pedagogy recognizes the dialectical relationships between students and the current society and believes that this recognition is imperative for growth. (Mclaren & Crawford, 2010.)

Paulo Freire, arguably one of the most important and influential critical pedagogues of the twentieth century, believed that education was "a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy" (Giroux, 2010, p. B15). In other words, for Freire, a political activist, philosopher, and educator in Brazil in the latter half of the twentieth century, education was a critical tool for social justice, freedom from oppression, community activism, and political engagement. Education gives a voice to the voiceless in the community and power to the oppressed and powerless.

Educators, then, as seen through a critical pedagogy lens, are not just teachers, but also advocates. "One of the fundamental tasks of educators is to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which the discourses of critique and possibility in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality function to

alter, as part of a broader democratic project, the groups upon which life is lived" (Giroux, 2010, p. B15). Additionally, very contrary to other educational theories, is the idea that education is not neutral. Educators are not just dispelling information and allowing students to fill catalogues of knowledge in their heads. Critical pedagogy is an active method of teaching that intentionally directs students to engage in, wrestle with, participate in, and question the world around them, and empowers students to stand up, speak out, and work towards a better society for all.

## Critical Literacy from a Critical Pedagogy Perspective

Critical literacy as seen through the lens of critical pedagogy uses texts and writing as the content through which empowerment and social change happens. It includes the assumption that all texts are created within a current social structure, and therefore should be read, analyzed, discussed, and understood through that structure. "Classrooms and communities where critical literacy and critical pedagogy are evident represent a call to fundamental educational reform that advocates for a deep change in the dominant social order and in the power structures that serve to maintain that social order" (Kinnucan-Welsch, 2010). Research suggests that curricula and texts used in the classroom can enforce and reinforce socioeconomic differences among students. Patrick Finn, in his book "*Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self- Interests"* outlines the differences between classrooms of affluent, middle-class, and lower-class students. According to Finn, students from affluent families in affluent neighborhoods tend to experience education that is empowering and teaches

problem solving, creativity, and discussion of current issues. Middle-class students tend to experience instruction that is empowering, but only to a point. Instruction is focused on finding the right answers. Generally, there is less value put on critical analysis and more emphasis put on rules and behavior. Lower class students, however, tend to receive instruction with very little emphasis on critical thinking or active engagement. Instruction tends to include memorization, drills, and following directions for routine tasks (Finn, 2009).

Not only is critical literacy often withheld from students based on class as shown above, but it is assumed to be too complicated to use with English Language Learners because of language limitations that will make engagement with complex social, political, and moral topics impossible (Lau, 2012). However, action research including fifteen, beginning-to-lower intermediate English Language Learners (ELLs) in Canada showed otherwise. The curriculum written for these students, mainly from Southern China, intentionally included tasks and topics seen through a critical literacy lens. For example, a theme on bullying was added to the curriculum after many of the students had complained of being bullied in school. They read Aliki Brandenburg's 1998 book *Marianthe's Story,* a story about a new immigrant ELL who experiences bullying. Afterwards, the students were asked to write about bullying that they had experienced or witnessed. Later, the group worked together to rewrite the bullying incident to decide how they would be more active in addressing the bullying. "By rewriting the incidents, they began to see a possibility of change, that they could assert themselves and use the

appropriate language to insist on more respectful and fair treatment from their peers" (Lau, 2012). Following a discussion of bullying and what they could do differently, the students were asked to design posters that encouraged appropriate actions to combat bullying. They then presented the posters to a group of content teachers and talked about their experiences as an immigrant and as an ELL in the School.

Another unit worked to develop critical reading strategies and introduced literary elements such as setting, plot, characterization, narration, and theme (Lau, 2012). The students were given two different versions of the fairytale *Cinderella:* the Walt Disney version and the Korean Cinderella (Climo, 1993). The students were asked to compare the two stories, not just in terms of plot and details, but also to identify the hidden messages in the stories (beautiful women can always marry powerful men, ugly people cannot, stepmothers/stepsisters are evil, etc.). The students were then asked to rewrite the Cinderella story in a way that challenges some of the hidden messages.

