

Highlights from a Longitudinal Study

Music for Social Justice: Impacts of an El Sistema After-School
Orchestral Music Program in Manitoba



FRANCINE MORIN, PH. D.

October 24, 2019

Prepared for

Creative Convergence Winnipeg

Canadian Network for Arts and Learning Conference 2019

Highlights from a Longitudinal Study

Music for Social Justice: Impacts of an El Sistema After-School Orchestral Music Program in Manitoba

About the Study

In 2012, we began a multi-phase, longitudinal evaluation research study exploring the role of music in teaching for social justice by examining a) the impacts of participation in an intensive after-school orchestral program on the personal-social, academic, and musical development among children 6 to 16 years old from low socio-economic backgrounds in two school sites; b) the impacts of the music program on family, community, and partnering institutions; and c) the pedagogical features and methods used in the program.

Two school divisions partnered with its local symphony orchestra to launch an after-school program for elementary school children that uses music as a means for social transformation and is based upon the renowned El Sistema orchestral programs of Venezuela. The program leaders began by targeting string instruments (violin, viola, cello, and double bass) and have now added woodwinds (clarinet and flute) and brass (trumpet and clarinet). Now in year nine, the program continues to operate five days per week for three hours a day throughout the school year at no cost to participants. Children study with lead music specialists, professional musicians, and other musical guests. The weekly schedule includes: sectional rehearsals, full orchestra rehearsals, choir, performances, as well as other arts and special activities. The children perform at various concerts throughout the year for diverse audiences and purposes.

What are we examining?

At the end of each program year, we are examining extensive data collected from children participating in the program at both school sites. We have undertaken short interviews with children and conducted assessments of their musical development, self-concept, ethnic identity, emotional awareness, and sense of belonging. We are carefully observing the children's program and school attendance as well as the children's achievement in mathematics and reading at one of the school sites. We have surveyed parents and held focus groups with them. We have held focus groups with classroom teachers and teaching musicians, and in-depth interviews with lead music specialists, school leaders, and institutional leaders.

What questions are guiding our work?

1. How has the "El Sistema" orchestral program of Venezuela been adapted for the school-community context in the prairie region of Canada?
2. What impact does intensive music education have on the academic, personal, socio-emotional, and musical development of the children participating in the program?
3. What impact is the program having on partnering institutions?
4. What impact is the program having on community (family, school, local community)?
5. What understandings can be gleaned from an analysis of the pedagogical features and methods used in the program to further inform and reform music education policy and practice?
6. How is the program working overall and what are the opportunities for improvement?

What positive impacts have we found?

Musical Progression. A comprehensive music assessment consisting of 10 measures was used to assess individual children’s musical growth over a three-year period. Statistically significant growth was found for: instrumental sight reading, instrumental aural skills (play-back melodies), rhythmic aural skills (clap-back rhythms), rhythmic coordination (clap rhythm while keeping beat in feet), rhythmic sight-reading, rhythmic dictation, and melodic aural skills (sing-back melodies). Results for solo singing and melodic independence (singing in canon or two-parts) showed improvement but not statistical significance. String performance scores remained relatively constant as children progressed in the program; however the music selections performed each year increased in difficulty. Children and young adolescents in the orchestra demonstrate very strong musical achievement that exceeds the music learning outcomes mandated in the *Kindergarten to Grade 8 Music* (2011) and *Grades 9-12 Music* (2015) *Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes*, especially in one essential learning area—Language and Performance Skills. They have advanced multiple grade levels in music learning creating an ever-widening gap between orchestra and non-orchestra children in school music programs. Some of the more experienced children in the orchestra demonstrate musical skill levels that approximate a first year university-level music study.

