Teaching creative music in El Sistema and after-school music contexts

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Abstract
El Sistema music programmes have blossomed over the past decade, with the aim of fostering social development through intensive orchestral music instruction. Many scholars agree that creative music making can facilitate student agency development, increase a sense of belonging and promote creative expression by allowing students to bring their perspectives to the learning context. With these benefits apparent, it seems rational that El Sistema should incorporate creative music making into its curriculum. To build understanding of how creative music approaches function in some programmes, I used a multiple qualitative case study to examine eight teachers’ perspectives of creative music making within El Sistema and after-school music programmes in Canada and the United Kingdom. Findings revealed that teachers conceptualized creative music making as activities that develop agency through collaborative music creation, that have the benefit of creating a sense of belonging and that give students the opportunity to contribute to their community. Successful nurturing of creative music making seems to rely on connecting students to their wider community, which is achieved in part through incorporating students’ own musical tastes. Teachers’ experiences with creative music making in their own music education played a crucial role in preparing them to teach creative music.

Keywords
Creative music, El Sistema, improvisation, music education

Over the past decade, El Sistema and El Sistema–inspired programmes have become increasingly popular music education and social welfare initiatives (Baker, 2014; Morin, 2014). El Sistema programmes are defined by principles that include social change through the pursuit of musical excellence, ensemble-based instruction, intense and frequent sessions, accessibility focused towards underserved youth, and community connection (Govias, 2011; Majno, 2012). Proponents of the programmes frequently cite research that shows increases in social and emotional growth (Alemán et al., 2017), community building (Merati et al., 2019), and academic and cognitive...
growth (Habibi et al., 2016). Critics of the El Sistema philosophy cite it as top-down, undemocratic and competitive (Bergman et al., 2016; Dobson, 2016) and argue that El Sistema’s focus on musical excellence over musical satisfaction is counter to contemporary attitudes towards music education (Baker, 2014; Kuuse, 2018). In contrast, the progressive pedagogies of many music education programmes promote a student-centred approach where the teacher concedes control to foster independence, promote collaboration and engage students in decision making (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Hickey & Webster, 2001; Younker & Hickey, 2007).

In general, the repertoire performed in El Sistema programmes is from the Western art music canon (Baker, 2016; Bergman et al., 2016), and student-focused creative music making (CMM) (i.e., composing, arranging and improvising) is featured less frequently, if at all (Dobson, 2016). Previous reviews of El Sistema programmes have recommended broader learning outcomes to be developed such as creative thinking, student participation in their own educational process, and ‘a rethinking of the centrality and methods of orchestral training’ (Baker & Frega, 2018, p. 507). CMM creates learning opportunities that can enhance students’ sense of agency and awareness within their social setting (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017). Furthermore, many prominent music education scholars advocate for including CMM in music education programmes, due to its positive effect on students’ musical, social and emotional development (e.g., Bolden, 2014; Hickey, 2015; John et al., 2016; Upitis, 2017). Given that El Sistema’s philosophy espouses students’ social growth as the primary aim of its programming (Govias, 2011; Morin, 2014), it seems natural that El Sistema should prominently incorporate CMM.

Nevertheless, in my own teaching practice in an El Sistema setting, I have had difficulty implementing CMM. CMM differs from traditional music education curricula, which focus on excellence in performance and very little on creation. These traditional approaches, as used by many El Sistema and El Sistema–inspired programmes, have centuries of writing, research and methods for educators to implement in their teaching. Creative music education, in comparison, is a newer field. While the potential benefits of CMM are significant, and a growing body of research has examined creative music education in formal music education settings (e.g., Beineke, 2013; Bolden, 2009; Coulson & Burke, 2013; Hickey, 2009; Hickey et al., 2016), relatively little research has examined creative music education in El Sistema settings. Research is needed that illustrates how CMM can be incorporated into the music education programming of El Sistema. Teachers and leaders need to know (a) how CMM can be valuable in an El Sistema context, (b) how teachers can implement CMM and maximize benefits and (c) the challenges involved in implementing CMM. Accordingly, the aim of the research reported in this article was to explore educators’ experiences with CMM, with a view to maximizing its potential to support student agency, self-expression, and social awareness in El Sistema and El Sistema–inspired settings.

**CMM**

Creativity, especially in the arts, has ‘a deeply entrenched mythology, whereby it is construed as a mysterious, unknowable process’ (Wiffen et al., 2006, p. 164). R. Murray Schafer (1976) described music

as predominantly an expressive subject, like art, creative writing, or making of all kinds. That is, it ought to be this, though with heavy emphasis on theory, technique and memory work, it becomes predominantly knowledge-gaining. (p. 228)

Schafer made the case that creativity in music education often gets lost in the pursuit of understanding the aesthetic qualities of musical works – those objects which are formed by this
‘mysterious process’. Unravelling creativity from musical knowledge–gaining involves placing the creative process in the forefront, in particular its potential for people to learn about and express themselves. Bolden (2014) states that ‘positioning creative work such as composing at the heart of music education curricula . . . firmly places students at the centre of their own music learning. It allows them to hear and share their own voices’ (p. 3). Elliott and Silverman (2015) make an important observation with regard to creativity in music. Rather than asking ‘what is it?’ relegating musical creativity to an act in the past, or an object, they ask ‘what can it do?’ This distinction places musical creativity as an action-oriented phenomenon with potential for expression and communication, as opposed to an aesthetic, static object.

CMM is often conceptualized as music activities that place creativity in the forefront of music making (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Paynter & Aston, 1970; Schafer, 1976). CMM may emerge in any musical activity, but it appears that composition and improvisation are the activities with the most potential for its development (Odena, 2018). For this study, CMM was viewed through a social-constructivist lens and identified to depend on the following: the interaction of cultural and social factors within the formation of self-identity (Burnard, 2006); the community, or, the social context in which creativity, creative products and creative processes emerge (Higgins & Willingham, 2017); the range of cultural practices, interaction and relationships between individuals and their social environments (Allsup, 2004); and the beliefs and meanings attributed by individuals to musical creativity (Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study was to examine music educators’ conceptions of CMM within El Sistema and after-school music settings. It was guided by the research question, How do teachers conceptualize CMM and its benefits? I addressed this question through a multiple-case study design and looked at the ways in which teachers in Canada and the United Kingdom understand, and students engage in, CMM. I gathered data using interviews with teachers and in-class observations. Within- and cross-case analyses provided answers to the research question and implications for practice.

Methods

This qualitative, bounded multiple-case study focused on the way individual teachers experienced CMM in their teaching contexts. Plano Clark and Creswell (2015) outline case study research design as a set of qualitative procedures used to explore a bounded system in depth. The systems in this research were four music education programmes: two El Sistema programmes, one public school enrichment programme and one community music programme. The music organizations chosen were purposefully sampled; I chose four music education organizations that actively engaged in CMM. Patton (2002) explains that purposeful samples are ‘information-rich cases . . . from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research’ (p. 169).

Cases

Cases were purposefully chosen because they were extra-curricular, group music education programmes targeted at students aged 6 to 14. The programmes taught orchestral-based instruments and included some CMM alongside orchestral music instruction. The eight teacher participants were all dedicated music educators and professional artists. I recruited participants who identified as CMM teachers (Reggie, Tom, Sarah, Toby, Max), as well as participants who did not identify as CMM teachers (Emma, Leslie, Georgia). Teachers’ experience ranged from beginner teaching
(less than a year) to very experienced (over 30 years), and all were passionate about teaching music to socially and economically disadvantaged youth. As an El Sistema teacher, I gained access to each site through my professional network, and approached the programmes and teachers directly for participation in my study.

**Researcher bias.** I was an active teacher in Case A, though I did not observe my own teaching. My familiarity with the students in Case A, and that I am employed by an El Sistema programme, may give me some bias to the findings. Also, my own music education consisted of CMM as well as traditional orchestral training, and I have formed the opinion that CMM is an important aspect of music education.

**Case A.** Case A was an El Sistema music programme for socially and economically disadvantaged children in a moderately sized city in Ontario. This programme was situated in a population of low socioeconomic status and served mostly White Canadians with some minority members. The programme reflected the population of the community. The 24 participants of this programme were aged 8 to 12 and met four times a week after school. The programme was situated in, and in partnership with, a primary school whose students make up the participants of the programme. The programme had seven teachers teaching a range of musical subjects, such as instrumental technique and singing, and its musical focus was orchestral strings. I was an active teacher and programme coordinator for this case.

**Case B.** Case B was an El Sistema music programme for socially and economically disadvantaged children in a large, metropolitan city in the Northern United Kingdom. The 58 participants of this programme were aged 8 to 13 and participated in approximately 9 hr of music learning weekly, both during school hours and after-school. The community population was very culturally diverse, with many newly immigrated members. The programme reflected the population of the community. Case B employed 15 teachers, teaching orchestral strings and wind instruments, as well as some teaching with electronic instruments on iPads. It was situated in a primary school, and the school’s students made up the participants of the programme.

**Case C.** Case C was a community music programme for socially and economically disadvantaged children in a large, metropolitan city in the United Kingdom. This programme was offered once a week for 3 hr, and the participants were aged 12 to 16, of mixed cultural backgrounds. The 18 participants in this group were living with exceptionalities, including hearing impairment, learning disabilities and visual impairment. The music programme was situated in a community centre in a low–socioeconomic status neighbourhood. Case C employed eight teachers. Student participants were transported to the centre to attend.

**Case D.** Case D was a community orchestra, band and choral programme for children in a large, metropolitan city in Ontario. The 64 participants of this case were aged 8 to 13, from multiple cultural backgrounds, and met once a week, all day during school hours (6 hr, including breaks) for 5 weeks. This programme was an enrichment opportunity for students and was a partnership with the city’s public school board. The social and economic status of the students was diverse.

**Case selection**

Although Case D was not an El Sistema programme, its focus on orchestra and band music was similar to El Sistema, as was its ethos of inclusion and rehearsal intensity. The teacher participant, Max, had a reputation for disrupting band and orchestral music education through CMM.
Case C was an opportunistic sample. An instructor (Toby) from the El Sistema programme in Case B also taught in Case C, and I was invited to observe his work in this setting. Although Case B differed from El Sistema in instrumentation and repertoire, its focus on inclusion was of interest, and observing the instructor facilitate this community music group was valuable.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected at all four sites using observations and interviews, commonly used practices for multiple case studies (Stake, 2006). There were four observation periods – one for each case, with varying numbers of sessions observed due to availability. In total, I observed for 8 hr in Case A, 8 hr in Case B, 3 hr in Case C and 15 hr in Case D. To help orient observation, I focused on CMM teaching within each programme, observing for sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002) of engagement, student leadership and pro-activeness, and musical growth. Observations were recorded with field notes and a journal of reflection to contextualize my observations within my experience as an educator. In my field notes, I described what I noticed and struck me as significant, such as students collaborating and encouraging each other.

Interviews with teachers focused on their experience with CMM and their perceptions of its impact on students. I conducted eight interviews total (one with each teacher) using a standard protocol (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). Interviews were semi-structured, consisting of seven questions, derived from the research questions. I transcribed audio-recordings of each interview session using pseudonyms to designate participants.

I used an inductive approach to analysis, allowing topics, categories and themes to emerge (Thomas, 2006) from the data. After analysing interview transcripts and field observation notes, 53 initial codes were further refined to 15 categories and grouped into three themes.

I analysed transcripts and observation data from each case individually and then performed a cross-case analysis that informed conclusions regarding the cases collectively (Stake, 2006). Member checking, triangulation among data sources and investigator expertise contributed to the validity of the findings.

Findings

Three themes emerged through the cross-case analysis as significant in how teachers conceptualize CMM and its benefits: (a) engagement, (b) sense of belonging and (c) CMM in teachers’ music education.

Engagement

The theme of engagement through CMM emerged as prominent within the data. Teachers engaged students through CMM by (a) using CMM to invite students’ own music into the music learning space and (b) making space for collaborative creation.

Inviting students’ own musical interests. Teachers engaged their students with CMM by designing and relating activities and musical content to their students’ own musical and sound experiences. Max (Case D) explained,

What music do we play? . . . I can’t go into a school to do a workshop and do a John Cage, or John Zorn or Murray Schafer or Pauline Oliveros piece because they look at me like ‘who is this . . . guy?’ It just doesn’t work the same . . . you can do the same thing, but with different music, like whatever music the kids might like.
Max recognized that his experience in the Western art music tradition was unlikely to translate to his students, many of whom had no connection to Western art music. Instead, he felt that it was imperative to include his students’ musical tastes into the classroom.

Similarly, while observing at Case C, I saw that the teachers had created an environment where students were eager to share what they had been listening to. As students trickled into the classroom, small groups of students gathered around teachers, with phones outstretched or single earbuds offered. Variations of ‘check this out!’ or ‘[teacher], listen to this!’ echoed across the classroom as students offered samples of the music that they were excited about. Teachers were warm, excited and inquisitive about the music being shared. They asked questions about why the students liked the piece, where they heard it or if they wanted to learn it. To me, this was one of the most prominent examples of students being engaged in their music class. It was evident that they were not just sharing the music but also aspects of their own selves.

Max (Case D) also was inquisitive about the songs his students were listening to and developed a practice of pulling motifs – riffs – from these pop songs to use in ensemble CMM. He explained,

I would teach them a riff or a song and even if they didn’t like Drake or Hotline Bling, they thought it was hilarious to play it on their string instrument. And then we’d take it from there and mess with it, and improvise on it.

The humour and fun in ‘messing’ with riffs was ever present in my observation of Max’s sessions. He broke down a number of songs into distinct riffs: usually a combination of verse and chorus riffs, bassline riffs, instrumental riffs and other distinguishing motifs from the song. In one session, he asked the class, ‘how should we arrange this? Should we start with the chorus? Verse? Bassline? Who’s going to play?’ A student suggested, ‘Let’s have the flutes start the bassline!’ coercing some twittering and giggles out of the students. ‘Cool! Okay, well what do we do after that?’ Immediately, an excited bass player shouted ‘let’s all do the bassline!’ And it was settled. The flutes began the familiar bass riff of ‘Wannabe’ by the Spice Girls, twice through, followed by a resounding ‘WHOMP’ as the entire 64-person ensemble joined in. Max had them repeat the line over and over, first in unison, and then, by using hand signals, differentiated the dynamics, changed instrumentations, had students play the riff solo or improvise over the bassline using the blues scale. It worked really, really well. Afterwards, the band shared laughter and discussed their favourite moments of the performance. I sensed that by creating the arrangement together, in a fun, spontaneous and engaging way, the students felt they had created something unique and their own.

**Collaborative creation.** The data indicated that within a CMM context, students were also engaged when activities were collaborative. Interestingly, engagement and collaboration seemed to impact each other reciprocally; students became engaged through collaboration but also sought to collaborate because they were engaged. Students at Site A were particularly engaged while working collaboratively to construct a storyline and corresponding lyrics to a number of songs that would make up a music theatre piece. Reggie (Case A) would prompt the students using open-ended questions, but the class turned very collaborative as students worked out ideas with each other. Some students were more engaged than others and contributed more to the creation of the songs. In one instance, there were two students sitting at the back of the classroom, not contributing. As the class continued, and more ideas were being shared, I observed that the engaged students started to ask the two unengaged students their opinion of the piece. At first, there was little response, and the class turned their attention back to Reggie and writing. Before long, however, one of the students at the back of the class voluntarily offered an idea, which was met with a positive response from the rest of the class. The two students were invited to join the rest of the group by their peers, and upon
sitting down, were met with warm hugs from the other students. Reggie continued to ask open-ended questions, but focused on the ideas put forth by these two students.

Collaboration was observed as a contributor to engagement at Site D. There was an accomplished student (Student A) who was a leader in the trumpet section. Student A was pleased to help her peers learn the written music and help with technique. When asked to engage creatively with the music (e.g., to improvise), she was extremely reluctant. After being placed into smaller groups, students were asked to arrange a popular song, however they wanted, for an upcoming performance. Student A was not engaged in this activity whatsoever, calling it ‘stupid’ and ‘a waste of time’. She felt that if the ensemble had been given a pre-arranged piece, time would be spent more fruitfully learning the music and playing it well.

During the arranging activity, Student A took on a leadership role, but continued to make negative comments. As others in the group began to contribute ideas and demonstrate innovative ways to perform the song, Student A began to take interest in its creation. The piece sounded good, and it was obvious from her expression that she was surprised. It was apparent to me that Student A suddenly had gained creative inspiration, as the group continued to try new ideas and new arrangements spontaneously. Throughout the revisions, Student A would sing what she heard the piece as sounding like and offer additions to others’ ideas in the form of improvised melodies on her instrument – something she was extremely reluctant to do previously. The students in the ensemble were encouraging of Student A’s input, and many offered supportive statements when she was unsure of her contributions. It seemed that Student A had changed her attitude about CMM, was more engaged with the project and was visibly proud of her group’s work. I believe this was a result of the supportive and collaborative environment of the ensemble and teacher.

Collaboration as engagement sparked a team-like atmosphere in the classes, which led to another theme of my study: CMM enabling a sense of belonging.

**Sense of belonging**

The data indicated that CMM was a way for students to experience a sense of belonging. When students were offered meaningful roles and input into group collaborations, the sense of belonging was strengthened. When their voices were honoured through these CMM collaborations, it further solidified the sense of belonging.

*Meaningful roles and input.* Teachers indicated that throughout their education and professional careers, a defined community of CMM practitioners contributed to their sense of belonging. Participating in CMM ‘scenes’ through Tom’s (Case A) early music education made him feel like he belonged:

> Being a part of bands, writing and playing music and sharing it with people made me feel like I was part of a community, and we made a community together . . . It’s something I don’t think I’d get in music class – jamming. A lot of orchestra musicians just never jammed out together.

The musical activity of ‘jamming out’ was important to Tom. Through improvising, and sketching out grooves and songs, he felt like he was brought closer to his bandmates. By supporting each other’s CMM, they were creating a community of musicians, who felt that they belonged to a certain ‘scene’, such as punk rock musicians. In the sessions I observed, Tom sought to re-create the ‘jamming out’ experience by actively improvising with his students.

Another teacher, Emma (Case A), in her music education background, did not experience the ‘jamming out’ with fellow musicians that Tom described, and she felt that lack was problematic:
Doing the Suzuki method, there was no aspect of creative education. It’s all about reproducing... we didn’t create anything together, so it felt like we were just bringing someone else’s – like a stranger’s – music to life. (Emma)

Emma’s description of the repertoire she learned in her education as ‘someone else’s’ or ‘a stranger’s’ seems to indicate a barrier between herself and the music. As a performer, she had no connection to the creation of the piece or person who wrote it. Her description of ‘reproducing’ music, and ‘doing it like everybody else’ resembles being part of some sort of musical machine, with little sense of ownership of the music. Being a part of a traditional orchestra, of course, can bring students a sense of belonging, at least in the sense of being part of a ‘team’. She seems to infer, however, that a lack of creative input to the music she was making made her feel like it did not belong to her – or her, to it.

Sarah (Case B) saw CMM as a means for inclusion in the class, explaining: ‘[I use] creative music making for children who maybe don’t have the technical aptitude, but they’ve got lots to give, and it’s finding a voice for them in the room’. Sarah actively sought to include children within the group through CMM, and it was a powerful way to enable students to feel a sense of belonging.

Honouring student voices. Teachers also nurtured a sense of belonging through CMM by honouring student voices. One student living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Case C) was particularly fond of The Edge, a guitarist from the band U2. He seemed to know everything about him, and the student had a replica of a guitar model that The Edge used. During my observation session, the student frequently came over to play U2 riffs for me and to tell me how he learned them from listening to the recordings. ‘It’s okay to ask him to stop’, another teacher told me, ‘he can be a little overboard with sharing’. As an activity in an earlier session, the teacher had asked the student to prepare a lick (a short, musical phrase) from one of The Edge’s solos, to which the student had repeatedly been listening. The student presented the lick in this session, and the teacher asked everyone to learn it by ear, turning it into a repeatable riff. From there, the group created a four-bar groove, which included students playing drums, bass and keyboards. When they had practised the four-bar groove a few times, the teacher recorded it using a pre-set recording setup. He then quickly uploaded the audio file to a cloud-based host, so that the students could listen to the groove with their families when they got home. Every student was excited to show their loved ones their work, especially the guitarist. It was evident that, for this student, having the group work with the riff he had brought affirmed his sense of belonging.

Toby (Case C) commented on the sense of belonging he observed in his students due to their CMM within a group collaboration:

I certainly get the impression that the students’ self-confidence has increased, and there’s definitely a community aspect in that... it is like a proper gathering, or a family... everyone loves being there, and some of them talk a lot in particular about ‘my band’, being in a band, being with everyone else. (Toby)

CMM in teachers’ music education

Throughout my interviews, the sentiment that teachers were often not prepared to teach CMM was prevalent. When reflecting on their own music education, teachers described a focus on technical development on an instrument and indicated that they rarely experienced any creative music practice. As they grew into music educators, they felt that they did not possess the tools to teach CMM, compared to teaching through established music methods:
The grade 5 curriculum, for example, asks teachers to compose with students, and even music students who have gone through university for music don’t know that much about composing. You’re asking a tremendous amount from these teachers. (Reggie, Case A)

Some teachers did engage in CMM alongside traditional music education in their musical upbringing; however, these activities were exclusive of one another:

It was really cool to play in bands one day, then the next be playing in orchestra. Like, it made sense to me that it was all connected – an A on the cello is an A on my guitar, right? Some [orchestra members] thought it was totally different music to play. (Tom, Case A)

Tom was active in both formal music education and informal music making, where he learned many of the CMM tools to teach in his career. Reggie explained that he developed the tools early on through a teacher who made composition ordinary, relatable and action-oriented:

I think a lot of people go, ‘Wow – that’s a lot easier than I thought, and I didn’t think that qualified’. A lot of teachers feel that to be a composer, you need to be a doctoral student of music.

Making CMM relatable is what, in turn, made Tom more excited, stating that CMM ‘might do for people what it did to me in grade 6. Instead of hating music, you can see another angle to what music is. [CMM] made me appreciate it a lot more’.

Three teachers mentioned that they did not have adequate ‘tools’ to teach their students CMM. Leslie (Case A), Emma (Case A) and Georgia (Case B) all felt that in their education, they were not provided the space to explore creatively or the opportunity to acquire the tools needed to teach CMM.

Leslie outlined a perceived ‘otherness’ between what a composer does (create) and what a performer is supposed to do (perform). She felt that there was an inherent disconnect between what she offers as a performer and what a composer offers:

[A colleague who identifies as a composer] has tunes just going on in his head and I see that as something that I don’t have. Maybe if I had grown up creating more music I would know that I, too, could compose a melody and that it is legitimate. [laughing] I have nothing to offer, creatively. (Leslie)

At some point in Leslie’s musical development, she lost her confidence for her own CMM, which might be attributed to her lack of CMM in her education. While discussing her students, however, Leslie felt that they had plenty to offer creatively and remarked on the pride her students felt when they compose:

They feel a sense of ownership . . . they are so proud to show their parents and if I write it out for them [in notation], it looks like a ‘real’ piece of music, that they wrote. They’re always most proud of that.

Feeling anxious about making mistakes was a common obstacle for teachers. Emma described a colleague’s string orchestra:

[Dave] ran an orchestra for the sole purpose of getting students to play non-classical music, and to develop improvising skills. That met with only mixed success, because of resistance among students to get out of their comfort zone. Part of the problem with classical music training is that . . . the emphasis on being correct is so strong that to veer off being correct, is really scary. (Emma)
Discussion

The key findings from this study identify how CMM engaged students and fostered a sense of belonging within them. The findings also identify how the teachers’ perceived ability to include CMM in their classes was dependent on their own experiences with CMM.

Engagement

The data showed that teachers perceived CMM as relating to student engagement. Through activities that invited students’ own music into the learning space, engagement in learning was evident. Engagement through CMM also seemed to be supported by co-creation, that is, collaboratively creating. Burnard and Dragovic (2015) identified that collaborative creativity depends on the trust students place in their community, which is fostered by peer-driven encouragement and decision making. The data in this study supported these findings, as CMM activities created space for self-expression that was supported by teachers and the learning community, which established trust among students.

Burnard and Boynack (2017) found that improvising music plays a key role in the ‘development of learners’ capacities to negotiate between multiple spheres – between the self and the world’ (p. 28). Furthermore, Custodero (2007) has written that CMM provides an opportunity for a genuine synergy between received knowledge and inquiry, between social consensus and individual expression, between learner and community, and between the child’s world and the adult world. The data from this study suggest students’ improvised exploration often formed the basis of new collaborative pieces. Student identity was affirmed by being included in these collaborative CMM ensembles, as their musical input and interests were valued and incorporated into group creations, which were then featured in performances. Collaborative creativity in the context of CMM can be viewed as a shared learning experience, where individual and social creations and activities come together (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015).

Sense of belonging

A sense of belonging was among the most prominent perceived benefits of CMM that emerged. Burnard and Boynack (2017) found that children working with ideas collaboratively recognize one another’s ideas and build these into personal and collective responses to tasks. In this study, the process of collaborative idea recognition promoted a sense of belonging. CMM offered meaningful roles for students to participate in and present ideas to the group. The sense of belonging observed and described by teacher participants was often social, rather than musical. The connections and friendships students made over the course of their participation at each case drove them to continue attending the programmes, as the teachers and their friends honoured their voices. In an earlier study of CMM, Muhonen (2016) interviewed 41 fifth- to ninth-grade students about their previous experience with CMM in a primary school setting, when they were in Grades 1 to 3. Muhonen observed a similar trend of belonging, citing that social participation, combined with CMM, was the prime reason some students engaged. ‘We wanted to belong to the cool group that made songs’ (p. 273), identified one student.

Collaborative creation fortifies feelings of togetherness and group-belonging (Bruner, 1996; Sawyer, 2011). Even when creations are modest, they are identity-bestowing, and may ‘give pride, identity, and a sense of continuity to those who participate, however obliquely, in their making’ (Bruner, 1996, p. 22). Burnard and Dragovic (2015) found that ‘togetherness and co-creation, in particular, can be seen as contributors to pupils’ wellbeing, as are the similar concepts of a sense of
belonging’ (p. 385). The researchers explain that these concepts are conceptualized by Soini et al. (2010) as elements that enhance pupils’ pedagogical well-being. The data from this study strongly support the notion of the value of students experiencing a sense of belonging and demonstrate how CMM can facilitate it.

CMM offers potential for developing student agency, which contributes to a sense of belonging (Burnard & Dragovic, 2015; Campbell, 2009; Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Hickey, 2015). Contributors to this development include equitable teacher–student relationships, integrated student leadership and shared decision making (Kirk et al., 2017). CMM has the potential to contribute to students’ agency by allowing them to bring their perspectives to the learning environment through their own creations and explorations. The data in this study showed that when students were given the choice and opportunity to influence the creation of new music, they felt that they belonged and mattered. As students engage in CMM, they not only gain trust in their musical capacity but also trust in themselves – that they can contribute something meaningful, at any time and any place (Spalding, 2017).

When these students revealed themselves and their relationships with others through CMM, they were given the opportunity to explore and develop social awareness, conceived as perspective-taking, empathy and respect for others (Müller et al., 2019). In all cases, I observed instances where this occurred – from students sharing what music they like with each other and responding to others’ musical ideas in a supportive manner.

**Teachers’ experiences with CMM**

Hickey (2012) has explained that a lack of exposure to CMM in K–12 music classrooms diminishes the natural proclivity and excitement towards CMM as students go through formal music education. Similarly, the teacher participants in this study who did not experience CMM in their own music education were less inclined to feel confident about including CMM in their teaching. Paynter and Aston (1970) conceived CMM as giving students not only the freedom to devise and develop their own musical ideas but also placing teachers in a position to engage in CMM alongside their students. In many instances during this study, the most magical CMM happenings occurred when the teachers were making creative music *with* their students. Teachers frequently demonstrated a playful approach to CMM and that it was okay to make mistakes while exploring. Max demonstrated this by taking familiar musical riffs and ‘messing around’ with them – putting different musical materials together by ‘mashing them up’. Tom would playfully ‘jam out’ with his students, and Toby felt that by improvising and making grooves collaboratively, students ‘got a kick’ out of CMM. To effectively include CMM in their teaching, it seems that teachers must make creative music *themselves*.

Baker (2014) observed that El Sistema programmes are fraught with insufficient teacher training, often in the form of peer-mentorship, with ‘imitation and repetition as the default method’ (Frega & Limongi, 2019, p. 570). Although the teachers interviewed for this study had a wide range of teaching experience, they were surrounded by colleagues who were young musicians, often still enrolled in university. As Paynter and Aston (1970) suggests, opportunities for CMM must be carved out for music educators themselves. Perhaps it should be a goal of administrators to prioritize CMM not only in student programming, but also in sustained teacher support.

**Conclusion**

El Sistema’s aim of social development using accessible music instruction has the potential to make a valuable contribution to youth development, particularly in areas that are underserved by
school-based music programmes and for populations that cannot afford private instruction. The findings of this study clearly identify that CMM can be a valuable tool to support students’ social development by engaging them and nurturing their sense of belonging. The study also identifies that teachers need personal CMM experience for teaching and learning within a CMM context to succeed. Teachers should, therefore, be sought who have this experience, and/or teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities in CMM. As many teachers come from conservatory classical training, where CMM is not significantly addressed, it will take concerted effort by administrators to prioritize creative music education in El Sistema settings. Future research on CMM in teacher training could shed light on this monumental task.

It is important to promote music education practices that positively support multiple paths for student growth and development. The findings of this study strongly suggest creative music education has a lot to offer, and that the benefits align with the philosophy of El Sistema: to play creatively, and together, is to discover a part of yourself and a place in community.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note
1. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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