**Attitudes toward Supporting Music Education in a Low-Income Rural Area**

**Abstract**

This generic qualitative inquiry seeks to describe attitudes toward the significance and sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income, rural area. Sources for this research included interviews, focus groups, observation, and informal conversations. Participants were school principals, parents, and teachers from four elementary schools in a small district in a low-income rural area in the southeast of the United States. The data were analyzed through open coding to ascertain

how participants explain their reasons for trying to overcome economic challenges to maintaining music in elementary schools. Two distinct themes emerged: the reasons for supporting music education in elementary schools; and the effects of principals’ leadership in overcoming challenges to music education. The findings indicate that efforts to maintain music education are motivated by its perceived positive impact on students’ academic performance and everyday activities, as well as the meaning it adds to their lives. Findings suggest that educators should do their utmost to support a music curriculum even in the face of challenges, due to its benefits for students.

*Keywords:*challenges, leadership, low-income, music education, practice

**Introduction**

Teaching music for many years, I have observed that music educators are frequently faced with school budget restrictions and ever-diminishing resources; in fact, when budgets are especially tight, music education is one of the first programs to be cut from the school curriculum. Accordingly, those teaching music or seeking to support music education in their school program must always be aware of policy changes and any resulting difficulties. Resource instability is a constant challenge for the organization of a school program, especially with respect to music education in low-income rural areas.

This study delves into current national policy, which, according to Garza, Drysdale, and Gurr (2011), promotes school autonomy by allowing principals to articulate their views on education, set appropriate directions, value teachers’ leadership and build communities of helpers. Regarding music education in particular, Burrack et al. (2014) summarized findings from past studies confirming that although experts on school budgeting committees recognize the significance of music for educational quality, funding for music education is frequently reduced when budgetary cuts must be made.

There are numerous and clear reasons for supporting music education in elementary schools. For one, communication through music-making is an important and integral part of each child’s life, starting with lullabies sung by parents, and continuing with interaction with playmates and preschool activities (Nardo et al., 2006). Each child has a specific level of music aptitude from birth, which evolves naturally until it stabilizes at around nine-years-old (Tu, 2009). In addition, early learning activities often use musical expression for working with young children in a natural, informal manner (Patrick, 2013). In an era of scientific development that has brought diverse groups of people into closer contact, music is one way to help integrate multiethnic classrooms (Aldegue, 2014). Moreover, music education in the schools provides opportunities for personal development by cultivating learning behaviors and improving awareness, interest, and common sense (Rohwer, 2017; Tobias, 2015). In sum, music education practices can lead to constructive accomplishments enabling children to develop greater tolerance and self-discipline, which are essential attributes in today’s diverse American society, indeed, in the world at large (Mantie, 2012).

Despite these benefits, Barry and Durham (2017) affirmed that in 71% of 1,500 school districts in a southwestern region of the United States, early education classes reduced music teaching time in favor of reading and math. Likewise, albeit in a southeastern state, Ladd et al. (2014) reported that government investments in education are focused on outscoring other areas on standardized math and reading tests. In comparison with numeracy and literacy skills, music education in public schools is therefore underfunded (Guhn et al., 2020). According to Puryear and Kettler (2017), few principals of rural schools in the United States – which are attended by 20% of the nation’s students – advocate for the inclusion of music in their programs despite policies supporting enhanced education.

Thus, whoever teaches music or seeks to support music education in their school program must always be aware of policy changes (Burrack et al., 2014; Johnson & Matthews, 2017). Consistent with this, Clasquin-Johnson (2016) wrote that the allocation of funding for music education relies on educators’ awareness, especially in disadvantaged regions, and that interest on the part of administrators can shape educational policies.

According to Martignetti et al. (2013), to achieve the full educational benefit, principals need to support music education in a curriculum-as-practicum to ensure the flexibility of instructional activities. However, West (2015) has argued that music education within a practicum model demands conditions and proficiency. Therefore, establishing developmental goals for a music program in rural, low-income schools, like schools in any disadvantaged area, can enhance the students’ educational achievements (Hunt, 2009). Allsup (2003) defended the vision of music practicum in rural communities where music can be explored and invented, allowing students to gain confidence from understanding and expressing who they are. Bates (2011) has found that the greater goal of music education in disadvantaged areas is to provide adequate means to influence students’ lives.