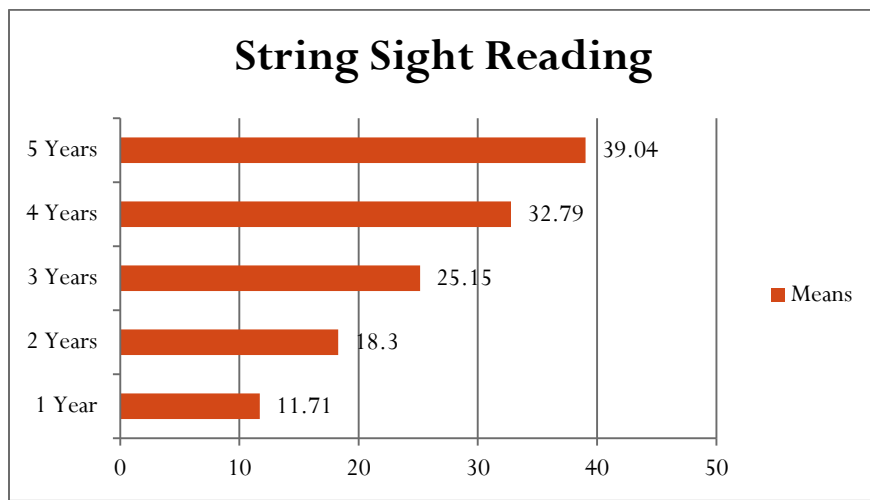


Figure 1. Bar chart showing string players’ sight reading assessment scores by years of experience in the program. Children attempt to play increasingly more complex excerpts and when successful a higher score is achieved.

Academic Achievement. Standardized reading and mathematics scores were collected in six time periods for 31 children in Grades 3 and 4 over two years to investigate if the distance or gap between the children’s achievement levels and expected levels were changing over time, and if they were improving while participating in the orchestra program. Overall, gap scores decreased by 0.31 for mathematics and 0.43 for reading. These results demonstrate that the gaps between children’s reading and mathematics achievement levels and expected grade levels are closing. This trend is positive because within inner city schools’ general populations, fewer students achieve grade level expectations as they progress through time. In other words, the gaps increase rather than decrease. These findings need to be interpreted with caution, as no inferential statistics were carried out because of the small sample size and some missing data. Teachers and parents consistently report that orchestra program participants are doing well academically in school. Future research will be conducted to determine whether this observed trend is recurrent and is statistically significant.

Attendance and Tardiness. Attendance data were collected and analyzed for all children participating at both program sites over a two year period. Overall instances of tardiness dropped from 34.06 late arrivals on average per child in year one to 20.97 late arrivals on average per child in year two which is an important, positive downward trend and it was statistically significant. This finding held true for all children in the program, including those presenting with extreme absenteeism. A small downward trend resulted for the average number of half days each child missed from school over two years; an important but not yet statistically significant outcome. Children missed 40.54 half days or 11.08% of school time in one year, but in the next children only missed 36.27 half days or 9.90% of school time. This result also provides critical evidence to suggest that intensive participation in the after-school orchestra program has *no* negative impact on school attendance. Suspensions from school among children in the orchestra dropped dramatically from 10 instances in year one to just one in year two. Another crucial finding relates to the percentage of the total group with chronic attendance problems which dropped from 48.39% in year one to 38.36% in year two of the program. These trends will continue to be studied as a positive, significant relationship exists between school attendance and academic achievement, particularly in lower income communities.

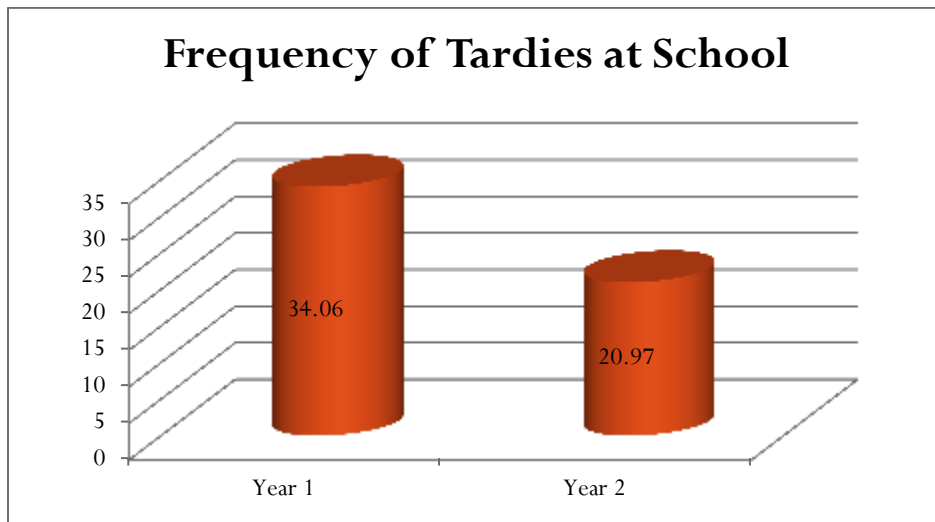


Figure 2. Bar chart comparing the average number of times that children in the orchestra were late for school.

