

Arts and the inclusive imagination:

Socially engaged arts practices and *Sistema Scotland*

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Abstract

This paper considers the role of the arts in engaging children and young people and connecting with their imaginations. It reports on children and young people's responses to an event that introduced them to a range of arts activities. It then discusses the recent establishment of *Sistema Scotland*, a program of social change through classical musical training which has its origins in the Venezuelan *El Sistema*. The paper reports on a knowledge exchange project undertaken within the program which highlighted a number of competing obligations or, in Derrida's (1993) terms, aporias. The paper ends with a consideration of the challenge of producing evidence of the impact of socially engaged arts practices on individuals and communities.

Keywords: Socially engaged arts practices; Sistema; Knowledge Exchange; Aporias

The arts have increasingly been seen by governments as a vehicle for promoting social inclusion and have been adopted as a strand of social policy in many countries (British Council, n.d.; Hunt, 2010), although the current economic crisis has led to cuts in many areas including cultural spending. There is also recognition of the potential of the arts for challenging exclusionary practices, offering children and young people novel learning experiences and, as film director Anthony Minghella suggests, being able to "confound" them (Allan, 2008, p. 109). This paper reports on children and young people's exposure to arts practices, the significant impact this had upon them and their reflections on their experiences. The paper also provides an account of the early stages of *Sistema Scotland*, a new program for overcoming social exclusion through classical music tuition, based on a model developed in Venezuela. It reports on the struggle which has been played out between the program managers and a group of researchers who formed part of a knowledge exchange team. It discusses how the team supported the program managers in realising their vision whilst also ensuring the community in which the program was introduced did not become excluded through this "experiment". This was done by uncovering the

paradoxes inherent in social inclusion (Campbell, 2010) and in relation to the pursuit of musical excellence and reframing these, in Derrida's (1993) terms, as "aporias" (p. 12). The paper ends with a discussion of the challenge of researching the impact of arts practices on individuals and measuring their success in achieving social change. In calling for a focus on the processes of engagement in the arts as well as a long term analysis of their effects, a caution is issued against the search for causal effects on individuals' health, education and wellbeing and in favour of a more imaginative, creative - and patient - approach.

Arts fabulations

Several writers have argued that art work undertaken by children and young people can be highly educative as work of experimentation (Greene, 2004; Deleuze, 1998; Gardner, 1982; Matassaro, 1997), providing dynamic play and allowing them to create what Braidotti calls "fabulations". These are: "A fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (Braidotti, cited in Gough 2004, p. 256). Involving children in arts activities opens them to experiences as yet unknown to them and their teachers. This is merely an extension of what children do naturally and ordinarily:

Children never stop talking about what they are doing or trying to do: exploring milieus, by means of dynamic trajectories, and drawing up maps of them ... In its own way, art says what children say. It is made up of trajectories and becomings, and it too makes maps, both extensive and intensive. (Deleuze, 1998, pp. 61-66)

School learning, with its emphasis on literary and verbal forms of expression, has closed down opportunities to construct maps of these kinds, but the arts, with their newly legitimised place in the curriculum, makes such activities possible (Minghella, 2004; Scottish Government, 2010).

As part of a research and development project funded by the Scottish Arts Council (Lynch & Allan, 2006), a one day workshop, *Art Lab*, was set up by the development officer on the project who was herself a practising visual artist. Artists from music, theatre, dance, film animation, visual art and circus were brought together to offer sessions, and children and young people from a range of schools were invited to select from these. The teachers who accompanied them were invited to participate if they wished. Moving and still film images were taken throughout the day, the children and young people were talked to informally as they participated, and follow up focus group discussions were held some weeks after the event. To encourage the children and young people to express themselves and to explore their understandings of teaching and learning, the development officer had asked them to draw their ideal teacher and ideal pupil during the *Art Lab* day, and in the focus groups they were invited to make a piece of art which captured their sense of the day and its impact on them. She also handed the youngsters the camera and encouraged them to "interview" each other on the subject of good teaching and learning. The experiences provided in *Art Lab* were distinctive, in that they involved the children in embodied learning, requiring movement rather than passivity from them and, in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) terms, emphasised expression rather than understanding. The learning also appeared to resemble Deleuze and Guattari's (1987)

image of the “rhizome” (p. 25), going off in new and unanticipated directions and “entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real” (p. 12). The *Art Lab* experiences appeared to encourage and enable children of all levels of ability to participate, although the noisy atmosphere may have restricted the participation of some individuals. In the theatre workshop, one of the actors engaged the youngsters in activities involving his own wheelchair in a way which was inventive and, in their words, “cool”.