In addition to budget cuts for music education, public school students and music educators must also cope with a variety of problems caused by policy instability (Elpus & Grisé, 2019). Accordingly, educators are forced to expend considerable effort on administrative procedures in support of school music programs (Johnson & Matthews, 2017).

There is a gap in the research regarding the challenges and decisions of public-school principals in low-income areas with respect to supporting music education in the curriculum (Kettler et al., 2016). The shortage of information on the effectiveness of musical practices results in apathy about including music as part of a school program (Colombo & Antonietti, 2017). However, according to Regelski (2006), the challenges for those supporting music education make it even more necessary to defend school music programs that are meaningful for students’ lives.

Given the challenges for music education programs and principals’ responsibilities to public schools, the Instructional Leadership Philosophy serves as a consistent conceptual framework for this study. Developed by Leithwood and Riehl (2003), the Instructional Leadership Philosophy is a valuable approach to leadership as it relates to educational changes, focusing on leading people, developing administrative functions, and nurturing learning. Consequently, effective leaders develop hope, trust, and optimism in their subordinates (Avolio et al., 2004). In sum, instructional leadership is essential for the education of all children regardless of economic diversities (Neumerski, 2013).

Given this background, the aim of this study is to identify the attitudes of parents and educators toward the significance and sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area. Providing a model of the authentic results of principals as musical facilitators may enable others to weigh the best methods and outstanding impediments that can benefit or undermine music education experiences. Furthermore, this study can offer educators insights for encouraging music in school programs.

Two research questions gave rise to this study’s methodology and guided the investigation:

1. How do educators and parents from a low-income rural area explain their reasons for supporting music programs in elementary school?
2. How do teachers and parents feel about their principals’ leadership in dealing with economic challenges for music education?

**Method**

I chose a generic qualitative inquiry to provide perspectives on attitudes toward the significance and sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area in the southeast of the United States. Merriam (2009) has stated that the generic qualitative inquiry, also called an interpretive or basic qualitative inquiry, is a basis for all qualitative studies and can be articulated as a research procedure. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), a generic inquiry is a flexible way to understand and ascertain the significance of people’s views and experiences. Patton (2015) also defined the generic inquiry as a qualitative approach that allows for conducting in-depth interviews and gathering field notes without constraining the research within a particular tradition.

After receiving institutional review board approval of my research procedure, hiring a professional to transcribe the recorded conversations, and obtaining permission from the district superintendent of public schools (who cautioned not to identify the names of the participants, schools, and district), I selected a purposive sample. This was accomplished by sending an invitation to participate to the nine elementary school principals in the district, and also to the parents listed in the Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) of each school. The inclusion criterion for this purposive sample was involvement with music education, in order to provide in-depth and comprehensive information about the study questions. Four principals, five parents from three of the PTOs, and three teachers responded positively to the requests.

The sample therefore consisted of 12 adults from different schools from this small district, all of them involved with music education. Patton (2015) stated that there is no protocol for sample size; rather, the amount of detail and contextualization represents the wealth of a qualitative inquiry. Thus, I collected data through individual interviews with each of the principals (*n =* 4) and three focus groups with parent PTO members from three schools (*n =* 8). Any uncertainties arising from these conversations could be clarified later by email. The locations for the 45- to 60-minute meetings, for both individual and focus group participants, were chosen according to their preferences. I recorded all sessions on a digital device, and to ensure privacy, I created pseudonyms for each of the volunteers, as follows: John, Louis, Sabrina, and Walt were school principals; Alice, Flora, Marc, Newton, and Olsen were parents; Bill and Therese were classroom teachers; and Zoe was a music teacher.

Before the sessions with the participants, I sent them a consent form explaining the freedom to participate in or withdraw from the study, which participants confirmed and then signed at our meetings. Using open-ended questions, I guided the discussion while monitoring the response time for each participant. Because English is my second language, I typed the interview and focus group questions on cards to facilitate communication and to ensure clarity; the cards were distributed to each of the participants (see supplementary materials). During the focus group sessions, all participants were involved, and the discussion was concluded within the scheduled time.