According to Lau, her critical literacy project had a deep impact on her students, their linguistic skills, and the confidence with which they spoke up and interacted with each other and their peers in school. It also had a deep impact on Ms. Li, their ESL teacher, realizing that ELLs can engage critically early on as long as we can give them the support and scaffolding to allow their engagement.

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy theories identify educators as agents actively working towards social change and freedom of oppression for our students. It is not, in fact, enough to impart knowledge. Rather, we need to encourage our students to

examine it, wrestle with it, question it, fight with it, and to use this knowledge as a context through which to understand history and to identify their roles in making lasting and effective change.

Though critical pedagogy and critical literacy are theories generally understood within the context of the K-12 classroom, they have much in common with the goals of El Sistema and the El Sistema-inspired movement in the United States. Generally speaking, what these three pedagogies have in common more than anything is the belief that, regardless of content area, the goal of education is social change.

## El Sistema

Started in 1975 by Jose Antonio Abreu, El Sistema has become one of the largest music programs in the world. Currently over 780,000 young people study music intensively in 1,681 orchestras and 1,389 youth choirs from 10,000 teachers in the twenty-four states of Venezuela. Seventy-five percent of these students live below the poverty line (Web official del Sistema Nacional de Orquestas y Coros Juveniles, 2017).

What makes El Sistema unique, and really, what makes it relevant to critical pedagogy and this capstone, is its intense focus on social change. As Abreu said, “music becomes a source for developing dimensions of the human being, thus elevating the spirit and leading man to a full development of his personality. So, the emotional and intellectual profits are huge: the acquisition of leadership, teaching and training principles; the sense of commitment, responsibility, generosity and dedication to others;

and the individual contribution to achieve collective goals. All this leads to the development of self-esteem and confidence" (Abreu, 2009).

In other words, music is the medium, the content area through which life skills are taught, and with these life skills comes great change for the student and the community. For example, built into its curriculum is the goal of building community. Even after only one or two lessons on an instrument, the student joins the ensemble. The student may only be able to play one note of the piece, but they are quickly recognized as an integral player and part of the whole.

But if we are being honest, El Sistema's mission of social justice is not characterized only by successful musicians and impressive orchestras. In fact, their slogan sums it up well: *Tocar y luchar,* which means *"*to play and to fight" (Sometimes translated as "to play and to strive"). And for El Sistema Venezuela, it is a fight- a fight from political oppression, from crime-ridden neighborhoods and corrupt police, from drug cartels and violent gangs. Like critical pedagogy, it is also a fight against poverty, racial, gender, and sexual oppression, and class oppression. Despite its obvious musical and perhaps economic success; however, it has its fair share of critics.

Many musicians and teachers have questioned El Sistema's use of classical music (as opposed to other types of music) as a vehicle for social change, arguing that it perpetuates the stereotype of the classical orchestra as elitist. Other critics have argued that, instead of really bringing citizens out of poverty, El Sistema is setting them up for failure when there are not enough jobs for graduating musicians. The El Sistema-trained

conductor David Lopez said in an interview, “Why do we need three million more musicians?” (Eatok, 2010). Still other critics of El Sistema have raised questions about its connections with a corrupt government, its opacity of finances, and lack of research to back up claims of social transformation for its students. In fact, Geoffrey Baker, a music lecturer at Royal Holloway University, called El Sistema “a cult, a mafia, and a corporation” (Ellis-Peterson, 2014).

What is true, despite mixed reviews of this remarkable program, is that El Sistema’s influence can now be seen around the world. According to El Sistema USA’s website, there are El Sistema-inspired programs in more than fifty countries around the world, including: Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Australia, Bolivia, Bosnia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Greenland, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Iceland, India, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Netherlands, Norway, Palestine, Peru, Portugal Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, South Korea, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, The Philippines, Taiwan, Turkey, the United States, and Wales (El Sistema USA, 2017). While there is no set prescription for what an “El Sistema program” must entail, El Sistema USA identifies its core values as the unifying elements:

- Every human being has the right to a life of dignity and contribution, filled with beauty.

