

## El Sistema as an Opportunity for Collaboration between School and Home – Parents’ Perspectives on an El Sistema-Inspired Activity

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**Abstract.** The aim of the study is to gain an insight into how the parents perceived their own and their children’s participation in an El Sistema-inspired programme, and how the parents’ participation and commitment should be understood in relation to their importance for their children’s schooling. The study is a case study and is based on semi-structured, qualitative research interviews with three parents. The results show the parents do not promote the idea that El Sistema is a programme that creates opportunities for their children to develop their musicality or paves the way for a career as a musician. Instead, the parents are happy that their children have discovered an interest that engages the children and support their personal development. The programme also provide an opportunity for both children and parents to build a social network. In the light of our theoretical point of departure in communities of practice, the result shows that it is possible to understand the El Sistema-inspired programme as helping to reinforce the parents’ involvement in school practice. The findings of the study suggest that El Sistema-inspired programmes do not simply promote the interest and commitment of parents in relation to their children’s schooling but go further, in that they also promote the children’s development and the well-being of the parents themselves. The results show that the El Sistema-inspired programme helps to bring children, parents and school together.

**Keywords:** music, parents, El Sistema, home-learning environment.

### **Introduction**

Ever since the start of the El Sistema orchestra and choir programme in Venezuela in the 1970s, its educational principles of employing the power of music to combat social exclusion and help people to influence their lives for the better have spread internationally and act as a model for similar musical activity across the world. In Sweden, there has been musical activity with an explicit El Sistema-orientation since 2010. There is now El Sistema-inspired activity in more

than twenty municipalities across the country that are part of a national network, involving around 9,000 children and their parents.

As educational researchers with an interest in music education and the fields of multiculturalism and interculturalism, our two previous case studies (Gustavsson & Ehrlin, 2016; Ehrlin & Gustavsson, 2017) focused on an El Sistema-inspired programme in a medium-sized Swedish municipality. These studies centred on the experiences and perceptions of the teachers, what they thought about their work and the programme and the explicit emphasis of the programme on integration. For this third study we have found it appropriate to examine parents' views of the El Sistema-inspired activity in which their children are involved.

The aim of the study is to gain an insight into how the parents perceived their own and their children's participation in an El Sistema-inspired programme, and how the parents' participation and commitment should be understood in relation to their importance for their children's schooling.

The research questions being posed are:

- How do the parents perceive their own participation in the El Sistema-inspired programme?
- How do the parents perceive their children's participation in the El Sistema-inspired programme?
- How should the parents' participation and commitment be understood in relation to the parents' importance for their children's schooling?

El Sistema was founded by José Antonio Abreu in Venezuela in the 1970s. El Sistema in Venezuela is state-funded and seeks to ensure that choral and orchestral activities support and assist children and young people from poor areas to have meaningful leisure time and get away from poverty and alienation (Booth, 2009).

The choral and orchestral repertoire consists mainly of Western classical orchestra music, and the educational concept of the programme is to enable individual members of the choir or orchestra to be inspired by and learn from one another. The orchestras are organised so that older adolescents act as role-models for younger members, and all orchestras also have opportunities to be inspired by and learn from professional orchestral musicians (Booth, 2009; Booth & Tunstall, 2014). Since its launch, El Sistema has served as a model for similar activities around the world.

The El Sistema model has been praised for its educational concept but has also been criticised in reports and research (Allan, Morgan, Duffy, and Loening, 2010; Majno, 2012; Baker, 2016; Dobson, 2016). Critics contend that El Sistema's aims may hide social injustice and structural inequality rather than counter it. A further problem is thought to be that the educational concept may reproduce authoritarian, teacher-centred models of music education rather than encouraging children and young people to develop independence and creativity.

The first thing visitors to El Sistema's Swedish website see is a quotation from Gustavo Dudamel (1981-), the international conductor and instigator of El Sistema Sweden. He says, "What you learn when you play in an orchestra – practice, discipline and teamwork – is what you need to lead a good life beyond the world of music." (El Sistema). Teamwork is highlighted as a key point of departure while at the same time every individual is considered important.

In the light of significant segregation, the music school in the municipality where our study was undertaken was tasked by the municipal executive with promoting integration in and through its activities.

The music school in that community started an El Sistema-inspired music programme in 2012. Since then, the work has expanded and currently two preschools and one primary school with pupils from the preschool class up to year four (6-11-years old) are working in partnership with the music school on El Sistema-inspired music activities.