The children and young people’s experiences were embodied in the most obvious sense: as one individual commented, “you get to do stuff”, and appeared in the focus group discussions to contrast starkly with the passivity of their usual school routine. According to one group of children, “doing stuff” was more effective because “you think more”. The activities had been deliberately presented to the children and young people as embodied. For example, a musician gave the children percussion instruments and told them: “You don’t need a drum to make good rhythm - you’ve got lots of bodily surfaces” - and encouraged them to explore these. He also distinguished what they were doing at *Art Lab* from their school lessons: “This is a drumming class. And, let’s face it, it’s not maths. It’s not chemistry. It’s certainly not physics. Enjoy yourself.” The other workshops involved the children and young people almost immediately in action, sometimes things they had never done before, such as spinning a plate or making a piece of animation, and sometimes things that were familiar, such as drawing. The focus of the dance workshop was science, but not as the children and young people normally experienced it. Here, they were required to create patterns and connections with others which simulated attraction and repulsion. So, this was physics, but on the move.

The theatre workshop was the most innovative and provocative to observe and seemed to have the greatest impact on those who had participated in it. The session involved a series of activities in which the children and young people were called upon to be inventive, using their own bodily resources - voice, expression, gesture, posture and movement. In one episode, they were asked to insert punctuation, of their own choice, into a continuous passage read by one of the leaders. They came up with a short sigh for a comma, a long one for a full stop, “ping” for a question mark and a slap on the floor with both hands for an exclamation mark. In another piece, they had to find different ways to say “I don’t want to be a skydiver”, and in yet another, they each had to come up with a different - and loud - exclamation and many riotous variations were produced. In one particularly rhizomic activity, the group leader, Robert Softley, an actor with the company *Birds of Paradise*, came out of his wheelchair and turned it upside down on the floor. The children and young people were then asked to compile words or phrases and accompanying actions around the wheelchair. They chose a range of actions either directly involving the wheelchair, for example spinning wheels, or gestures towards or away from it. The sounds they produced were both musical and machinic and came together in an impressive cacophony: “Cool, wow, wah, check it out, just weird, that’s dreadful”. Robert asked them to turn up both the speed and the volume, then to bring it down again. The youngsters’ “performance” seemed to represent a productive kind of repetition through which rhythmic difference is produced (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This kind of repetition “has nothing to do with a reproductive measure” (ibid, p. 314), of the kind which produces exclusion. Rather, it was inventive, creative and powerful for spectators and participants alike.

The inclusive nature of this experience was revealed in discussions after the event, in which the children and young people expressed delight in their active

participation and in their achievements. One youngster proudly boasted: “I learned how to juggle, spin plates, drum” while another described his experience of animation as “awesome”. The participants in the drama expressed great satisfaction with what they had produced and pleasure at “watching other people”. There was also an interestingly matter-of-fact engagement with the disabled actor and his wheelchair in their reflections. One of the participants, for example, referred to the actor, who “could be quite funny” and who had “that machine thing”. The children and young people appeared to have engaged with difference as interesting rather than problematic. There was some dispute over whether what they had experienced was “work” or not: “You didn’t have to do work; You just got to do the fun stuff; It is work, but it is fun work.”

