

Changing the Orff Process in Batuta: Music for social change



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Project Overview

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Department: MA - Music Education 2014

Organization: Fundacion Nacional Batuta

Location: Colombia (Bogota, Santa Marta, and Manizales)

Mentor: Dr. Lisa Lorenzino - Area Chair for Music Education
(McGill University)

Fellowship Duration: May 2nd –July 31st, 2014



About the McBurney Latin America 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 over a period of 2 to 3 months. 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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Changing the Orff Process in Batuta: Music for social change

As a McBurney Fellow, the rationale for my project was to improve Fundacion Nacional Batuta's free music program, and in particular to strengthen the overall structure of its Orff-based, early childhood program. This program's primary goal is to improve the social and health conditions of children who are victims of displaced violence. Student-centred activities, which are at the heart of the Orff process, create an inclusive, involved, and positive atmosphere that places the focus of the musical process on the students and provides the musical skills and building blocks necessary to create understanding as a group. The program thus not only teaches music, but life and social skills at the same time.

Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

Prior to arriving in Colombia, my initial objectives were to:

- Teach lessons for students in DPS - Departamento para la prosperidad social - centres while having Batuta teachers observe
- Observe Batuta teachers and offer constructive feedback
- Conduct teacher workshops and further explain/elaborate how the Orff process can benefit Batuta's goal of reconciliation
- Meet with Batuta administrators to discuss possible changes in structural policy

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 the Orff process such a useful tool in bringing about social change is the way the learning process is shifted to a more student-centred base. 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 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.

In addition to financial constraints, the second key challenge for Batuta is that the current curriculum and teaching pedagogy are not always in line with the desired goals of using music as a tool for social change. Instead, too much emphasis and importance is placed upon concert preparations, and much of the learning is teacher-centred. Batuta approved songs (Colombian folk music orchestrated for Orff instruments) are far beyond the developmental level of the children and do not offer the chance for children to collaborate in the classroom using activities that include social components such as problem solving and cooperation skills. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, and I have met a few very progressive-minded teachers in Colombia

that are doing a wonderful job improving the social fabric of the communities they work in. However, overall I had the sense that the administration of Batuta feels it necessary to have traditional pieces that can be showcased for their sponsors, in an effort to maintain funding levels. As a result, unnecessary tensions have been created and the focus of Batuta is shifting away from a process that develops musical and social skills, to a program that rushes to get children ready for a concert using a teacher-knows-all rehearsal method of relaying knowledge.

Activities

Bogota

The process of introducing pedagogical activities that can have long-lasting benefits for Batuta was at first, slow going. Once regular classes were up and running I spent two weeks with both Allegro and DPS centres. The Allegro ensemble is Batuta's showcase ensemble when high-profile concerts are put on. It is also funded at a higher level than the DPS centres with much more, and higher quality musical resources. It is important to note that Allegro functions independently of DPS centres, and is not a free program. It is for children that have been auditioned based on musical ability and where parents are charged a small fee, which is proportional to how much income each family takes in.

I spent eight sessions observing and teaching with Allegro and five in Ciudad Bolivar, a DPS centre located on the outskirts of Bogota. With the DPS centre I was able to teach for three out of the five sessions and had active participation from the local musical teacher and a few very rich discussions afterwards regarding pedagogical practices. However, I believe that two weeks was too short a time to be able to have any long-lasting impact.

Santa Marta

The second part of the McBurney Fellowship had me working with three DPS centres both in and around the Santa Marta region: San Francisco Javier, Cienaga, and Fundacion. San Francisco is located in Santa Marta and the latter two are located in towns one to two hours outside of Santa Marta.

In these centres I was able to facilitate more activities and had active teacher participation. I was further able to have meaningful discussions as to the rationale and benefits of the activities I was leading. In addition, I began to meet with Batuta teachers after lessons in order to provide constructive feedback. Furthermore, thanks to fortuitous timing and the generosity of Catherine Surace – Academic Director of Batuta, I was offered the opportunity to observe and conduct teacher-workshops during a 3-day teachers' conference for the Batuta teachers belonging to the northern region of Colombia. Over a three-day period I conducted two (1hr 30min) sessions in which I taught two aspects of the Orff approach - expanding a poem to develop rhythm and musical concepts, and teaching an Orff orchestration for the purpose of improvising with rhythmic cells inherent in the song.

It was in these sessions that I really started to see the positive impact that the Orff process could have in improving the structure of Batuta's early childhood program. Teachers at the

workshop commented on how fun and engaging the Orff process can be with children. In addition, several teachers who observed me while I taught their classes also advocated for the benefits of the process to their colleagues. Batuta teachers were very receptive and many inquired about Orff certification, resources, and where best to begin the process.