- Every child can learn to experience and express music and art deeply, can receive its many benefits, and can make different critical life choices as a result of this learning.
- Overcoming poverty and adversity is best done by strengthening the spirit, creating, as Dr. Abreu puts it, "an affluence of the spirit," and investing that affluence as a valued asset in a community endeavor to create excellence and beauty in music.
- Effective education is based on love, approval, joy, and consistently successful experiences within a high-functioning, aspiring, nurturing community. Every child has limitless possibilities and the ability to strive for excellence. "Trust the young," informs every aspect of the work.
- Learning organizations never arrive but are always becoming—striving to include: more students, deeper impact, greater musical excellence, better teaching, improved tools, more joy. Thus, flexibility, experimentation, risk-taking, and collegial exchange are inherent aspects of every program (El Sistema USA, 2017).

Currently in the United States there are 127 programs that identify with these core values and a goal for using music as a vehicle for social change. However, this number is probably inaccurately low, given the likely chance that programs exist with these goals in mind without registering themselves officially with El Sistema USA. Despite its critics, and likely much to the surprise of Abreu himself, El Sistema has indeed become a worldwide model for education and social change.

In recent years, research regarding impact on students in El Sistema-inspired music programs has surfaced. One such study took place in two economically and

socially disadvantaged primary schools in Australia. The music programs of both schools were based on the El Sistema approach by having mostly group instruction and intentional concerts and activities in the community to foster community connection. However, unlike most El Sistema programs, instruction was not intensive but rather only took place 1-2 days per week. The students in each program were assessed on their reading skills, math skills, attitudes to school, and non-verbal ability after the school year had concluded and compared with a group of students who received no musical instruction at all.

The results indicated that students that participated in the El Sistema-inspired program reported significantly higher scores on total well-being and all seven psychosocial tests than students without musical instruction. There also appeared to be a positive association between instrumental music study and stronger literacy skills as well as a positive relationship between instrumental music learning and math reasoning skills (Osborne, McPherson, Faulkner, Davidson, & Barrett, 2016).

This research shows what educators and researchers have been arguing for a long time: musical study, and in this case instrumental study, can be used to improve other skills such as mathematical skills, verbal reasoning, and improved literacy. It also shows the benefits of an El Sistema-inspired program in a low socio-economic setting in terms of academics and psychosocial measures.

So far, this literature review has focused on three main ideas: first, that there is a link between prosody and increased literacy and improved reading comprehension and

that explicit instruction in prosody can lead to these improvements. Second, critical pedagogy and critical literacy and its focus on empowerment and emancipation from oppression is an appropriate lens through which literacy and reading comprehension instruction can and should be viewed. Third, the El Sistema movement across the world shares common goals with critical pedagogy, and El Sistema music programs can be used to improve literacy and reading comprehension even without direct English instruction. The last part of this review will focus on the research showing that music education is correlated with greater fluency in speech and musical prosody. This closes the circle, showing that music education, through a critical pedagogy lens, in an El Sistema program, can increase literacy and improve reading comprehension.

## Music and Prosody

Music and speech prosody have much in common, including the descriptive words of each genre. Pitch, intonation, stress, volume (dynamics), rhythm, and timing all describe unique aspects of both music and prosody. Therefore, it is reasonable that one would have positive correlations with the other, and there is a good deal of research to prove these correlations.

In a study done in 2011 with sixty-four Finnish adults, researchers attempted to examine the associations between musical perception (being able to identify off-beat and out-of-key examples), word stress perception, visual spatial recognition, pitch perception, and auditory working memory. To evaluate the musical perception of the participants, each was given thirty pairs of melodies. In roughly half the pairs, the two melodies were

identical in both pitch and rhythm. In the other half, either the pitch or the rhythm did not match. Participants were asked to identify which pairs were not identical. Speech prosody (word stress) was tested by asking participants to identify whether a given sentence included a compound noun or a noun phrase based on word stress (ex: "Walk to the bus stop." "Walk to the bus. Stop.") by choosing a picture represented by the sentence. Visual spatial perception was assessed with a test using a series of lights. The lights shown varied in duration but formed a continuous path. Two sets of these paths were shown in succession and the participants were asked to identify whether the paths were the same or different. Pitch perception was rated using a test including five sequential tones. The participants were asked to identify whether the five tones remained the same or whether the notes changed.