The schools that are involved in the study have El Sistema sessions once a week. The programme takes place in a school for 6-13-years old in a residential area that is ethnically multicultural and economically and socially disadvantaged.

The pupils taking part are 9 or 10 years old. The group normally consists of approximately 15 children and two music teachers. The El Sistema sessions consist of playing the violin or a brass instrument, singing or dancing and last for approximately 60 minutes. There are monthly 'Friends Days' (*Vänsdays*), musical and social gatherings to which teachers and pupils invite parents and siblings. Repertoire for Friends Days is decided jointly by the pupils and music teachers. On each occasion, one of the pupils presents the programme and the pupils and teachers perform together for the audience. After the short show, pupils, teachers and family guests enjoy refreshments of coffee, lemonade, homemade cakes and fruit.

Two previous case studies gave us an insight into El Sistema-inspired activity in a town in a medium-sized municipality with about 100 000 inhabitants. The first study (Ehrlin & Gustavsson, 2016) was based on interviews with music teachers and preschool teachers involved in the programme. The area of knowledge that was of interest for the study was the teachers' experiences, perceptions and thoughts. What did the teachers point to as the most important aspects of the El Sistema-inspired work? The analysis of the teachers' input resulted in two categories: *music having intrinsic value* and *music as a tool*. Three themes emerged from the latter category: music as a tool for creating pleasure and good mental health, music as a tool for social development and social relationships, and music as a tool for language development.

A common denominator that we identified in all three of these themes was that the participating teachers were keen to highlight and stress the focus on, and importance of, integration. The music teachers in the study say that they see their work as a tool for integration – that the musical activities give both children and parents an opportunity to "become part of Swedish society". Integration is also an explicit goal in the municipality's brief for the programme.

The emphasis on integration was one of the major reasons why, in our continuation of the empirical study (Gustavsson & Ehrlin, 2017), we included a focus on the teachers' accounts and reflections on the programme in relation to integration. This required some consideration of the concept of integration. What *is* integration? Is it possible for the programme to be understood as focusing on integration? Our reflections and analytical reasoning around this suggested was more relevant to understand the focus of the programme in terms of inclusion. The teachers' accounts put us in mind of assimilation rather than integration. If we were to seek a more in-depth understanding of the teachers' accounts that went beyond their own choice of words, inclusion seemed a more relevant concept. The study shows that inclusion enables a greater understanding of the programme than integration does, not least in providing opportunities for more in-depth understanding of what the teachers in the study have to say about the pupils' enjoyment and their development in different areas.

One aspect that we were interested in investigating further in light of what emerged from the teachers' accounts and reflections was music as a route into increased communication and collaboration with parents. Music teachers involved in the study highlight the way in which the musical activity creates opportunities for contact with parents and for parents to be integrated socially. Through their children's appearances as part of various types of events, parents have opportunities to meet not only the teachers but also each other. For the teachers, the music and the children's commitment are important factors in encouraging the parents to attend the various gatherings that are organised. The musical events are also felt to have a positive impact on the parents' attendance at other parents' meetings and briefings. However, the teachers called for greater collaboration with the parents. One of the teachers said:

Getting the parents involved in a more spontaneous and natural way is problematic. OK, they come to our 'Vänsdays' and really enjoy them, but it would be good to have more input from them. That's where we're struggling a bit, because we haven't got time to get some of the parents together and sit down and talk to them properly. What can we do to make them feel that they're involved?

For this article, the teachers' descriptions of how they interact and work with the parents of the children taking part in El Sistema-inspired programmes have led us to focus our research interest on the parents' perspectives on the activity. What do parents think about the El Sistema-inspired activity that their children take part in?

## **Literature review**

### **Parents' involvement in their children's education with a particular focus on collaboration between the school and parents from a foreign background**

Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNESCO, 1989) states that it is the parents who have primary responsibility for the child. Parents should provide advice and guidance so that their child is able to enjoy their

rights. In view of this, close collaboration with the parents is a recognised aspect of a school's work.

Historically, the relationship between home and school has been dominated by the *principle of separation*. It has been felt that it is best for children if the roles and tasks of the home are kept separate from those of the school. This has led to one-way communication between parents and school, with the parents merely recipients of information about parents' evenings and similar notifications. Since the latter half of the 20th century, views on the relationship between home and school have increasingly evolved and the principle of separation has been replaced by the *partnership principle*. This principle is based on liberal and social democratic policies of reform, whose vision is that a partnership between home and school can help to even out economic and social differences in society. However, the efforts to achieve equality took a back seat towards the end of the 20th century. Contact between schools and parents came increasingly to focus on working together to improve the effectiveness of teaching, to create the conditions for more effective learning (Erikson, 2004, 2008; Strandberg, 2013). Above all, collaboration with parents and carers has come to be associated with success at school or, more especially, the lack of it. Teachers would like to work together with parents to facilitate the discussion of issues perceived by the school as problematic (Granstedt, 2010).