The children and young people highlighted the contrast between the teaching they had received from the artists and that which they normally experienced in school. The artists made their activities more interesting and appealing than their teachers managed, albeit, they admitted, with more intrinsically interesting subjects than those in school. The artists treated the youngsters with a level of respect they felt was not usually accorded them in school; they thought most teachers lacked a sense of humour and often shouted or, as one person commented, “speak down to us.” For many of the children, the musician was the living embodiment of their ideal teacher. Clearly his hat and “cool” demeanour was part of his attraction, but his main strength, as far as the youngsters were concerned, was his ability to relate to them in a respectful way and to allow them to make such great noise.

The *Art Lab* appeared to show the power of the arts to draw children and young people in and to engage them. The paper now turns to a more formal program of music teaching aimed at a far more radical form of engagement and at a more significant impact.

***Sistema Scotland* and imagined communities**

In Scotland, a new program is “on a mission to transform lives through music” (www.sistemascotland.org.uk), attempting to use classical music to overcome social exclusion. *Sistema Scotland* is modelled on the Venezuelan *El Sistema* (which translates as “The Network”), that has sought to rescue young Venezuelans from poverty through the agency of orchestral training. The program has been successfully implemented across the country for the past 30 years with 180 orchestral centres serving 350,000 children in Venezuela. *El Sistema* was founded in 1975 under the directorship of maestro Jose Antonio Abreu and has produced scores of world-class players, including Gustavo Dudamel, who is currently the Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Principal Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. Maestro Abreu’s vision is spiritual, seeing music as having the potential to touch humans:

Is rhythm a musical phenomenon? No. Rhythm is a spiritual phenomenon. Rhythm is the internal pulse of the soul. Music sublimates the internal pulse of the soul and expresses it in a harmonious way - subtly, invisibly, and transmitted, without words, to other human beings. It is the art of making the will, soul and spirit agree to generate a message and to generate values that profoundly transform the spirit of the child who values the orchestra. (Maestro Abreu, <http://www.fanfaire.com/Dudamel/abreu.html>)

He also sees the act of being in an orchestra as an act of community and belonging:

An orchestra is a community where the essential and exclusive feature is that it is the only community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Therefore the person who plays in an orchestra begins to live the experience of agreement. (Maestro Abreu, <http://www.fanfaire.com/Dudamel/abreu.html>)

The *El Sistema* approach does not seek to provide the kind of embodied and rhizomic learning of the kind offered by *Art Lab*, but is highly structured and disciplined, combining Suzuki and Yamaha methods with a great deal of singing and with an emphasis on playing together:

The goal is not about music. It's about discipline, respect, achievement through work and teamwork, and never, ever taking away the idea of being excellent. (Susan Siman, director of Centro Academico Infantil de Montalban in Caracas, *The Guardian*, 24 November, 2006)

This combination of high musical excellence, entirely driven by an ethos of social equality and participation in a context of extreme deprivation, has generated considerable excitement, and Sir Simon Rattle has proclaimed: "There is no more important work than is being done in Venezuela." The Simon Bolivar orchestra (a product of *El Sistema*) attracted a great deal of press attention and interest from across the education and social inclusion communities in the UK in the summer of 2007, at the London Proms and the Edinburgh Festival and during their 2009 visit to London, for the very high musical quality, energy and vitality of its performances.

El Sistema excited the imagination of the Chair of the Joint Board of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, Richard Holloway, who dreamed of bringing it to one of Scotland's most deprived areas, the Raploch Estate in Stirling, Central Scotland. His excitement was in the potential for the method to both produce high class players *and* transform communities. He mobilised support from some key players, including the BBC Scotland, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Drake Music (an organisation which facilitates the participation of disabled people in music) and Stirling Council, the local district council, and established the first European "outreach" location of *El Sistema*. A company - which took the name *Sistema Scotland* - was set up under the directorship of Dr Holloway, with the appointment of Nicola Killean as Program Director and was formally launched in 2008, amid considerable publicity. The orchestral program delivered by *Sistema Scotland* was given the name *Big Noise*. *Sistema Scotland* has a formal partnership agreement with The State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela (FESNOJIV), led by Maestro Abreu. Six classically trained musicians (all strings players) were appointed to work with the children. They began in 2008 with a summer school and since the start of the 2008/2009 school year children aged 5-8 have received three hours of lessons per week during school time. An after-school club takes place throughout the year, with additional community activities, including lessons for parents.