Manizales

The last month in the Zona Cafetera region of the Colombian Andes proved to be by far the most productive and fruitful in terms of having a profound, long-lasting, and sustainable impact on influencing pedagogical practices and curriculum policy.

During my three and a half weeks with Batuta Caldas, I was able to teach and work with a broad spectrum of individuals. I worked with DPS students, led workshops with university students training to be early childhood music teachers, conducted daily 2-hour workshops with Batuta teachers and administrators, initiated a one-day parent workshop for prospective parents who were looking to enroll their children in a private kindergarten run by Batuta teachers (a way to generate income for Batuta Caldas in an effort to become financially self-sustainable), and finally (and most importantly) I observed classes where Batuta teachers used material, lessons, and concepts from my workshops with the DPS students. After these sessions, very productive, lengthy and rich discussions were had as to what went well, what did not, and what steps can be taken to scaffold activities that will further develop and build student understanding. Teacher feedback after having experienced the Orff process was overall, extremely positive.

The response, reception and willingness to learn and experiment with new ideas on the part of Batuta Caldas teachers has been nothing short of outstanding. My only regret is that I did not arrive here sooner.



Challenges and Successes

The main challenges throughout my fellowship were adapting to both the cultural differences and curricular expectations around Batuta's program. Other programs (e.g. International School curriculums) are structured in such a way that opens the possibility to change and adjusting content as needed to fit learning expectations that can address the appropriate developmental stage of the students. Batuta's program is built around Colombian folk music (orchestrated for Orff instruments), which holds strong cultural significance and is used specifically to foster a sense of national and community pride. As a result, the material is at times far beyond what is developmentally appropriate, and the development of fundamental skills (beat, rhythm, rhythmic and melodic patterns that appear frequently in music) are often overlooked. Thus one

of the main challenges I faced was trying to convince administrators and top teachers in Batuta (mainly Bogotá) that the focus should shift away from teacher-centred classes, to more student-centred activities. What worked well was the combination of conducting workshops with teachers where I could answer questions about the Orff process, and provide valuable feedback after giving Batuta teachers the chance to try a few Orff-based lessons in the classroom. It was apparent that the teacher-workshops, in conjunction with constructive feedback are what had, and will have left, the most positive and long-lasting impact.

What did I learn? A Personal Reflection

My three months in Colombia as a McBurney Fellow, more than most of my eight years teaching overseas, is what made me a better teacher. I learned to really trust my instincts and believe in my abilities, both as a teacher and as an individual. Never before had I conducted teacher workshops; so that in itself was a massive risk-taking experience and leap into the unknown. As it turns out, conducting teacher workshops and observing their broad smiles while performing a simple African American hand-clapping game or an intricate Bolivian folk dance became a person highlight.

In addition, by repeating the same lesson not only 30 times, but teaching it across an enormous age and ability range (6 years old to senior Batuta administrators), I became more cognizant of how each teaching step needed to be broken down, scaffolded and adjusted in order to attain success. As a result, my confidence as a person and an educator is at a level that I never thought possible, and there is still room for much personal and professional growth.

Prior to my departure for Colombia, The Institute For Health And Social Policy taught me (through various role-play activities) how to identify the main stakeholders, both within and outside an organization, and how to approach each of them in a manner that would have the most positive influence towards a desired change in structural policy.

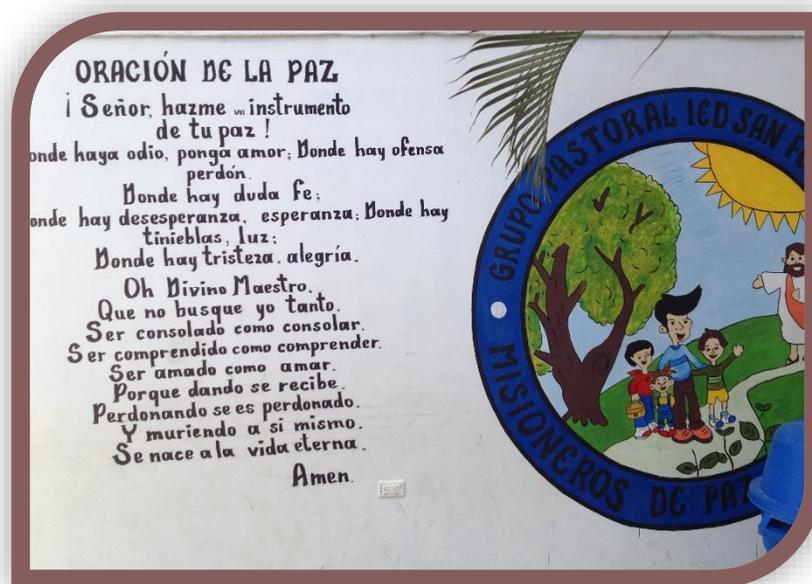
Now that I have had three months of experience working in three very different locations it is easy to look back and say that more time should have been spent in Manizales. However, in the moment it is difficult to spot these factors. That is why, the next time I am in Colombia (or any new location), I must remember to accept the fact that trust between an individual and an organization must be built and nurtured over time. Therefore, a combination of patient grace (when days are slow-going) coupled with a persistent awareness (to seek out those who will listen) are vital to any long-term success.