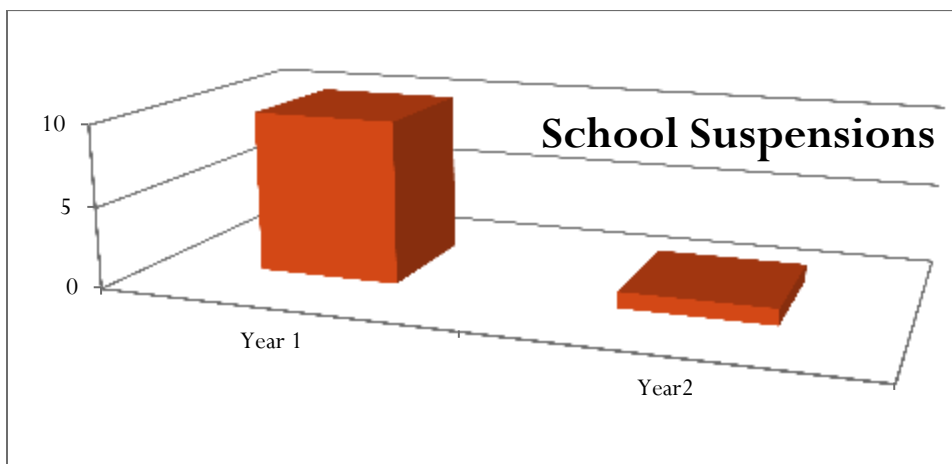


Figure 3. Bar chart showing decreases in number of school suspensions among orchestra members.

Personal and Socio-Emotional Development. Strong evidence was found for the impacts of the after-school orchestra program on participants’ personal and socio-emotional development after five years of self-report measures were conducted with all children at both sites. All areas are necessary for progressive learning and employability. Participants consistently scored high on assessments for global *self-concept* and sense of *belonging* at school. Self-concept was highest for musical competence, followed by personal-social competence, and then academic competence. Most orchestra members scored well for *emotional awareness*; a statistically significant difference was found for the musicians’ abilities to manage their emotions more effectively in the music context than in the academic context. Playing a musical instrument provides some participants with a positive outlet for expressing their emotions, for giving them voice. Participants scored high on assessments for *ethnic identity* and *respect for cultural differences*. In the area of *personal development*, participants are making gains for: confidence, concentration, focus, communication skills, presence, pride, impulse control, identity, and outgoingness. In the area of *social-emotional development*, improvements were found for: making friends, general behavior, responsibility, contributing to household chores, team work, conflict resolution, decision-making, respect for people and property, cultural integration, sense of safety, and lower stress levels. In the area of *affective development*, gains resulted for: aspirations, passion and interest in music and the arts, general happiness, attitudes towards school, self-initiative, program engagement, self-pride, increased interest in practicing their instruments, and commitment. Participants’ career aspirations have been consistently high, ambitious, and varied.

Item	Sense of Belonging Scale	Response Options			
1.	I feel comfortable in the Sistema program.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
	<i>Percent of (n)</i>	<i>2.6</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>19.7</i>	<i>71.1</i>
2.	I feel I am a part of the Sistema program.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
	<i>Percent of (n)</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>15.8</i>	<i>72.4</i>
3.	I am committed to the Sistema program.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
	<i>Percent of (n)</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>5.3</i>	<i>21.1</i>	<i>67.1</i>
4.	I am supported and helped at the Sistema program.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
	<i>Percent of (n)</i>	<i>3.9</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>27.6</i>	<i>60.5</i>
5.	I am accepted at the Sistema program.	NO!	no	yes	YES!
	<i>Percent of (n)</i>	<i>7.2</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>12.5</i>	<i>73.7</i>

Note: A score of 0.5 was assigned to two response options for one child who wished to select both for item 5.

Figure 4. Table of the distribution of children’s responses for sense of belonging in the orchestra program.

