

Music: a flexible and adaptable channel for emergency situations

Paper presented at the Emergency Education meeting of the Global Education and Skills Forum in Dubai.

By Ron Davis Alvarez

I want to take a couple of minutes for all of you to say Hello in your own language. Yes, on the count of three we will all say Hello in our own language. And keep the note going until I signal you to stop.

Everybody, 1, 2, 3...

Helloooooo

Okay, lets add some ingredientes now. No matter what language, religion, age, where you come from or what your current situation is, let's add energy, passion, love, attitude and discipline (by discipline I mean structure: that we all start and finish together, that we work as a team to build up our greeting).

Let's use our creativity. Let's make it sound like the beginning of a symphony or like the soundtrack of a movie you love. Let's imagine that with this Hello, even if it's not in tune, we will build a better world, we will transform the life of the person next to us. Don't think about it too much. It doesn't matter if we don't know why we are singing together today. Let's just sing this Hello with all our heart.

That is what I teach my students. The important thing is not if they are in tune. The important thing is that they connect with what they are doing. For me music is not the sound of the instrument. It is the sound of your heartbeat.

Okay, take a deep breath, focus and put your best best energy into this chord.

1,2,3 Hello... Bravo!

That's how my life started. Circumstances, need and emergency made my family, a strong family, seek solutions to overcome the poverty and the challenges that many people face in Venezuela.

I was born in Caracas, in what is currently the second most dangerous city in the world. The figures for criminality and violence, corruption, shortages of food and medicines are all very high, and I am not proud of this.

Some years ago, my uncle disappeared in the barrio or slum where we lived in. Barrios are very similar to the favelas in Brazil. My grandmother, my aunt and my mother (in Venezuela it is very common for families to be headed by single mothers) decided to fight to give us a better life. I'm the third of four siblings. Our youngest sister was not born from my mother. She was abandoned as a baby at the door of our house, and we took her in because even when food is scarce we believe there's always room for one more.

We didn't own a house so we would move often. That's how we ended up in a town near Caracas. My grandmother set up a shop at the front of the house. I was seven. After

school I would come back and help her sell chupis, a homemade ice cream. I was selling chupis the first time I listened to the music of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Mozart.

In front of my grandmother's house there was a music school that was part of Venezuela's powerful system of children and youth orchestras and choirs, which currently engages with almost 1 million children and youths in my country, and has inspired similar programs in over 65 countries. This program uses music as a tool for social integration. It was created by Jose Antonio Abreu, an economist and a musician, 42 years ago. Maestro Abreu is my mentor and my inspiration.

The programme is called El Sistema. The System. There, I started to study music when I was 10. At 14 I began to teach. Part of the philosophy of this program is the collective practice and teaching of music to develop communities, to keep children away from the crime and the vices that today, in Venezuela and the world, are an emergency. This program is a response to the situation of the more vulnerable and impoverished, to those displaced by political, economic, social and religious conflicts.

When I was 16 I was named director of the music school. And when I was 18, as I was attending university, I would wake up each day at 3:45am, to go to study and work, and I never lacked the desire to follow my dreams. At that time I could not imagine that that child that would sell DVDs on the street with his mother, that would work as a clown in children's parties, or that would go through garbage to find furniture for his house, would today be inspiring others through the transformational power of music.

Maestro Abreu, who would go on to win the Polar Music Prize, once attended a rehearsal in which I was playing, and he invited me to take part in an intensive workshop. I would stay at a hotel for some days, with access to more food that I had ever seen (I remember calling my grandmother to tell her that the table for sweets was bigger than our living room!).

When I got to the workshop, I sat next to a boy. Excited, I asked him: "What are we playing?" He said: "Mahler 7." I'd never played that symphony! My music level was almost basic. Scared, I smiled at him, and he said: "Don't worry, play the bits that you can", and he marked some notes for me. Some years later, I shared a desk with a girl and asked me the same question. Knowing how she felt, I replied: "Strauss' Don Juan. Don't worry, just play these notes". That's what this is about. To make a difference as teachers by always remembering where we come from.

This happened in Greenland, 700 kilometers from the Arctic Circle. I didn't speak English. I'd never seen the snow. I started to work in a town that would change my life: Uummannaq. Only 1,500 people live there. I worked in an orphanage with children that had a history of abuse. They became my family. They taught me to be a better teacher. They stimulated my skills and abilities. They improved my teaching beyond any language barrier. I discovered that teaching was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Having to take six airplanes, one helicopter and a dog sled to teach within the Inuit culture, without even being able to pronounce one word in Kalaallisut, only reminded me that I come from a teaching model in which with an adaptable structure and in constant growth.

After creating the orchestra in Greenland, within the program of the Uummannaq Children's Home, I visited Sweden. I was shocked by the amount of young people that were arriving into Europe to ask for asylum as refugees. After living in Sweden for several months, I started the Dreams Orchestra, which brings together young refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea and Iraq, among others. My goal was to ensure that my Hello could grab their attention, no matter how it sounded, while respecting where they come from, while continuing to be a student in my classroom and while sharing values that would make us all better citizens. It is not easy work. It isn't easy to replace the sound of a bomb with thunderous applause in an auditorium, nor is it easy to be embraced with happiness after a concert once you've lost your family.

In rehearsals they share their stories with me. Even though I've never experienced war, their stories touch my heart because I grew up in a context of emergency. That which I do not know, I research. That's why, some days ago, I went to teach at two refugee camps in Greece. I need to understand the process that my students go through. I need to, we need to, focus on the children and the learning, because the adults are the ones that create the problems.

Before the recital, one of the kids in the orchestra tells me he is very nervous and excited about the concert. This is a young man that walked for many kilometers from Syria to Turkey. After paying smugglers, he got on an improvised raft with another 40 people to get to Greece, leaving his family behind. He went through the borders of eight countries, overcoming hunger and cold, sleeping on the floor, to get to Sweden. And this kid, 14 years old, is nervous because of a concert. He is still a child, like any other in the world. Art, and especially music, is a flexible channel that adapts to situations of emergency. It allows human beings to express and develop their sensitivity, without any language constraints.

A teacher makes a difference when he decides he can give something to his students, when he becomes a channel in the service of them, when his priorities are the needs of the children and young people.

Do not end your lesson until you've managed to make every single student come back for more. Start every lesson like if it was the last one. Support their culture, their roots. But teach them that diversity and respect are important. Work with them as a team to ensure that your projects and ideas are sustainable and robust. Never let guilt overcome joy.

Education is a path to multiple destinies. When that journey includes music, which feeds the spirit of our children, we are giving them a future with infinite possibilities. Music can help save the spirit in times of war, and music is love in times of peace. And the most pure love.

In El Sistema, says Maestro Abre, we all sing, play and strive. Let's strive for those that need us the most. For their dreams and their education.

Thank you very much.