Lastly, auditory working memory was measured using two different tasks. The first task used a series of numbers that the participants were asked to repeat back in the same order, while the second task used a series of numbers that the participants were asked to repeat back in reverse. The participants were also asked to fill out questionnaires that asked about their past musical education as well as their general education background, any cognitive problems they could identify in themselves, their musical abilities, hobbies, and preferences.

Results from these tests indicated a strong association between music perception (pitch and rhythm identification) and speech prosody, specifically word stress. Considering the questionnaires, the greatest link to high scores in music perception (and

therefore speech prosody) was a background in music study. Interestingly, when examined even further, the strongest correlation was found between the rhythmic examples of the music perception test (examples being off-beat) and word stress. This shows that perception of rhythm in music as well as in speech is related, and indicates that intentional rhythmic instruction could also improve communication (Hausen, Torppa, Salmela, Vainio, and Särkämö, 2013).

In a second study, researchers in France aimed to determine whether musical training influenced pitch processing in both language and music. Eighteen participants (nine of whom were musicians) were asked to participate in the experiment. Each participant was presented with forty pairs of either musical melodies or French sentences, and asked to identify if the final notes or words of the two phrases were prosodically or melodically congruous, weakly congruous, or strongly incongruous. Their answers and their reaction times were recorded and the percentage of errors and differences in reaction time were analyzed.

The results showed that the musicians in the group were not only more accurate in identifying pitch violations in the music, but were also more accurate in identifying prosodic pitch violations in spoken language. Additionally, the stronger the incongruity between the audio pairs, the faster the reaction time in the musicians. The non-musicians, however, showed no difference in reaction time between congruous and incongruous examples. This study further suggests a strong correlation between speech

prosody and music, and links pitch analysis in addition to the rhythm analysis shown in the first study (Schön, Magne, & Besson, 2004).

A third study examined whether participation in music lessons increased sensitivity to pragmatic emotional meaning conveyed through speech prosody, specifically pitch or intonation, rhythm, and stress. (Thompson, Schellenberg, & Husain, 2004). Three different experiments were conducted to attempt to answer this question. In experiments one and two, the researchers attempted to replicate a study in which adults were tested on their ability to identify the emotional meaning of spoken phrases or the implied emotional meaning of tone sequences that were prosodically similar to the spoken utterances. In experiment one of this study, twenty undergraduates, nine of whom were musically trained with at least eight years of formal music study, were included. The participants were given sixteen tone sequences and asked to choose the conveyed emotion out of a set of four possible answers. The results from this experiment showed that the musically trained adults could correctly identify the emotional meaning of the tone sequences 45% of the time, while the untrained adults were only able to identify 29% of the sequences correctly.

In experiment two, fifty-six adults from a university community participated, twenty-four of whom were musically trained with at least eight years of music study. The participants were asked to identify the emotions of semantically neutral spoken utterances and tone sequences. Some of the spoken utterances were in English and the others were in Tagalog. Means were calculated across English and Tagalog spoken phrases and tone

sequences and the results showed that trained musicians were more easily able to identify emotions of sadness, fear, and a neutral emotion than untrained musicians. Remarkably, these results show that musical study is associated with increased prosodic awareness in a foreign language as well as the participant's commonly spoken language.

In experiment three, forty-three six-year-olds were recruited and randomly assigned one of four conditions for the following year: weekly keyboard lessons, weekly singing lessons, weekly drama lessons, or no lessons at all for the duration of the year. After one year of study, the children were asked to complete experiment two, as outlined above, with only two possible emotions to choose from instead of four or five in the adult experiment. Mean levels of performance were calculated and results showed that children who had received keyboard instruction outperformed the children in all the other groups. These results are somewhat surprising, especially that children in instrumental study outperformed children who received vocal study, given that vocal performance includes common speech prosody indicators.