Benefits for Families, Community, and Culture. Participation in the orchestra program offers benefits for children, adolescents, and family life. The program has significantly impacted family pride and their sense of validation. Family relationships are improving; familial members feel more connected through music which is calming and stress reducing. Children and their families have sustained, numerous opportunities to form new friendships; they mix and interact socially through concerts and special events. Families with children in the orchestra are experiencing an increased sense of inclusion within the school community and some are now volunteering. Effective, caring relationships have developed between music teachers, participants, and their families. Consequently, families are grateful for the rich musical and varied learning opportunities the program provides for their children, the dedicated teachers and leaders, as well as numerous benefits they receive from participation. Parents and guardians enjoy their children’s concerts, know more about their local professional symphony, and report heightened appreciation and enjoyment of orchestral music. They show increased participation in the musical culture of their city. Furthermore, the program is contributing to a more arts-enriched culture at the school sites and within the broader community.

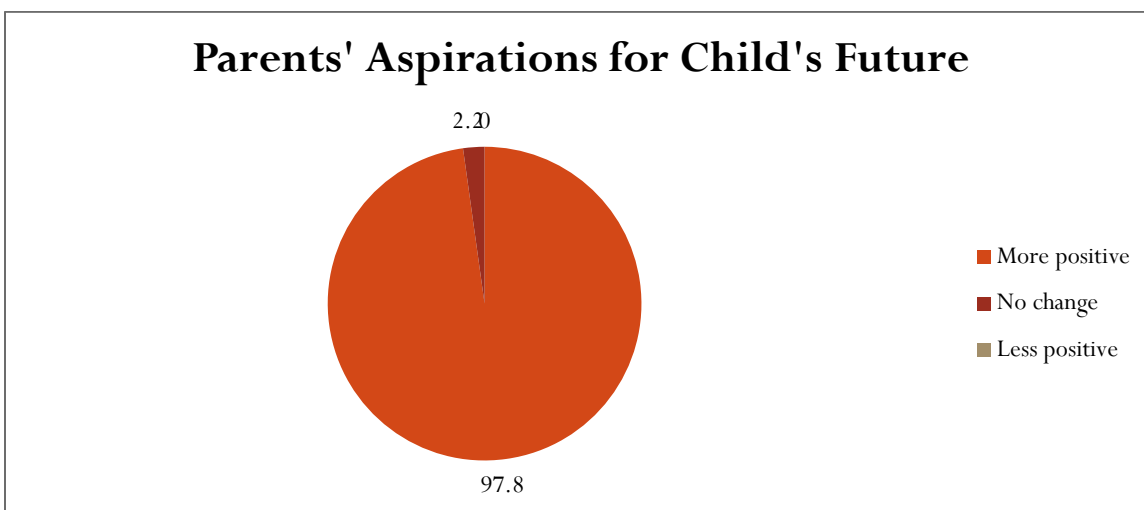


Figure 5. On a survey, parents identified ways that the after-school orchestra program had made a difference to them and their family. The vast majority (97.8%) responded “I feel more positive about my child’s future”.

Health, Safety, and Well-Being. Children and adolescents in the program study music daily in a safe, secure, nurturing learning environment. The program provides large blocks of time when children can be protected from the realities of inner city life they might otherwise experience such as: crime, violence, drugs, alcohol, loneliness, sadness, lack of supervision, or shortage of food. Music making keeps participants meaningfully engaged, offering positive alternatives to and diversions from negative influences outside of the school sites. Participants are provided with healthy, nourishing snacks while at the program as well as opportunities for exercise and physical activity. Simultaneously, orchestra participants benefit from the positive, social modelling and mentoring of their teachers as well as a range of pro-social and life skills advanced through the group learning, orchestra model that is employed. The after-school orchestra program has the potential to develop behaviors and skills among participants that are critical for good health, safety, and well-being.

This longitudinal study contributes to a growing body of research on the benefits of arts-based pedagogies in reducing inequities for students living in high challenge circumstances. We are learning that music for social justice programs...