The education authority in Sweden, the Swedish School Inspectorate (*Skolinspektionen*) and researchers looking at Swedish schools stress that a closer relationship between home and school has a positive effect on a pupil's educational achievements. The curriculum prescribes collaboration between parents and schools, stating that "Schools shall support families to fulfil their responsibilities for the upbringing and development of their children. There must therefore be close cooperation between the home and the school." (Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*), 2018, p. 2).

### **The educational background and socioeconomic situation of parents**

The emphasis on collaboration is significant in the light of national and international research that shows that the educational background of the parents is a major influence on how well their children do at school. Educational sociologists say that social divisions in terms of class, gender and ethnicity are reflected and reproduced in school. Although children from different groups may attend the same school, their achievements will differ because of the varying levels of support at home and differing expectations and reception on the part of the school (Bunar, 2012). The national educational authority, research on schools and the debate on education all single out parents who have a poor educational background and are socioeconomically disadvantaged as factors in poor achievement at school. The link between differences in pupil performance and the pupils' socioeconomic background is presented as a clear one. There are major differences between the educational outcomes of pupils whose parents have completed compulsory schooling, pupils with at least one parent who has completed upper secondary school and those with at least one parent with degree-level education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012; Statistics Sweden, 2016). One conclusion of the 2010 PISA survey is that:

Home background influences educational success, and schooling often appears to reinforce its effects. Although poor performance in school does not automatically follow from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, the socioeconomic background of students and schools does appear to have a powerful influence on performance." (OECD, 2010, p.13).

The reasons for the differing levels of educational success highlighted in the research are in part the lack of ability of parents with a poor educational background to help their children with their schoolwork and in part that middle-class families are more involved in their children's leisure time and will work with their children at home in a more focused way than working-class families do; this applies to both their children's schoolwork and their leisure activities (Bodovski 2010; Bunar, 2012; Lahdenperä, 2017). Cultural codes and ways of talking and behaving that children encounter and develop in these contexts are largely consistent with the basic educational principles and practice, cultural codes and expectations in school (Bunar, 2012). To use the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's terminology (Broudy, 1998), these families' social and cultural capital and the habitus that the child develops are of value in the fields constituted by the schools and the educational system as a whole that provide a firm basis for positive educational outcomes and success at school.

### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is also highlighted as a crucial factor in educational achievement. Pupils with foreign backgrounds achieve lower school grades than pupils with an ethnic Swedish background. There are clear differences in educational outcomes between schools in multicultural residential areas and those in ethnic Swedish residential areas and between foreign-born and Swedish-born pupils in the same class (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2009; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2012, 2016; the European Commission, 2017). The 2015 PISA survey included a focus on differences in outcomes based on migration background. In the areas of knowledge measured by PISA - science, reading comprehension and maths - there are major differences between pupils from a Swedish and foreign background. The difference is greater in Sweden than in the rest of the OECD countries. One reason put forward to explain this is that the nature of immigration differs from country to country (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016).

In multicultural school research, policy documents, reports and supporting material from the national school authority from 1990 into the 2000s, two themes emerge, one of them relating to difference, the other to problems (Granstedt, 2010). The theme of difference has as its starting point a division between ethnically Swedish pupils and pupils with a foreign background. Despite the express aim of Swedish schools to be a school for everyone, many pupils of foreign origin perceive school as "a school for other people" (Parszyk, 1999). Key reasons for the perceived exclusion are felt to be limited linguistic ability in the case of pupils who arrive in Sweden at an older age, the monocultural approach of teachers, differing referential frameworks in terms of educational culture and the fact that teaching is not sufficiently tailored to the needs and circumstances

of the pupils (Lahdenperä, 1997, 2017; Gustavsson, 2007; Bunar, 2010; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2012).

Educational and didactic principles in Swedish schools are often different to those familiar to parents and children who have begun their schooling elsewhere. Parents often view their children's school from the perspective of their own schooling in their home country, which is a reason why teachers in the Swedish school system and parents with a non-European background often differ in their basic outlook on education, learning and bringing up children. This includes the school's expectations in relation to contact and collaboration between home and school. One reason why parents may not care about schoolwork or show interest in collaboration may in fact be because they see school as separated from home life. A study (Bouakaz, 2009) involving parents from countries in and around the Middle East revealed that there was a similar perception that "school is the teachers' concern". One of the parents interviewed commented that "Everything is planned and the teachers have to follow the national guidelines and mustn't try to change anything." (Bouakaz, 2009, p. 73).

One conclusion from the interviews with the parents is that school in the parents' home countries is seen as an authority representing the state. Teachers work in accordance with decisions made at a high level and opportunities for parents to influence the teaching which appears to be non-existent (Bouakaz, 2009). This means that parents of foreign origin may have a different idea of what they should do to further their children's education. Parents who have little contact with their children's regular school should not perceive themselves as less involved in their children's education simply for that reason. They see their role as being outside the school (Bouakaz & Persson, 2007; Bouakaz, 2012).

The 'problematic' theme is based on the idea that there are problems associated with the pupil and their parents to do with language and culture. Inadequate knowledge of the Swedish language and thus poor educational outcomes are said to be a problem. Another problem is said to lie in the cultural background of the pupil and their parents. Within the school system, there is a perception that the culture and traditions of immigrant parents cause problems (Bunar, 2010; Bouakaz & Persson, 2012). Teachers and other staff say that they find it difficult to work with parents because of what are perceived as language barriers and cultural differences. Class teachers would like better collaboration with parents in order to be able to discuss the things they see as problematic, but feel that there are parents who show no interest in interacting and do not care about their children's schoolwork (Granstedt, 2010; Strandberg, 2013). The teachers would like to see more commitment from the parents. On the other hand, the parents are not asked, as they are marginalised and not expected to be able to contribute (Bunar, 2010). It has been shown that teachers in schools with a high proportion of multilingual pupils interact less with the parents than teachers in schools where the majority of parents have Swedish mother tongue. Teachers in schools with a lot of multilingual pupils state that attendance levels at parents' evenings are low (Erikson, 2008: Alfakir, Lahdenperä & Strandberg, 2010; Strandberg, 2013).

Teachers with ethnic Swedish background are also identified as being part of this 'problematic' theme. Those with a monocultural, ethnocentric approach based on majority societal norms and values see pupils with foreign backgrounds as having inadequacies and problems and perceive parents with foreign backgrounds as problematic but without contemplating their own attitude (Lahdenperä, 1997; Granstedt, 2010). Parents are seen as lacking interest in and commitment to their children's schooling, based in part on their limited participation in parents' evenings and teachers' perceptions of a passive, uninterested attitude (Alfakir, Lahdenperä & Strandberg, 2010; Osman & Månsson, 2015). A teacher who feels that parents are not interested in school may become distrustful of the parents (Bouakaz, 2009; Bunar, 2012; Strandberg, 2013).

The studies also offer additional keys to an understanding of the attitudes and limited engagement of immigrant parents. Ignorance of how things work in the Swedish school system combined with poor linguistic ability can make it difficult for immigrant parents to express their opinions in a way that ensures they are correctly understood, which can lead to passivity. In addition, they often find it difficult to get Swedish parents to take on board their views. These are some of the reasons why many immigrant parents may feel that they are subordinate, become critical of schools and lack the motivation and interest to get involved in parents' evenings and parents' councils (Bouakaz, 2009; Granstedt, 2010; Alfakir, 2012).

### **Involvement**

Some research plays down the significance of the educational background, socioeconomic situation and ethnicity of the parents. Even if there is a strong correlation between the parents' background and how well the child does at school – which is seen as being reinforced by the activities of the school – it is not impossible to influence that relationship (Bunar, 2012). Studies show that the parents' involvement, regardless of their level of education, socioeconomic situation and ethnicity, has a significant effect on the child's educational outcomes. What the parents *do* is more important for their child's achievement at school than what they *are* (Bodovski, 2010; Bunar, 2012).

The home learning environment (HLE), in the form of parents' involvement in their child's schooling, their expectations and belief in their child's abilities and a trusting relationship between school staff and parents, helps to achieve positive results in school irrespective of the parents' own educational level, the stage the child is at school and the parents' ethnic background. A meta-analysis of 21 studies on how the involvement of minority parents in their children's school affects educational outcomes shows that parental involvement is significant irrespective of ethnic background (Jeynes, 2003; Bunar, 2012). Other research, which analysed information about more than 10,000 pupils, shows that the major factor in academic success is parents who are encouraging, who invest time and interest in their child's schooling and who clearly show that they think school is important (Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman, 2013).



The earlier the parents get involved, the better. To be successful with this, schools must become better at making all parents aware of their role and of how they can support their child's schooling. They need deliberate strategies to enable parents to have concrete involvement in their child's schooling and in order to maintain a positive attitude towards the school. One route to success is said to be to develop ways of working that enable parents to support their children and to see themselves as important in relation to their own child's schooling (Dufur, Parcel & Troutman, 2013).

### **The importance of music for parents of foreign origin**

For families who have left their old lives behind and are trying to establish a new life in an unfamiliar community, the search for context is important. Music can play a key role in this. A study (Hofvander Trulsson, 2010) about the importance of music for integration, based on the perspective of parents, finds that music can provide a sense of well-being and open doors to memories and also to the future, both for the parents and their children. A balance is needed in this context between the minority culture and the majority culture. On the one hand, a parent may want their children to be rooted in the parents' cultural background. Roots are important; it is important to know where you come from. Having children play music from their parents' original musical culture warms their parents' hearts. Music can, of course, symbolise security and home. Parents also point out that it is important for how the family is seen by others that the children master the music of their home country. Attention to music is seen as helping the parents to show that, when bringing up their children, they have not lost sight of where they have come from, thus gaining them the respect of their countrymen (Hofvander Trulsson, 2010, 2015).

On the other hand, the parents are keen for their children to be successful and have a good life in their new country. For parents, the challenge is to guide their children into the new community while also nurturing their cultural roots. Having musical activity at all stages in preschool and school and perhaps also going to non-compulsory music or arts school is seen as somehow guaranteeing the child's development, creativity and integration. The parents indicate that music protects people from taking the wrong turn in life. They also emphasise that music opens doors to new social environments and people and can help people gain respect and become valued as individuals. They long to be accepted by the majority population and to have friends and acquaintances amongst their neighbours; this can be understood as the driver behind their perception of the importance of music. Many families pay large amounts of money each month for piano, violin or dance lessons. The state of family finances is said to be a constant underlying worry in several of the interviews for the study (Hofvander Trulsson, 2010, 2015).

### **Collaboration**

Taken as a whole, studies focusing on collaboration between schools and parents of foreign origin suggest that teachers and parents find it difficult to interact and work with one another, each party putting the blame on the other. The studies' findings underline the need for contact between parents and teachers. A relationship based on trust and mutual understanding is said to be crucial. There

is a need for a dialogue between home and school that is not always possible at a parents' evening. The research suggests that trust and mutual understanding is established not through isolated parents' evenings and progress discussions once or twice a year but through continuous dialogue and repeated structured meetings between teachers and parents. Regular, effective contact, with an open dialogue between home and school, provides security to teachers, parents and children alike and helps to ensure that children will enjoy their schooling and achieve good educational outcomes. Frame factors can also have an impact on the collaboration between home and school. Factors that are important for good collaboration include both teachers and parents having time to meet and a meeting place being identified where the parents will feel comfortable and welcome (Erikson, 2004, 2008; Bouakaz, 2009; Alfakir, Lahdenperä & Strandberg, 2010; Alfakir, 2012; Bunar, 2012; Strandberg, 2013).

For multilingual children, the research shows that collaboration between home and school is a particularly significant success factor for their schooling. If the values and perceptions of the parents and teachers are very different, as may be the case in schools with children whose parents went to school in countries where the school-related referential frameworks are different, pupils may feel that their loyalties are divided between home and school. Close collaboration between home and school reduces the likelihood of this. The parents of children and young people with a foreign background have a significant impact on how children experience school and approach their school work. The children's school work reflects the level of interest and commitment of their parents. If parents think school is not working well, or if they are uninvolved, this will be reflected in the child's commitment and achievement at school. In an intercultural educational context, therefore, contact and communication with parents is an important area to be addressed (Bunar, 2010, 2012; Runfors, 2003; Bouakaz, 2009; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010; Strandberg, 2013). Music can play an important role in this respect (Hofvander Trulsson, 2010, 2015).

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical point of departure for this study is Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory on communities of practice. In the context of this study, collaboration between pupils, between pupils and music teachers and between the music school and parents as well as the Swedish majority society and Western contemporary music can be understood as communities of practice that are interconnected to a varying extent. The starting point for Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory is that, in our everyday lives, we form part of several communities of practice that affect our development, and that within these communities we affect practice to a varying degree. Participating in a community of practice changes the individual as well as their position in society. Within a community of practice, an individual's participation can be understood as a shift from being a peripheral participant or actor on the outer edge of a community to, over time, becoming an increasingly central participant or player who has increasingly mastered that community of practice. This learning process is based on the interplay between the people in the community of practice. One dimension of

the process is being able to identify with, and consider yourself part of, the community (Wenger, 1998).

Based on the research studies, parents' interaction with preschool and school generally takes one of two forms: 1) The parents adopt a position of openness and trust, allowing the children to enjoy the opportunities available in the form of activities and learning, for example in music and sport. 2) The parents position themselves in opposition to the new by restricting the children's opportunities to take part in activities in and outside of school such as swimming lessons, music schools and sports clubs (Hofvander Trulsson, 2015).

The research shows that schools' interaction with immigrant children and parents can also be characterised as adopting one of three different approaches, i.e. a compensatory, complementary or participatory approach. With a compensatory approach, school compensates for what the child does not get at home. The complementary approach means that parents are invited to take part in a discussion about their children's schooling and education, while the participatory approach means that the school and the parents educate the children together (Lahdenperä, 1997).

## **Method**

The study presented in this article has been designed as a case study (Merriam, 1994). It provides a unique example of players in real situations and investigates the interactions, statements and actions of those involved. In our study, we focus on parents' statements about one particular El Sistema activity. The weakness of a case study is that the study cannot be replicated and that the result cannot always be generalizable (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). However, in interpreting the characteristics of the statements of the parents interviewed, our purpose was to find patterns that could be applied to parents' involvement in school activities in general. This can also be expressed through the concept of transferability as developed by Lincoln and Guba (2009), which requires a certain degree of similarity between the contexts. In this case, we can expect that there will be similarities between different school activities or the way in which activities are didactically planned, for example if the activities are part of the regular school day or, as here, part of an after-school activity.

The case study presented in this article focuses on how parents perceive the El Sistema activities in a Swedish city with a population of approximately 100,000. The study is based on semi-structured, qualitative research interviews, which Kvale (1997) calls "conversational interviews", with three parents from different families. The interviews were conducted in conjunction with an El Sistema "Friends Day". One parent was interviewed by one of us alone, the other two were interviewed by us both together. All interviews were supported by interpreters who translated all the questions and answers so that all the parents could share their thoughts in their mother tongue.

The interview subjects were three parents with ten-year-old children, two from Iraq and one from Syria, with whom we made contact at a Friends Day event.

There were approximately ten parents at the event and we had hoped that four or five parents would participate in interviews. Initially, four parents were interested in being interviewed but one of them was not able to attend that day. After discussion with the parents who had agreed to participate, it was decided that the interviews would take place at the next event. The parents were told that we could book an interpreter and all were in agreement with this; the music teachers subsequently helped us to book interpreters. The three parents that participated were not known to each other than that they had met at the El Sistema events.

The conversational interviews were based on an interview guide that used open and leading questions to stimulate stories and reflections that were concentrated around a number of themes. The semi-structured approach meant that each conversational interview took a slightly different direction. The interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word, with no attention given to how things were being said. No transcription key was used. The transcribed data material was analysed using a qualitative analysis method (Kvale, 1997). During the first stage of the analysis, the content of the transcribed interviews was categorised by establishing a number of themes. In the second stage, aspects of these perspectives were theorised using a critical hermeneutic approach (Kristensson-Uggla, 1999). Overall, the analysis process may be understood as abductive (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008). The research adhered to the Swedish Research Council's ethical principles relating to information, consent, confidentiality and use (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

### **Methodological reflections**

In a research context that spans linguistic boundaries, it is necessary to be aware of the significance of any linguistic limitations and the impact on reliability when communicating through an interpreter. One significant aspect of this is that people who have arrived in Sweden as refugees or relatives of refugees have often had negative experience of authorities in the communities they have left behind. Those living in a totalitarian society bent on control will have had to exercise caution and to distrust authorities and officials. Contact that refugees or relatives may have had with Swedish authorities may also have given rise to distrust and caution. In an increasingly closed EU, migrants from countries outside Europe often describe how they and others have had negative experiences during interviews and questioning at the hands of scrutinising officials. Experiences of continued contact with the authorities in contexts such as housing, compensation, family connections or employment may also have given rise to distrust (Gustavsson, 2007).

Our reports of the interviews do not reproduce the words of the parents who were interviewed verbatim. It is our experience that, where the content of interviews and discussions are reproduced without correction of the language, missing words, incorrect or incomplete sentences, dangling modifiers and grammatical errors etc focus the reader's attention more on the language used than on the content. To a large extent, the focus has come to be on *how* things are expressed rather than *what* is said (Gustavsson, 2007). One ethical consideration

in this context is that a rendering that is close to the original spoken form may help to paint an incorrect, disadvantageous and even derisory picture of the informants. The danger here is that this might have the effect of constructing 'the others' as a negative (Tsfahuney, 1998; Gustavsson, 2007; Ehrlin, 2012).

## **Results**

The results are presented under two headings based on the study's research questions.

### **The parents' perceptions of their own involvement in the El Sistema programme**

The three parents who were interviewed using interpreters describe their perceptions of the El Sistema programme in a similar way. One of them, originated from Syria, had their own experience of music teaching from their own schooling but said:

No, I didn't have music in school when I was growing up. When I went to school I just had one music lesson a week when they taught us that system with the notes - Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So.

This parent describes music as being important in their life and says that music has mainly been something done at home where, for example, they listen to music on the radio. However, the El Sistema programme and the children's interest in music has expanded the role of music in the family and also further increased the parents' interest and involvement in music.

When my daughter started with this, the family got involved with the music. She gets me to come along to these celebrations, she gets me to come along to the music. So I get more active.

The other two parents interviewed are originally from Iraq and have no experience of music teaching from their own schooling, but they too say that music is an important part of their lives.

All three parents note that they get involved in the El Sistema programme because their children show a great deal of interest in, and commitment to, the programme. One of them says:

I'd really like her to continue with it as long as she's interested. She can stay even when she changes school. I want her to keep going as long as she's interested.

And another says: "As long as she wants to be part of it, I want her to be part of it."

All three parents also say that the El Sistema programme their children are part of has helped them feel proud and pleased with their children. One of them says:

When we come together here, we can see how the children have developed so much, you become happier with the children and prouder of them.

All three parents also note that they feel that they have good contact with the music teachers and that they have confidence in them. They base this on the fact that they are continually contacted by the teachers via text message or by telephone, are invited to Friends' Days and feel that the teachers emphasise the educational aspects of the programme so that the children can develop. One of them makes a point of saying that opportunities for the child to try out different instruments and to have a go at singing and dancing have been important in gaining the child's interest. When asked if there was anything particularly important about the El Sistema programme that they would like to highlight, another parent responded that it was good that there was no charge for the children to take part. None of the parents see any reason why they as parents should have greater influence on the content and design of the programme.

The parents consistently say that the El Sistema programme has expanded their social networks. The Friends' Days gatherings are described as festive occasions when they cannot only watch and listen to their children but also meet the parents of other children. One of the parents also mentions that, as a result of these gatherings, their family now get together with another family in their spare time.

### **The parents' perceptions of their children's involvement in the El Sistema programme**

All three parents say that their children have gained new friends through the El Sistema programme. As a result, their children meet up not just at the El Sistema sessions but at other times as well. They often practice their songs and dances at home too. One of the parents says:

She really works hard on it at home too, and likes to dance with her friends and show them El Sistema. It's important to her.

The parents also say that they feel that their children have developed through their involvement in the El Sistema programme, partly by learning to play, sing and dance but also in other areas. One of the parents says:

She's got more active since she started with that music because she likes to practice or play her violin.

Another parent says:

I can see the children becoming more mature, they're getting more independent, they're not just playing music or their instruments, they're trying out other things. She's learning to dance [...] My daughter's been learning the piano. My daughter gets to be a programme leader and presenter. She wasn't like that before. She was shy before, and would stay in the background. Now it's totally different.

The pleasure the parents experience due to their children having found an immediate interest that they can develop alongside other children seems important in the interviews. All three parents also express a feeling that the experiences and knowledge that their children gain from the programme will be important for their future lives. In the main, however, this is not to do with music as an interest but more with the fact that the musical activity in question makes the children more adventurous and more active and gives them opportunities to meet and get to know friends, which is seen as important for the future. However, one of the parents notes that her daughter often says, "I'm going to be famous, Mum" - the parent sees this as a dream inspired by the El Sistema programme that can be interpreted as relating to the idea of becoming a musical performer in the future.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

The case study undertaken has a small evidence base and may to a certain extent be seen as providing a limited basis for analysis. One contributory factor is the relatively short interviews based on questions formulated in advance around closely-defined issues. This, together with what we have highlighted in our methodological reflections about an interview situation in which we may seem to represent authority figures in the eyes of the interviewees, might be a reason why the parents interviewed sometimes gave only brief responses to our questions. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern important aspects of, and interesting links to, theoretical perspectives and findings from earlier research.

The first thing to note is the parents' interest, in and commitment to, their children's participation in the El Sistema-inspired programme. None of the parents had any knowledge of the programme before their children were offered the chance to take part. When, after their children have been taking part for a number of years, they are asked what made them enrol their child in the El Sistema-inspired programme, they do not identify the music or the children's musical development as the reason why they allowed their child to take part. The parents do not promote the idea that El Sistema is a programme that creates opportunities for their children to develop their musicality or paves the way for a career as a musician. All three parents are happy that their children have discovered an interest that engages them and has helped them develop a social network. None of the parents have pushed their child to take an interest in music; it is rather that the music programme has, in a way, come to them. Our interpretation is that the parents' adopt an attitude of openness and trust in respect of their children's participation in the activities on offer. The musical activities are seen as supporting the child's personal development and providing an opportunity to build a social network. As in Hofvander Trulsson's study (2015), music is perceived as having the ability to open doors to new social environments and people.

The parents' attitude may be understood as an expression of involvement in their children's upbringing. Narrowing this to the perspective of schooling, their attitude can be related to the idea that the El Sistema programme constitutes an alternative option for demonstrating interest and getting involved in a school-related activity. What the parents state in the interviews does not, however,

provide an insight into the extent to which the parents see the El Sistema programme as part of school. But in the light of our theoretical point of departure in communities of practice, we do tend to think that it is possible to understand the El Sistema-inspired programme as helping to reinforce the parents' involvement in school practice.

One not insignificant reason for this seems to be the fact there is no charge for the children to take part. In view of what has been found in previous research about parents' concerns that their children's music-making activities are associated with major financial sacrifices on the part of the parents, the stance of the El Sistema-inspired programme that participation must not be subject to a fee would seem significant.

Although to some extent the teachers would like closer collaboration with the parents of the children involved in the El Sistema programme, this case study shows that the parents are happy with the working relationship. Our previous research finds that the El Sistema-inspired programme has a clear structure, both in terms of the sessions with the children and the Friends' Days that the parents attend, at the same time as the teachers are keen to make it known that there is room for parents to make suggestions and give their own views. However, the parents taking part in the study do not see any reason why they should have any influence over the programme. When we asked parents if they sometimes come up with ideas or if there was anything about El Sistema that they would like to change, the answer was unambiguous - no, not now and not previously. It seems that the programme's clear structure, in terms of both design and content, is appreciated or accepted. Linking this to previous research, we can see how this might be related to findings from studies that the school-related referential frameworks of parents from authoritarian societies include a view that the way in which a school organises its activity is the school's concern. Teachers work in accordance with decisions made at a high level. It is thus important to bear in mind that parents who do not speak up do not need to feel that they are less involved in their children's education simply for that reason. They see their role as being outside school.

In the interviews, the parents' main emphasis is on music as a source of happiness and social contact. This again leads to a link to previous research and to one of our key theoretical starting points. It can be understood how the Friends' Days activities, where the parents are constantly finding out more about what their child is interested in, have led to the broadening of their own interest in music and also enabled them to meet and get to know other parents. Within El Sistema as a community of practice, their involvement has shifted from being peripheral participants at the outer edge of a community to becoming increasingly more central participants in the community of practice. This process is based on the interplay between the teachers, the children and the parents in El Sistema as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Previous research has shown that one of the main factors affecting educational achievement is parents who offer encouragement, invest time in and show commitment to their child's schooling, an area where, our case study suggests, the El Sistema programme



has been successful. With the El Sistema programme in the municipality in question, there is a conscious strategy to get the parents involved in the activity in a concrete way. The music school has enabled the parents to support their children while also seeing themselves as important for their own child's participation.

The findings of the study in relation to the parents' participation in, and commitment to, the El Sistema programme lead us to think that our understanding will be far too limited and misleading if we relate parents' interest or lack of interest in their children's schooling and academic achievements simply to structural determinants such as the parents' educational background, socioeconomic situation or ethnicity.

What we see as an important conclusion from the study is that the interest these parents take in their children's participation in the El Sistema-inspired programme, and their commitment to it, demonstrates the importance of a positive home learning environment. With this in mind, it seems important, as is also stressed in theoretical perspectives and previous research, to develop alternative methods with which to involve and enthuse parents in their children's schooling to complement the communication routes that schools have already established. The findings of the study suggest that El Sistema-inspired programmes do not simply promote the interest and commitment of parents in relation to their children's schooling but go further, in that they also promote the children's development and the well-being of the parents themselves. The comments made by the parents reveal how the El Sistema-inspired programme helps to bring children, parents and school together.

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