These three studies show evidence for positive correlations between music education and increased prosodic awareness and comprehension. The first study showed a connection between musical pitch and rhythmic awareness and an enhanced ability to make meaning from word stress. The second study found a correlation between musical study and pitch processing in both music and speech. Lastly, the third study showed both that musical training leads to greater prosodic sensitivity in music and in native and

foreign language and that instrumental music study produced greater performance on these tests than vocal study, drama training, and no training at all.

This chapter has addressed four main areas of research. First, what is the connection between prosody and reading comprehension? What evidence do we have that a more advanced understanding of prosody correlates with skilled reading? Second, what is critical pedagogy and what does literacy instruction look like within this pedagogical framework? Third, what is El Sistema, what does it look like in the United States, and how do the goals of El Sistema align with critical pedagogy? Lastly, is there a correlation between music training and enhanced prosodic awareness? Through these areas of research, I have attempted to answer my research questions: how can I use the content area of music in an intensive, El Sistema- inspired after school string program to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension for my students, and how do goals for increased literacy and improved reading comprehension align with an El Sistema-inspired program with goals for social change? The research in these four main areas makes it clear that increased literacy and improved reading comprehension are imperative for emancipation from oppression. Also made clear is the connection between musical study and prosodic sensitivity, speech prosody, and reading comprehension. Therefore, my capstone project is a semester-long curriculum for 3rd and 4th grade beginning violin players in an intensive after school El Sistema-inspired program that includes direct instruction in prosodic elements and has goals and objectives for not only musical growth

and achievement but also for psychosocial awareness, community building, and literacy skills.

In my next chapter I will outline this curriculum and describe the method used to write it, the setting, and the intended audience.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Project Description

### Introduction

To explore my research question — how can I use the content area of music in an intensive, El Sistema- inspired after school string program to increase literacy and improve reading comprehension for my students? — I chose to write a curriculum for my beginning violin class at Ascension Catholic School. The program is an intensive, El Sistema-inspired program and is a partnership between Ascension and MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis.

This chapter will explain the framework and research through which the curriculum is written, the major decisions regarding the curriculum methods, the setting and audience, an overall description of the curriculum itself, and the implementation timeline.

### Research Framework

In Chapter two I presented research that showed a strong correlation between instruction in prosodic elements and improved reading comprehension. I also cited research that showed a correlation between musical training and increased prosodic awareness. My curriculum aims to tie these two areas of research together. Can we use music instruction to explicitly teach prosody? And if we do, can we see measurable results that literacy and reading comprehension have improved? My curriculum therefore

includes direct instruction in both music and the prosodic elements of pitch, rhythm, stress, and volume.

## Curriculum Writing Framework

The framework through which I am writing and presenting the curriculum ties together the other two areas of research from chapter two: Critical Pedagogy and El Sistema. I see both philosophies as sharing common goals of empowerment and social change for the most economically and socially disadvantaged students. It is through this lens that the curriculum is written.

The template (appendix A) is an often-used template in the school partnerships department at MacPhail Center for Music. The music portion of the curriculum is based on many years teaching in school partnerships at MacPhail and includes elements of both Suzuki Education and traditional violin instruction. There are objectives and activities for musical goals, identified in purple in the curriculum, as well as objectives for pitch, rhythm, volume, and emphasis prosody, identified in green. Objectives for psychosocial awareness and growth are identified in red. Finally, objectives and activities for community building are identified in blue. Many songs and activities are referenced through the lesson plans and are shown explicitly in the appendix of the curriculum.

## Project Description

To write this curriculum I used the calendar of instruction for the first-year violin class of fall semester at Ascension: around 10 weeks, 3 classes a week, 35 minutes per

class. Since I have been teaching violin at the school for many years, I took the same progression of musical skills that I would normally teach and added instruction in prosodic elements, finding ways to overlap the content or explicitly connect the musical skill with the corresponding prosodic element as often as possible. For example, teaching the concept of higher and lower pitch on the violin on the same day or week as a lesson practicing raising the pitch of the voice at the end of a question. I also looked for ways to infuse my classroom with words and language to make my music classroom look more like a traditional reading classroom. I did this by always including words to songs that the students needed to read while singing, adding word walls throughout the classroom including musical terms as well as words encouraging empowerment, emotional regulation, and community building, and including verbal instructions in written form as often as possible. For example, beginning classroom procedures, steps for going from rest position to playing position, and an explanation of how to make a sound higher or lower on the violin is all posted on the wall. Lastly, I intentionally included goals and objectives for psychosocial development and community building in each lesson.