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 contains 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.

The most profound evidence that this goal has been achieved can be illustrated with three examples. First, after just one session that I conducted with students (where the class size was 10 students), the very next session saw an increase to 21 children. As my reputation grew in the community the teachers learned that the 10 who were at the initial lesson enthusiastically convinced others to come, even those who had previously had reservations about attending. Secondly, after teaching an Orff-based lesson a Batuta teacher stated that, “Not only did I see enjoyment in the children, but it felt good right here (as she pointed to her heart) and I could not only see, but feel that it was the right way to teach.” Those are the short-term gains, which will of course continue into the long-term. The third example that will further contribute to the long-term sustainability of this program was made possible due to the generous help of Catherine West (Head of Orff Canada) who graciously and generously donated an invaluable resource “Everything You Wanted to Know About Orff, But Were Afraid To Ask.” This Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) teacher training Orff-levels manual is valuable and comprehensive resource filled with information that has been practiced and analyzed with Batuta Caldas teachers and, with the help of translation into Spanish, will become readily available to all Batuta teachers and administrators, further enriching not only the experience of DPS students, but the teachers as well. The question now becomes: Why would someone within, or outside the Batuta community care about my fellowship? Simply put, enthusiasm, passion, and love spread like wildfire. The seeds planted with Batuta Caldas will (we hope) have a domino effect that will reach the ears of other teachers throughout the country. The continued success of Batuta Caldas, as demonstrated with a more student-centred approach will inspire further discussion and collaboration within the Batuta community at all levels. I firmly believe that this paradigm shift is what is necessary to see social change within Batuta brought to the next level.



Is Change Needed? Further Recommendations

Batuta's greatest resource is its fiercely dedicated and passionate teachers. Their love for music and the children they teach is infectious. To further advance Batuta's goals as a social program, I recommend a shift in pedagogical approach that emphasizes student-centred learning and builds musical understanding through creative activities and social skills. To further this goal I recommend that Batuta bring in a guest Orff-specialist such as Doug Goodkin, to work with Batuta teachers for a minimum 1-week intensive workshop in order to experience the Orff-process in greater depth. With the Orff-method, teachers, administrators, sponsors, and most importantly, the children themselves can have the best of both worlds without having to sacrifice musicality. On the contrary, musicality will be enhanced because students will understand (through the creative process) what they are playing. Ultimately, the desired goal would be to send Batuta teachers to full 2-week Orff levels course (Orff certification is attained by completing levels 1, 2, and 3; all of which are 10 day intensive workshops).

In order to see these changes, maintaining, and even boosting present levels of funding are vital. Of that we are all in agreement. In a perfect world, the teachers' salaries would also be raised, both to better support existing teachers, and to attract new and talented musicians to the program. This would require finding donors that believe in the importance of the collaborative method of teaching, as the main goal of any el-Sistema inspired program should be first and foremost social change.

Advice for Future Fellows

In future years, when I look back and am asked, "If you could name an experience that really made you a better teacher, what would it be?" my answer would be simple: the time spent working with students and teachers of Fundacion Nacional Batuta as a part of the Latin American McBurney Fellowship. Just one example would be the way I had to carefully plan my lessons due to my lack of Spanish. With limited communication skills a music teacher has to become very creative and find ways of communicating instruction without speaking. Speaking less during lessons has made my own approach to teaching more musical, which has made me a far more effective teacher. As an educator I spent eight years teaching to society's elite in various International Schools in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Indonesia. What I valued most about this fellowship was the chance to truly give of my talents to those in our society that need it the most; those who struggle on the fringes.

My advice to future McBurney Fellows: 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 and diplomacy) 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 an exotic location, but actual change on the ground where it matters most. There is no better feeling.

--Eugene Negrii

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