I used the NVivo qualitative data analysis software to organize the data, which made it possible to codify and move inductively and cyclically amidst questions, records, and field notes until saturation was reached. Three weeks’ worth of unobtrusive observations during my visits to schools and PTO meetings to plan the data collection also yielded field notes as additional evidence. After this methodological exploration, I organized the data within categories and relationships, after which I applied a summative technique to produce a clear consensus for my report. Next, I cross-verified the data from multiple sources (interviews, focus groups, and field notes) to help test the consistency of my findings. Once the transcripts were completed, I provided a copy to each participant to check for accuracy. Lastly, for authenticity purposes, an external auditor who was familiar with elementary school music education acted as a peer and reviewed the field notes, transcripts, and the new themes that emerged from the data.

**Findings**

A focused analysis helped to determine whether the results confirmed, contradicted or extended the results of previous research in the discipline. In creating categories, recurring terms related to the research questions were used as codes that generated two themes: reasons to support music programs in elementary schools, and the effects of principals’ leadership in overcoming economic challenges for music education. These themes were developed using the interviewees’ words recorded during the interviews and focus group meetings. I have used brackets and ellipses to lightly edit the transcripts for clarity.

Reasons to Support Music Education in Elementary Schools

The collected data were codified to determine relationships, categories, and themes. When sorting the data into categories, the codified terms revealed agreement among the participants concerning the significance of music, not only in the educational process but also as developmental opportunities for both teachers and learners. During an individual interview, John, a principal, discussed his considerable involvement with music education in the elementary curriculum:

My experience with sustaining musical programs in education [is] providing the opportunities for the music program to happen, providing opportunities for teacher development in the area of music and how it relates to the classroom, to the other content areas of math, science, reading, even art and physical education.

The focus group discussions also yielded statements concerning the benefit of music education in elementary schools as it relates to classroom learning. When talking about links between music practices and standardized reading tests, as a teacher, Bill observed:

I have found, and research has shown that music education, even for young children K-3, helps them with their math skills and their other skills. And almost every student who takes music education as a young person will find their general learning skills improved.

Flora, a mother, was impressed with her son’s interest in making music and how he transferred these practices to his academic tasks and everyday activities. Therese, a teacher, agreed with Flora and added:

It’s really important for the kids…when they [are] starting in kindergarten to fall in love with music. So they love it; it’s something that is fun for them to do. They’re playing with sounds, they’re playing with instruments, and they’re having a good time, but at the same time the teacher is incorporating other subjects, and they’re teaching them numbers, they’re teaching them how to read, and then that love for learning, love for music, comes together.

The four principals also described how music encourages students to learn. Sabrina, a school principal, commented that music education makes the school environment interesting for learners:

I think that if the kids are learning and they’re having fun, and they’re learning new skills, then that’s…what I’m really looking for. That’s a class that most of them enjoy going to, whether it’s to beat on the drums or learn to play the recorder or sing, or whatever they’re doing in there. Most of our students enjoy that class.

As a school principal, Louis’s experience was that while learning how to make music, students also have several opportunities to interact while developing their common sense. He explained:

There is an increased percentage of students wanting to participate in chorus, strings, and band, which is an indication that the children enjoy learning music, and their families enjoy attending their concerts and applauding their efforts. We usually do a couple of performances every year. We also have a special chorus class that meets before school every Wednesday morning, and they do a lot of [things], not only extra singing, and they learn how to play different kinds of instruments and experiment with them.

Sabrina also remarked that music practices produce responsive learners and prepare them to live in a diverse and challenging society, while encouraging them to pursue success:

I think it makes our students more well-rounded, and those students who aren’t as successful in other areas sometimes find success in music education, which then, in turn, helps them feel more a part of the school, and school culture plays a very important role in student’s achievement as well.

Regarding the significance of music education in school programs, all four principals (Walt, Louis, Sabrina, and John) mentioned the effects of music practices on students’ brains or minds. Walt stated:

Well, just stimulating the brain for the musical things they’re doing in there, whether it be learning to [play] an instrument, singing in a group, learning about the history of different musicians and composers. I just think that it’s very significant for a student to get that well-rounded education, and music is a big part of that.

Louis noted the value of scheduling music practices in his school:

I certainly think that music has an effect on the brain. Our children’s…brains are really developing at this age. So, I think that listening, learning, thinking about the music, learning things like rhythm, harmony, melody, as they get a little older, they’re learning how to read music…I believe all of that is significant…in a student’s development and…in their brain development. I think that it reaches into a lot of kids’ parts of their brains that are not usually…turned on by just science or math.