## Setting

Ascension Catholic School is a small Kindergarten through eighth grade Parochial school in North Minneapolis. Statistics from the 2015-2016 school year show an enrollment of 281 students, 96% of whom were students of color (Latino, African Immigrant, African American, or Hmong). Twenty-four percent of the student population were English Language Learners with L1 languages of primarily Spanish, Hmong, and

Somali represented. Seventy-seven percent of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch (Church of the Ascension, 2017).

Ascension lies in the "near north" neighborhood of North Minneapolis. According to Minneapolis crime statistics, 358 crimes have been committed in this neighborhood between January 2017- July 2017, falling under the categories of homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, auto theft and arson. Forty-three percent of the neighborhood population lives below the federal poverty line (Minnesota Compass, 2017).

Ascension has had a long-standing relationship with MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis for more than twenty-five years and was the very first school partnership between MacPhail and a community school. In the last twenty-five years, MacPhail has provided instruction in Early Childhood Music, choir, and string instruction on violin, viola, and cello for all nine grades of the school. Currently, MacPhail provides early childhood music and an intensive El Sistema-inspired after school orchestra program for grades 3-8. I teach as a violin instructor in the El Sistema-inspired program. In the 2017-2018 school year, the program contains approximately fifty children and includes instruction on violin, viola, cello, musicianship, bucket drumming, and orchestra. We meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 1:45-3:45 pm for thirty weeks of the school year. Many of the children also participate in a related Saturday orchestra program called MNYO (the MacPhail Northside Youth Orchestra) for grades 7-12 which meets

every Saturday from 1-3pm, also for thirty weeks of the school year, and includes full orchestra instruction (strings, winds, brass, and percussion).

After school time at Ascension is a busy time. Many of our El Sistema students also participate in sports and are often required by the school to receive tutoring in either math or reading up to five days a week depending on their test performance scores. A tutoring company is hired by the school to tutor the children, and often my string students are pulled out of my class for private tutoring in reading, math, or both. Some of the students also participate in a program called the Northside Achievement Zone, which requires them to do an additional hour of instruction on math or reading after school.

## Audience

This project was first envisioned to address the needs of my El Sistema students, specifically in reading. More than that, though, it is a recognition of the philosophies of both El Sistema and critical pedagogy and an attempt to reach the goals of social change, individual empowerment, and emancipation of oppression to an even greater extent for my students through intentional objectives in music, psychosocial elements, prosodic awareness and identification, and specific activities using reading and reading comprehension. However, while this curriculum is designed specifically with my Ascension students in mind, an additional intended audience is other El Sistema-inspired educators around the country who seek to make an even greater impact on their students inside and outside the music classroom.

## The Curriculum

The curriculum is written for a class of approximately twelve to fifteen 3rd and 4th grade beginning violin players. It includes thirty lesson plans for ten weeks of fall semester, with three thirty-five minute classes per week. The curriculum contains goals, activities, and objectives divided into musical elements, psychosocial elements, prosodic elements, literacy practice or exposure, and community building elements. Musical elements in the curriculum are very specific to the violin and include both Suzuki-based and traditional methods. Activities and song sheets are included in the appendix so that they could be replicated by other violin teachers. Psychosocial activities are related to emotional awareness and emotional regulation skills, both generally and as related to being a musician and performing. Prosodic elements include lessons and activities regarding pitch, rhythm, emphasis, and dynamics. Lastly, community building elements are included as they are one of the cornerstone goals of El Sistema educational philosophy.

Inherent in the success of the curriculum is the classroom environment itself. Language and words cover the walls of our classroom: instructions for transitions and classroom procedures, class goals and motto, word walls of musical terms and terms related to psychosocial development, community building, and prosody, and lyrics to songs in the curriculum. Students are rewarded for bringing new words that they have learned in other classes to the word wall. Our classroom library is a bin of 50- some

books related to music and psychosocial development and empowerment- all of which were donated by friends and family in the community.