- Feature effective leadership and institutional collaboration
- Feature high quality music teaching and a time-intensive music curriculum
- Show positive links between intensive involvement with music and other areas of human development
 - Produce capable, expressive student musicians
 - Enable excellence in music literacy and performance skills
- Cultivate relationships among students, teachers, families, and communities
 - Are infused by an ethic of care
 - Respond to the needs of students and families
 - Integrate musical and non-musical components
- Support students' academic achievement and positive self-concept at school
- Mobilize the development of "habits of mind", a broad range of dispositions and skills necessary for learning and life such as: concentration, focus, persistence, responsibility, creativity, independence, group work, and organization
- Work in tandem with responsive school learning environments and educators
 - Show positive links with improved school attendance and tardiness
 - Use music effectively as a vehicle for social inclusion
 - Promote a range of music, education, and life experiences

Key Recommendations

Evaluation results provide evidence that the after-school orchestra program led by its institutional partners holds much potential to be life-enhancing for participants. Partners are committed to delivering the program over the long term in order to achieve the desired musical, academic, personal, and social-emotional prospects for children, and it is recommended that they do so. Sustained and long-term engagement with the music program is likely to have the most impact, leading to better overall outcomes for participants, their families, and communities; therefore, an early start and participant retention are important factors. These key recommendations rest upon a vision for a permanent, continuing program with sustained funding.



What are parents and caregivers saying about the impacts of the Sistema music program on their children and family life?

“They are becoming musicians and that is something that I wanted for my children, and they are getting it. They wouldn’t have this without Sistema. Sistema is such a big part of their life.”

“This program is extremely powerful. I watch not only my children in Sistema but the entire group and I am amazed. The understanding the children have and what they can express about music is phenomenal. They learn at an outstanding rate.”

“The musicians working with the program are not only talented but their ability to communicate with and nurture the students’ abilities needs to be noted. The lead teacher is exceptional. She has an abundance of patience for the students and the parents. Her organizational and leadership skills are superior.”

“I wish I could afford a music education for my children, but my funds are limited. This program is a lifetime opportunity for them. We are blessed that our children are included in Sistema.”

“One of my children has some special needs. Her attitude, skills, and focus have all improved because of this program. She would not be excelling at anything else in her life if it was not for Sistema.”

“Our children are well mannered when we go places now, and it wasn’t like that before. They used to be all over the place, and now they are so much better behaved. Sistema has helped them in that way.”

My kids love meeting new friends and all of the outings, family fun days, playing their instruments, and learning all about them. I am really proud of how they are improving in music. It is making them so ambitious.”

“Sistema gives us something to do. It gives us family events where we can be a family together. We can go somewhere as a family, and enjoy each other and our children’s talents.”

“Sistema helps us a lot. We have peace of mind that our son is doing something safe after school. We have time to do our errands, and we don’t have to be rushed to pick him up from school.”

“Our daughter is more vibrant and confident than what she used to be. Her memory is better and she is happy all of the time. Sistema teaches her motivation and dedication because she has to practice all of the time.”

“My son knows how to respect others, and cooperate with them. He is more patient and understanding. I think this is because the students are being given responsibilities here in the program.”

“The children love their teachers and the relationships they have with them.”

“It is a positive thing for us to see our child be good at something.”

“Most important is the music. Learning music is so important.”

“Sistema is teaching my child a very positive outlook on life.”

About the Principal Researcher

Dr. Francine Morin, Professor (Arts Education) and Associate Dean Undergraduate Programs at the University of Manitoba is a leading authority in Canadian arts education. She is a Founding Board Member of the Canadian Network for Arts and Learning and Past-President of the Alliance for Arts Education in Manitoba. In *A Study of Arts Education in Manitoba Schools*, Morin (2010) gave educators its first comprehensive look at school arts programming in dance, drama, music, and visual arts. As a key contributor to arts education curriculum reform, Dr. Morin served as a lead writer for Manitoba's new arts curriculum frameworks. She is currently a co-investigator on a Pan-Canadian study focusing upon arts learning and youth engagement in the digital age. Among other projects, Dr. Morin works with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Winnipeg School Division, and Seven Oaks School Division studying the impacts of an El-Sistema-inspired after school orchestral program on children and their community. She can be contacted by email at Francine.Morin@umanitoba.ca.

Research Funders

- University of Manitoba/Social Science and Humanities Research Council (UM/SSHRC) Research Grants Program
- Canadian Music Educators' Association
- Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra
- Seven Oaks School Division
- Winnipeg School Division
- Faculty of Education Strategic Research Fund
- University of Manitoba Undergraduate Research Awards



Photographs used with the permission of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra