

Music for Social Change



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Project Overview

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Department: Music

Organization: Batuta

Location: Colombia

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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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MUSIC FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: REVISITING BATUTA

Project Overview

As a McBurney Fellow, the rationale for my project was to continue the work I had established with the teachers and students of Batuta Caldas (Manizales, Colombia) as part of my 2014 fellowship. In addition, I was to return to Bogotá to start working within its DPS (Departamento Para La Properidad Social) centres.

As with last year's fellowship, the goal was to improve the Orff-based, early childhood pedagogical framework of Fundacion Nacional Batuta; a government funded music program that offers free music to children who are displaced victims of armed violence. The Orff-approach was an essential tool in achieving my goals due to its play-based and student-centred nature, which creates an inclusive, involved, and positive atmosphere that places the focus of the musical process on the students. These activities not only create musical skills, but they also include a strong social component (through partner games, dances, group activities); essential skills for success.

Fellowship Rationale and Objectives Prior to arriving in Manizales, Colombia, my initial objective were to:

- Spend three days observing teachers in Manizales to assess the sustainable successes (if any) of my 2014 fellowship
- Based on my assessment, plan lessons to teach the students of Batuta while teachers observed
- Facilitate weekly workshops with teachers to explore and explain how the Orff process can benefit Batuta's goal of reconciliation
- Assess the fundamental structural challenges facing Batuta and address these issues with administration in an effort to effectuate sustainable change
- Travel to Bogotá to resume work I had only just begun in 2014

Background

Batuta was developed based on Venezuela's el-sistema. Initially, el-sistema was the brainchild of Maestro Juan Antonio Abreu and started in a garage in Caracas in 1975. He invited all willing and eager Venezuelan musicians to play together with the goal of creating a professional level, locally formed orchestra, as the main orchestra in Caracas used foreign musicians. As interest swelled it developed into a social program, using music as the tool for change. Today children within the el-sistema program receive musical instruction for upwards of 20 hours a week.

Fundacion Nacional Batuta began in 1991 with the help of Maestro Juan Antonio Abreu in conjunction with the Colombian Government. Working in Colombia's favour from the outset was

a highly developed early childhood music program and a wealth of dedicated (and highly motivated) teachers. The social problems facing Colombia were similar to Venezuela's at the time (drugs, crime, extreme poverty). In addition, due to violence between both government forces and amongst various armed factions, Colombia experienced (and continues to experience) a large amount of internal migration, with thousands of children living in hastily built barrios (neighbourhoods), mainly on the outskirts of most major cities.

What makes Orff Schulwerk (literally – Orff School) such a useful tool in bringing about social change is the way the learning process is shifted to a more student-centred approach. Students construct their own musical understanding through activities and games that foster cooperation, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, concepts are taught through movement (kinesthetic) and active participation, which, developmentally is the way young children learn best. The concepts that are first introduced in the body, and then have the possibility to be transferred onto a range of media (recorder, xylophone, pitched and non-pitched percussion) that complement various learning styles.



Current Context

The issues presently faced by Batuta are two-fold. Firstly, Batuta does not receive the same high-level of government funding as their original counterpart in Venezuela. Government funding makes up 70% of Batuta's total operating budget. The rest is generated from private donors or corporations. As a result, most classes at DPS centres only happen once a week, as opposed to upwards of (and sometimes exceeding) 20 hours a week in Venezuelan nucleos (centros musicales). Funding is also unevenly distributed, with some centres receiving funding all the way from early childhood (Orff) to the desired goal of an orchestra program. However, some DPS centres are only funded as far as the early childhood program with no funding available for students who wish to continue to the symphonic level.

Batuta Caldas continues to work with DPS children in various barrios surrounding Manizales, including students from higher socio-economic backgrounds using a curriculum of Colombian-inspired folk music, which originated from Bogota. However, the issues that currently face teachers working with DPS children are that the curriculum is at a developmental level that is far too advanced for the students for which it was intended. Further to these issues, the originator of the curriculum did not take into account the many social challenges that these children face. Instead, these series of songs seem as though they were written for children that could endure a teacher-driven, and teacher-centred learning environment.

There have been some changes that have occurred since my last visit and I have seen all the teachers (some more than others) use a more play-based approach. In spite of seeing a few lasting effects I still concluded that overall, students were exposed to a teaching style that functioned more as a lecture that had children sitting in chairs the majority of the time. I will discuss this more in detail in my activities section.

Activities

Manizlaes

This city was where I had the most success during my 2014 fellowship. I built a very strong relationship with the teachers, students, and administrators; so it made perfect sense to keep that relationship going and build upon my success from last year.

They say your reputation precedes you, and if I thought I worked a lot last year, it was nothing compared to what I was asked to do this time around, which was a great thing! I worked daily in a least two DPS centres in addition to two hours of classes at Batuta's main centre. The latter involved classes for children whose parents pay 600 000 pesos (300 CDN) a month to have them enrolled in general music classes. It was very heartwarming to see a few children in each DPS centre remember me from last year and not only greet me with smiles, but they also proceeded to sing back a few of the games and songs I taught them. As a teacher, that's a great feeling.

Instead of teacher workshops occurring daily (with unpredictable attendance), they happened once a week for two hours. These were quite successful and as last year, teachers used the materials with their own students. Overall, the teaching style still involves students seated in chairs throughout most of the two-hour lesson. Movement is starting to be incorporated but for the most part, music classes are still teacher driven. In some instances I was surprised and quite pleased to see the Orff-approach in action – rhythmic speech, followed by movement, which then was transferred onto pitched and non-pitched percussion. In other instances I observed teachers that I had worked with less than 10 months ago, continuing to revert back to their learned ways of teaching.



Bogotá

In Bogotá I traveled to three DPS centres outside of the city to model lessons for teachers using my own material and to demonstrate how to incorporate child-centred lessons into their existing repertoire. Furthermore, I was fortunate enough to be reunited with a very progressive teaching couple I had worked with last year during my workshops in Santa Marta (Caribbean coast).

Further to my working with students I was invited to run model lessons for teachers during a 3-day teacher-training workshop. This allowed me the opportunity to plan play-based activities with teachers who also provided lessons during the workshop.

For Bogotá I have suggested that progressive teachers such as Victor and Jennifer should be the ones training teachers. Furthermore, I was fortunate to have been connected with a local Colombian teacher, who received her Orff certification from The San Francisco School, learning from arguably the best teacher-trainees in the world.



Challenges and Successes

Before leaving Manizales in July of 2014, I had left a few wonderful resources that explained every step of the Orff process in detail. In addition, a video archive was catalogued which contained every teacher workshop offered that summer; a wealth of activities that teachers could use, and view as a refresher whenever they wanted. Furthermore, one very gifted and talented teacher had begun using a more Orff-based approach with much success.

Unfortunately, when I arrived in Manizales in 2015, I saw sparse evidence (at best) of a student-centred approach. Some teachers were using the methods I had shared but I felt as though all of the progress I had made had regressed. To add to this, Batuta Caldas experienced a teacher turnover, which saw key personnel depart from the program.

When discussing the printed and video resources with teachers and management last year, I had suggested that teachers plan lessons as a team, taking one concept from the book and working through it (one by one). However, when I arrived I learned that the book had not been translated into Spanish, as was promised, and that videos had not been accessed at all. These issues have been brought up with management and a more concerted effort (I am told) is being made to make these resources available to teachers.

Even though these challenges proved frustrating there also were many highlights. A few of the teachers have remained with Batuta and during my second time in Manizales I have seen tremendous progress in the way they not only have used more of the Orff-based activities, but also in their overall confidence in using them. Most notably, one woman's work with young children has inspired and influenced my own teaching. Another teacher has become quite confident with applying an Orff-based approach to the arrangements of the current Colombian folk curriculum. Regardless of teaching styles, Batuta Caldas is very fortunate in that its teachers are very strong. They're also great musicians, and most importantly, great people who relate very well with children.



What did I learn? A personal reflection

After reflecting on the frustration I felt with lack of a visible change in the program, I realize that expectations must be changed. Although there has been positive and sustainable growth in the teaching process I do not think I could have expected to create that much change in just three weeks here last year. Furthermore, as opposed to last year, instead of introducing new and shorter songs, which I thought children could get more from I figured out strategies to merge the Orff approach with the current curriculum. In one such workshop I was able to work with a current song and not only make it more child friendly, but also use rhythmic aspects in a way that introduced a creative approach (the ultimate goal of Orff – to let the children be their own composers). The patience I learned from last year (from a cultural perspective), helped in that regard, even if the driven side of me still expected more results. I guess one can say that's a tension I am still trying to reconcile.

Community implications and further work

My contribution to the delivery of health and social services for victims of displaced violence was sharing an approach to teaching music that not only develops musical skills, but more importantly promotes the development of vital social skills such as cooperation, problem solving, and relating to one and another. In the short term I was able to see the effects of the creative process of the Orff method of music that above all, allows children to regain the fun, carefree and exhilarating aspects of childhood which these victims of displaced violence have been robbed of. Through teacher training workshops, there is much potential for long-term impact, as dozens of teachers are now better equipped to teach using a student-based approach.

As opposed to last year, I would be very interested to return to Manizales to see what lasting effect I have had on the musical community of Batuta Caldas. I do have faith in its administration and teachers and my presence here, more than last year, has been well received and valued. As such I can only see more positive change coming from this year's fellowship. My hope is that more progress is made with regards to diligently working with the resources left in 2014.



Is change needed? Further Recommendations.

In addition to working with children and teachers, one of the key highlights of my time in Colombia was a chance to meet with members of Batuta's administration, and share recommendations for change. Slight adjustments and improvements concerning a few issues would go a long way in improving the work that Batuta Caldas and Batuta Bogotá. These improvements centre around scheduling, teacher-planning, the "culture of fear" when it comes to making mistakes, and teacher salary.

Class schedules would be better if they were more often, but for less time. Two hours is simply too long for some children to handle. Everyone (especially the children) would benefit more from increased frequency. Thus I suggested that classes occur four times a week for 30 minutes/class for small children, and one hour twice a week for older children.

With regards to teacher planning, I again recommended that Batuta shift the focus of teacher meetings to discussions around concepts based on Orff resources. Lessons could be planned as a team, taught individually, with follow-up meetings where rich reflective discussions could occur. If this happens, growth will be exponential.

It seems that in Colombia, mistakes that occur in the classroom not only by teachers, but especially by students, are feared. In my teacher workshops I stressed the importance of teachers creating a risk-taking environment where mistakes were seen as something positive. Mistakes need to be seen as something we all grow and learn from, but this is a recommendation that is harder to implement because it is rooted in culture.

Lastly, I recommended that teacher salaries improve. Batuta is seen (in teacher circles) as stepping-stone and not a lasting and life-long career. There exists two negative consequences that result from a regular turnover of teachers. Firstly, any sustainable progress resulting from professional development is broken as new teachers will not have been exposed to a student-centred model of teaching. Secondly (and more important), continuity with the children in DPS centres is lost and as a result, trust needs to be constantly be re-established. These children have very little stability as it is in their lives. They would greatly benefit from knowing their teachers are sticking around for the long haul. Teachers also need to be paid for concerts they attend outside of school hours, and regular professional development needs to be provided. If Batuta is to become a destination that retains its teachers and makes them feel valued, they need to be compensated appropriately.

Advice for future fellows

As with my fellowship last year, my experience in Colombia has been life changing. I have learned more about teaching, and more about myself than my eight years of teaching overseas, combined.

To improve on last year's fellowship, my Spanish skills have improved, which was essential. Before you head out into the field McBurney Fellows, get your language skills together! They will go a

long way. Not only that, but the best way to get to know a culture is first and foremost through language. Also, work hard, dream big, but always remember to have ample patience, never forget to bring a playful and wonderful sense of humour to work and these will go a long way.

Do not think that you cannot make a lasting impact in a two to three month fellowship. I have been very fortunate to have received a second consecutive fellowship; and if you go about your work with sincerity and holding true to the values of the culture you work in, you will be surprised by how much your work is appreciated and the positive impacts you can make. Watching three young children remember a hand-clapping game I taught them 10 months ago, after only 3 classes in all with their group was testament to that.

Lastly, my final advice to future McBurney Fellows is as follows: if you are given this opportunity as I have been given, it is most likely because you have convinced those at the Institute for Health and Social Policy of your passion for your path in life and have laid out a solid plan in carrying it out. Once in the field do not be afraid to fight hard (but with wisdom, diplomacy, patience, and a sense of humour) for what you believe in as your passion and voice will eventually find its way to those who want to listen, value and benefit from what you have to share. The ultimate result is not just a fellowship in a new and richly stimulating culture, but actual change on the ground where it matters most. There is no better feeling.