A group of researchers have involved in a knowledge exchange project connected to the *Sistema Scotland Program*, funded by the Scottish Funding Council. Knowledge exchange, increasingly replacing knowledge transfer and supported by research councils, has the aim of improving the flow of knowledge between researchers and public policy partners in order to "enhance the operation and

productivity of these industry sectors and ... create a legacy of further demand-driven activity” (Scottish Funding Council, 2008). The researchers brought to the program rather different narratives and imaginings (collectively and individually). These can be summarised as focussing on the social, educational, personal, psychological and musical aspects of *Sistema Scotland*. The researchers also came with a great deal of musical talent and biography as orchestral players (of piano, viola and violin), although it must be stressed that this author possesses none of this, but shares all the excitement about the performance genre and knows some excellent jokes about viola players.

The researchers co-ordinated a series of knowledge exchange activities which were aimed at exposing the program managers to the multiple voices that had a stake in the process: children, service providers, members of the Sistema Scotland Program Board and the local community. Meetings were also arranged with the program managers to respond to these events and to encourage explicit articulation of their aspirations of the program and how these might be realised. Meetings with the stakeholder groups were organised as a series of *Learning Spaces*, based on Open Space Technology. The Open Space approach, established by the businessman Harrison Owen, has been described as “passion with responsibility” and as “chaos and creativity” (www.openspaceworld.com). It is simultaneously loose, because the agenda is not set, and highly structured, using the responses of the participants to a single open question in order to plan discussion activities. The Open Space approach differs radically from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice in its lack of concern for commonalities and shared passions and vision and its interest instead in a divergence of views. The ethos of the meetings was inclusive: participants identified issues and set their own agenda. This meant that topics for discussions were entirely relevant to those in the room, and not imposed from outside. Participants were viewed as the experts, bringing their knowledge and ideas to the gathering. At the heart of the knowledge exchange process with the program participants was the articulation of a series of tensions, competing obligations or what Derrida (1993) calls “aporias” (p. 12), and these are discussed below.

Paradoxes and aporias in social inclusion

As Campbell (2010) points out, social inclusion is rife with paradoxes, which make it a borderline concept and create ambiguities and exclusions for those on whom it is practised. The most striking paradox, according to Campbell, is that inclusion involves the bringing in of the other who “is *already* among us, despite her unimagined presence” (p. 83). However, Derrida (1993), like Campbell, has suggested that such paradoxes need not be negative. Derrida highlights the inevitability about being faced with competing obligations and these would often present people with considerable uncertainty and even an incapacity to act. His own personal example, as an Algerian living in France, concerned ethnicity and identity and was the obligation of, on the one hand, a nation’s response to differences and minorities and, on the other hand, concern for the “universality of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and univocity, the law of the majority” (Derrida 1992, p. 78). Derrida named these moments of “not knowing where to go” (1993, p. 12) aporias and suggested that, far from being troublesome, these could be highly productive moments where justice is possible because of the very uncertainty that is generated. Derrida argued that the moment where decisions are made is when closure is created and injustice is produced because one of the two possibilities is excluded.

The aporia, in contrast, allows the two possibilities to be held open, without privileging one over the other and this has been recognised as having potential value in educational policy and practice as well as in wider civic engagement (Critchley, 1999; Egéa-Kuene, 2001; Allan, 2008). Egéa-Kuene (2001), for example, suggests that there is particular scope for improving the inclusion of ethnic minorities by forcing educationists' attention upon their interests. From the outset, a number of aporias surfaced in relation to *Sistema Scotland* and these are discussed below.

Musical excellence and social inclusion

The *El Sistema* method in Venezuela has been hailed as a great success in producing “top flight” orchestras and the musical excellence of the orchestra has been lauded and given precedence, at least by the media, over the social inclusion achieved by the program. The Scottish version, it is claimed, is intended to be principally about social inclusion, but it is hoped that the youngsters will also achieve high levels of excellence (Holloway, 2009). The musical approach of *El Sistema* (learning to play *with* the orchestra, as opposed to learning to play *in* the orchestra) is aimed at achieving complementarity between these two elements, but right from the start there have been questions about how this will (literally) play out. The appointment of staff described in publicity material as “musicians” rather than as “music teachers” suggests the possibility of a privileging of musical excellence over social inclusion, although this was denied vigorously by those running the program in discussions with them.