## Timeline

This curriculum has been written, revised, and taught throughout the fall semester of the 2017-2018 school year, from approximately September through December of 2017. It is presented as a brand-new curriculum, with the successes and challenges that come with trying new lesson plans for the first time. Lesson plans were composed at the beginning of the fall semester at Ascension Catholic School and were edited and completed by the end of fall semester.

## Summary

In this chapter I outlined the research and framework through which the curriculum project was conceived and implemented. I also described the setting in which the curriculum was implemented and named the additional intended audience. Lastly, I outlined the curriculum itself and the objectives and goals for improved literacy, prosodic awareness, musical skills, community building, and psychosocial awareness that are included in each lesson. In the final chapter of this capstone I will offer some of the major learnings from writing and implementing the curriculum this past semester. I will also revisit some of the relevant literature and examine how it does or does not tie in to my current project. Lastly, I will discuss how this project sits within a greater context, the implications and limitations found within, some goals for future research, and my hopes

for how this capstone may benefit the profession and the greater community of both ESL and music educators.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Conclusion

### Introduction

In chapter one of this capstone, I outlined my somewhat unusual path towards this work: my training as a classical musician, experience working as a crisis worker in New York City, employment at MacPhail Center for Music, interest in El Sistema philosophy and pedagogy, and finally a Masters in ESL from Hamline University. My path has been anything but direct, and yet somehow these various twists and turns have brought me to this incredible partnership with MacPhail Center for Music and Ascension Catholic School, where the resilience and perseverance of my students is nothing short of amazing, and the pedagogy and creativity of my colleagues is a constant source of inspiration. I feel honored and lucky to be doing this work with such incredible people.

Chapter two outlined some of the research and literature relevant to my project, specifically research showing a connection between instruction in prosody and improved reading comprehension, literature outlining critical pedagogy and critical literacy, the El Sistema movement in the United States and its shared goals with critical pedagogy, and research showing that music instruction correlates with increased prosodic awareness. This literature, when seen, shows that El Sistema music programs in the United States not only should but can help close the achievement gap in literacy and reading comprehension for our students, and that their shared goals with critical pedagogy make them relevant as an important piece of American K-12 education.

Chapter three described the curriculum, the framework through which it was written and should be viewed, the method of putting the curriculum together, the setting in which it was implemented, and the intended audience. It also briefly outlined the timeline in which it was written and implemented.

In this final chapter, I will discuss the major learnings from writing and implementing the curriculum. I will also revisit some of the relevant literature, discuss some of the implications and limitations of the project, and outline goals for future research and projects. Finally, I will describe the results I have been able to see while implementing the curriculum and my hopes for how this project could benefit ESL and music teachers and researchers.

## Major Learnings

When beginning to think about this curriculum, I was not entirely sure if my ideas would be possible. How would I find time to add instruction in the prosodic elements into an already full music curriculum? One of the first things I found was that I had been wasting a lot of time in my lessons. When I had 60 minutes of instruction time for my classes as I had in the past, I did not necessarily teach more content, but rather just took much longer to teach the skills. In this way, I think that writing this curriculum has ultimately made me a better and more efficient teacher. Skills and concepts are combined whenever possible, and activities that are also informal assessments are preferred over separate assessments. My students seem to have gotten used to the flow of the class, and

seem to be at the same general level as last year's students, despite classes that are 25 minutes shorter and include much more content.

Additionally, though I suspected that music and music skills and concepts could be used to teach and reinforce prosody and prosodic awareness, I did not anticipate also using prosody to reinforce musical skills. My students can now use the word "emphasis" to describe an accent in music. They can describe a rise in tone in music and a rise in voice inflection as a change in "pitch", and can identify the "dynamic level" of a musical phrase or a spoken phrase. The ways that I have been able to use music to inform language and language to inform music has been both unexpected and exciting.

Lastly, I have been amazed and excited by the enthusiasm for language that my students show. They race to add new words to our word wall, offer to read the story to the class, and are animated whenever they can make a connection between words and music. Adding language and prosodic instruction to our music classroom has been a surprisingly natural transition.