Venezuela and Scotland

The intention of *Sistema Scotland* is to replicate a system, developed in the Barrios of Venezuela, within the Raploch, a disadvantaged part of Central Scotland, but to recognise the cultural specificity of the Scottish context: “We are showing that the Venezuelan miracle can work in Scotland, a very different society with a very different culture” (Holloway, 2009). The exclusive emphasis by *Sistema Scotland* on classical music, and the absence of the Scottish traditional genre raises some questions about the extent of the recognition of the Scottish context. *Sistema Scotland* has been proud to be endorsed by Maestro Abreu as providing the most authentic version of *El Sistema* in the UK: “He believes no country has done it as well as it has been done in Scotland. He is thrilled by it. Raploch is very close to his heart” (The Herald, 18 April, 2009). At the same time it is avowedly pursuing a unique version of *El Sistema* and hopes to roll this out across Scotland: “We are very proud of our close links with Venezuela. We seek to benefit from the South Americans' expertise, while adapting their methods to suit conditions in Scotland” (<http://www.sistemascotland.org.uk>).

Program “needs” and community “desires”

The Raploch is a disadvantaged area that has enjoyed incessant attention from community reformers and developers, each intent on making the lives of the community better and each having had a limited success (Robertson et al., 2008). The program officers have been alert to the dangers of appearing to “parachute” into a community, but the speed at which the initiative was required to move appears to have made consultation with the community impossible. As a result, it may be difficult for *Sistema Scotland* to distinguish the community's desires for itself from what it regards as in being in the community's “best interests.” The need to secure

significant amounts of funding has driven *Sistema Scotland* to produce publicity materials that emphasise the deficits of the community and its needs in a way that is problematic. For example, a brochure aimed at funders described the impoverishment and lack of hope within the community. Assurances were given that the community was never expected to see this documentation, although there seemed little recognition of the damaging effects of such profiling being seen by others.

Sistema Scotland and other stakeholders

Sistema Scotland has been set up as a properly constituted “company”, with, among its stakeholders, BBC Scotland, the BBC Scottish Symphony orchestra, Drake Music and the local district council. Each partner has “signed up” to *Sistema Scotland* and to the espoused emphasis on social inclusion above elite musical playing, but there may be differences in how their interests are reflected and the possibility that some of the “stakes” are larger than others. BBC Scotland has certainly had a particularly strong presence and although they have had an important role in documenting the development of *Sistema Scotland*, they have inevitably been drawn to particular individuals and their circumstances because of their media interest and their potential for a “heartwarming story” (BBC Scotland, 2009).

Sistema Scotland and the sceptics

There is already evidence of scepticism from some quarters: specialist music teachers have expressed concerns (Service, 2010) that the investment will be at the expense of mainstream music tuition; community musicians appear not to be convinced that *Sistema Scotland* is offering anything new; the extraordinary nature of *El Sistema* - in the sense of it being “different” - has created extreme discomfort, leading to, in the words of one *Sistema Scotland* insider, a “clenching of buttocks” by arts administrators being asked for financial support. Such resistance from these quarters to anything beyond the formal classical tradition is, of course, not new (Allan & Cope, 2004). There is, however, a more widespread and varied set of opposing views (Service, 2010) and countering all of these may seem to *Sistema Scotland* to be time-consuming and ineffective. Nevertheless, the option to ignore them, or to minimise engagement with them, may not be tenable.

Aporias and knowledge exchange

The knowledge exchange team sought to place these aporias at the heart of the process and to present them to the program officers, not as sets of alternatives, but as two equally important obligations and to question them on potential areas of privileging. At the same time, we were also seeking to develop further research proposals to investigate the long term impact of *Sistema Scotland* and this itself became an aporia: the program officers impressed upon the researchers the need for clarity about the vision and a certain urgency about getting started and obtaining evidence of impact. Whilst sympathetic to these needs, we have had concerns about how such a move towards clarity, and an imperative to “act now” could, following Derrida (1992), produce injustice. We sought to alert *Sistema Scotland* to these dangers and to the impossibility of producing evidence, certainly in the short term, of the achievement of their extremely ambitious objectives.

One of our first encounters with *Sistema Scotland* involved their presentation of their program plan. To say this was bold is to be somewhat understated: the explicit intention is to “transform lives” and to “empower the community.” Without wanting to dampen their enthusiasm, we articulated some concern that this was likely to be beyond the scope of any program; more importantly, we argued, it was for the community to transform its own lives and empower itself. Although our argument was listened to, a strong sense of a “mission to change lives through music” has remained (<http://www.sistemascotland.org.uk>) and in a speech at 11 Downing Street, Richard Holloway reiterated the vision:

By recruiting children and immersing them in orchestras, we can slowly, year upon year, build them into something stronger and greater and more enduring than the despair that surrounds them. They learn discipline, they experience joy, they co-operate passionately with each other to create excellence, and a wonderful beauty is born. (*The Herald*, 18 April 2009)

This kind of zeal is probably necessary to sustain momentum and energy and we have shared the desire for *Sistema's* success: it has been impossible not to. However, we were not claiming a more privileged, moral or valid position by drawing attention to these aporias, but were genuinely attempting to be educative; we also envisaged a difficulty in producing the kind of evidence that lives had indeed been transformed and that this had been achieved solely through the genre of classical music. The challenge of measuring the impact of the arts on individuals, and its inclusive potential, is addressed in the final part of this paper.

Measuring the impact of the arts: using the imagination?

The growth of funded arts projects which claim an element of social engagement (Arts Council England, 2001; Scottish Arts Council, 2003; Higgins, 2008) has heightened expectations about their likely impact, particularly on disadvantaged groups and individuals, and as the current UK Culture Minister has observed, we have “suffered in arts education from a plethora of initiatives” (Hunt, 2010). Whilst the evidence of impact produced by these projects has been somewhat flimsy (Galloway, 1995) or has merely added to the “victimist narratives” (Sagan 2009, p. 108), some research findings may be more convincing in pointing to changes in individuals’ confidence and skills and in their social lives (Matassaro, 1997). Clearly the children engaged in *Art Lab*, saw themselves as engaged in a way that school does not seem to manage and this clearly made a strong impression upon them.

Sistema Scotland has targeted, for good reasons, one of the most deprived parts of Scotland for the development of its music program and has seen the need to emphasise the community’s deficits. How problematic this remains will be for the community itself to judge. Our role as a knowledge exchange team was to try to open the program officers’ eyes to alternative, more positive, constructions of communities and the individuals in them. This was something of a struggle and the process of knowledge exchange was experienced by both parties as uncomfortable. Whilst the knowledge exchange team remain convinced of the pedagogic value of such discomfort in facing up to aporias, and of the importance of ensuring that social inclusion programs do not themselves become instruments of exclusion, we were aware that the program managers experienced the engagement with us less positively.

The kind of evidence needed by researchers to evaluate the impact of the arts is very particular. Researchers must not seek to make banal causal links between the intervention and such ontological states as “transformation” and “empowerment”. This is hopeless in every sense. Researchers would also do well to avoid the pursuit of proof that changes in health, education and wellbeing are down to the arts activities that have been introduced. What they can, very usefully, do is seek evidence about the process of engagement, as it occurs, and about how individuals and communities experience it. This involves accessing individuals’ imaginations and communities’ interactions and will require from the researchers both the use of arts based methods (Leavy, 2009; Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008) and their own imagination. Finally, whilst the desire by the *Sistema Scotland* program managers to obtain evidence of impact as soon as possible is understandable, it must also be recognised that this cannot be hurried. As Althusser (1994) reminds us, “the future lasts a long time” (p. 1). Patience will be a necessary virtue.

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Biographical Note

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