## Relevant Literature

In chapter two of this capstone I presented research and relevant literature in four main areas: first, research showing a correlation between direct instruction in the prosodic elements of the English language and improved reading comprehension. Second, I explained the context of Critical Pedagogy, and showed case studies showing the ways that Critical Literacy is being used to reach the social and community change goals of Critical Pedagogy. Third, I described the El Sistema movement in the United

States and around the world and outlined the shared social and community change goals between El Sistema and Critical Pedagogy. I also presented studies showing that music instruction, specifically intensive El Sistema instruction, has been shown to improve academic performance, specifically reading and math. Lastly, I presented studies that showed that musicians and people with musical training have better prosodic awareness.

After using my curriculum for fall semester of 2017 at Ascension Catholic School, I noticed improved prosodic awareness of my students. They can point out when emphasis is used and can describe the ways we use emphasis in both music and language. They have rhythmic and syllabic awareness in language and can translate rhythmic language into musical rhythm. They can describe and use changes in volume and pitch in both language and music. And lastly, they participate in the language-rich environment of our classroom by offering new words, asking for definitions of words they do not know, and requesting to read aloud.

## Implications

My hope with this Capstone is to encourage and convince other El Sistema music teachers that adding instructional goals for improved reading comprehension for our students is both reasonable and attainable. Furthermore, given the ultimate goals in the El Sistema movement for social change and the self- actualization of our students and the low reading proficiency scores of many of our students, it is prudent to add it to our curriculums.

Additionally, when so many arts and music programs across the country are being cut in favor of science and math, being able to show that music programs can improve the reading proficiency of our students becomes increasingly important. It is my hope that this research and project can help continue to make the case for arts education and arts funding in Minnesota and across the United States.

## Limitations

This project is not a research study, but rather a first step along a path of research that could aim to show a direct correlation between my curriculum and improved reading comprehension or reading proficiency scores on statewide testing. Improvements that I have been able to see in my students have all been anecdotal, and do not tell me exactly how or why the improvements can be seen. Parceling out why such improvements were made would be difficult within the scope of this Capstone and would require a level of communication between the music program and teachers and administrators at Ascension Catholic School that is not yet in place. Additionally, this curriculum is written only for one semester, and would not ensure prosodic instruction up until the time of statewide yearly literacy testing.

## Future Research and Projects

This project will be expanded for the second semester of the 2017-2018 academic school year at Ascension Catholic School for first year students. I also plan to expand it for the intermediate and advanced violin classes at Ascension and possibly for the viola

and cello classes as well. I would also then like to turn this into a quantitative or qualitative study that could show precisely how reading comprehension and literacy levels were improved by prosodic instruction in the music classroom.

## Communicating Results

This research project and curriculum will be presented to the faculty at MacPhail Center for Music, specifically the teachers who teach in our El Sistema-inspired programs in North Minneapolis. It will also be presented at the Biannual Conference of the Suzuki Association of the Americas in May of 2018 in Minneapolis and at a site visit and staff collaboration with the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (YOLA) in Los Angeles, CA in April of 2018. It is my hope that presenting at MacPhail, at the Suzuki Conference, and at YOLA will start a greater conversation amongst music educators and El Sistema educators about the ways we can use music to help our students improve their reading comprehension and literacy levels.

## Summary

At the beginning of researching and writing this Capstone, I was not sure whether my vision was possible. Could a music curriculum in an El Sistema classroom really be used to improve reading comprehension? Could I adequately teach my students skills in both music and prosody? Though at the time of this writing I have only anecdotal evidence for the ways that music can be used to improve reading comprehension, I can say that my students have benefited from this task. Even more, I have become a more

efficient and creative educator. It has been fulfilling to be able to combine topics that I love and feel passionate about and an enormous honor to implement this curriculum for my students. I look forward to taking further steps down this research path and sharing my findings with a wider audience of teachers, musicians, and literacy experts.

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## Appendix A

MacPhail
CENTER FOR MUSIC

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| **Objectives:** |
| **Class Activities:** |