John demonstrated familiarity with the meaning of music-making in a school program:

I think that students develop parts of the brain, [through] studying [and] opening more to learning, that that will help them develop more…[This] provides them that whole, holistic awareness of education and cultural awareness, and brain development.

For Sabrina, who had faced several challenges from curricular adjustments:

There’s a lot of research, which I’m sure you’re probably more familiar with than I am, about how music education changes your brain, and it adds connections in your brain that weren’t there for a student who doesn’t have music education.

Both the interviews with principals and the focus group discussions revealed that all the participants recognized the value of music practices in students’ lives. For example, Louis, a principal, stated that despite students’ different socio-economic levels, he tries to offer the same opportunities to all. His fellow principal Sabrina expressed her satisfaction in observing how musical practices can positively affect the students and those who teach music. Zoe, a music teacher, shared that the enjoyment of music helps motivate students to come to school. As a principal, Walt affirmed that he would never give up providing time for musical practices in his school.

Effects of Principals’ Leadership in Overcoming Challenges to Music Education

The data analysis also revealed that finding resources to support music in elementary schools is a challenge the participants embrace. During interviews, the principals expressed their conviction that a practical curriculum of music in children’s education is essential. They explained that each school gets an equal amount of money, but that it is complicated to have to work with insufficient funds. As a principal, Louis demonstrated his interest in overcoming challenges to ensuring that there is active musical instruction in his school and told of his experience facing a reduced budget:

Well, I feel it's limited for everyone. I feel like we have a strong community that if I ask for something [I will have] help...I…sit down with the teachers [trying] to make a list of extra things we want to do in the year, and…we figure out how we're going to raise funds with our local parent-teacher organization that's here at our school, and then we try to do it, whatever that might be.

When describing how funding cuts might affect decisions regarding the music curriculum and how the principals might manage a limited budget for enhanced education opportunities, Sabrina shared:

You can have visiting artists who will come in [to] do short sessions. But I think a commitment to allowing every student to show or to shine [where] they’re strong is important. If your budget doesn’t support a music teacher, [you should still work with the] the community to provide for your students.

When sharing similar efforts to overcome economic challenges to music in his school program, Louis reported:

We do units on folk music, and we’re always looking for people who can come in and demonstrate the instruments or talk to the kids about the history of the music. It does take a level of effort…to get those people into the school…and get the kids participating with them. But I think any school [principals can] find people in their community who would be interested in helping with that if they just ask.

Sabrina explained her hopeful attitude for the maintenance of music education in public school programs, saying that as state funding changes, the school community in rural areas can also change:

There [are] lots of community members who have musical talents, or they teach piano lessons, or they sing in the church choir who would be willing to come in and do short programs with…your students or just come in and talk about [their instruments] and play for your students.

During focus group meetings, parents also discussed their feelings about the risk of losing music in their children’s education. Based on her experience as a mother and teacher, Therese made several observations:

Our society [lacks] social connection, and we’re trying to...bring emotional learning back into the schools...We have seen an increase in violence [and]...bullying, and kids [committing] suicide at a very young age…I think it’s all connected because…they’re not developing...those skills that they have…Because music shows emotion. It’s a way to show how a child is feeling:…happy, or angry, or sad, or mad….It’s like they get in touch with their own feelings and are able to [self] express…When they don’t know how to express they [will] find a way, and sometimes...it’s through violence, [or]...things that [could] be harmful to them. So, without thinking, by removing music, [policy makers are] causing all these...social problems in our children. So let’s teach [the kids, whether talented or not] how to express themselves in a positive way through music.

In a focus group meeting, the question about how parents support principals’ efforts to keep music education in the school program generated an exciting discussion. Newton, a father who usually sat quietly, offered:

I think we just [have to] roll up our sleeves and participate [by] doing...if you don’t want your children to lose the project. [Policy makers] don’t cut...math, they don't...cut sports…[or] everything else. And music? Music suffers first, which I think is unfair because we’ve seen how [important music] is for the kids.

When parents were asked about raising funds to support music education in their children’s school, Marc replied that he tries to involve local businesses. Alice described her experience with a school bake sale. Bill, while expressing his aversion for fundraisers, added:

…if the school needs the money to do it, we could raise the money. What we could do is be volunteers in the school to help with expenses…[my role] wouldn’t be teaching music, but some of us could help with music. We can be assistant teachers and parent volunteers, so the school can afford to keep good things in its curriculum.

All of the parents demonstrated an interest in working to keep music practice in their child’s school. Olsen lamented the limited budget for enhanced education opportunities, and suggested:

Many schools are facing budget cuts today, and music education is one of the first things that often can be lost. Parents can help by supporting their kids, maybe by buying their instruments. There are fundraising [ideas] such as programs, concerts, even bake sales that can help because most parents agree that if their children stay in the music, they like school better.

The principals acknowledged that their efforts to overcome fiscal crises were encouraged by the effect of music on students' learning and, mainly, by parents’ interest. John said that giving parents a unique standing to discuss strategies, shape policies, and achieve their goals is a way to encourage them and keep them involved. Likewise, as principal of a bilingual school, Louis argued for his responsibilities as an administrator and an educator:

It really makes us think about our customer service towards parents and children and how we’re approaching educating kids. We have certain mandates we have to [follow]. However, how we present that information to parents is up to us, and I think that the schools that are able to communicate that effectively and have good communication skills, and really outreach to the community, are going to fare much better than the schools that are not able to do that.

As a supporter of a vision for a dynamic music program in his school, John likewise affirmed:

The way we manage our school is [by] building relationships, knowing the teachers, giving the opportunity to parents to know the teachers, to know the campus, to know how we do things. So everyone is involved in managing the school. Then a big part of that community is the parents. They’re the ones that are going to support you more than anything else.

The principals agreed that parents’ support for the vision of music practices in school is an encouragement to reach that goal. As a music teacher, Zoe praised parental interest as a great advantage. She emphasized that parents need to be insistent with board members and policymakers on how a music program with a practical meaning for life is essential to their children’s development. In her view, opinions based on parents’ experiences will help educational authorities realize that music education is indispensable for every child.

**Discussion**

This research was conducted in a small school district from a low-income rural area in the southeastern United States.The data was collected and compared with the research literature, yielding fruitful results. Interviews with principals and focus group discussions with parents and teachers clarified the reasons for their efforts to support music with the educational program.

First, the study participants recognized the values and funding gaps of music programs in elementary schools in low-income rural areas (see Allsup, 2003; Puryear & Kettler, 2017). In the course of the research, it emerged that they concentrated on the benefits of music practices from early childhood and how they affect other learning domains as a contribution to a comprehensive education for their children (see Guhn et al., 2019).

During interviews and focus group discussions, participants emphasized the children’s enjoyment from musical practices in their schools. According to the parents and teachers, the joy in making music produces visible learning results, which originate in the children’s spontaneity (see Flohr, 2005; Hernández-Bravo et al., 2016; Johnson & Matthews, 2017). This finding suggested the usefulness of offering music in school programs within the that learning period during childhood when children have the greatest potential (see Nardo et al., 2006; Patrick, 2013; Tu, 2009).

According to the participants, there is a need for a music program that motivates children to enjoy their school while adding meaning to their lives. Both educators and parents believe that music benefits students from different social and cultural backgrounds and promotes opportunities for equal participation in learning (see Clasquin-Johnson, 2016; Puryear & Kettler, 2017). However, they admitted that success across different cultures depends on principals’ abilities (see Abril & Bannerman, 2015).

Parents and teachers also demonstrated understanding of a principal’s priorities within a limited budget, which encouraged collaborative attitudes and behaviors toward the inclusion of music in school programs (see Major, 2013). Despite dealing with insufficient funds, the principals were also firmly resolved to keep music in their schools. The findings also evidenced all participants’ willingness to support music practices in their school curriculum. Their motivation for this was driven by the students’ sense of fulfillment, not only at school, but also in their everyday lives (see Tobias, 2015).

The findings revealed that parents’ and teachers’ efforts to meet challenges in supporting music education in elementary schools reflect the knowledge and managerial abilities of principals (see Burrack et al., 2014; Johnson & Matthews, 2017; Major, 2013). In turn, the principals affirmed that through political action, parents and teachers can help effect changes. The principals also stated that challenges could be overcome, and that whenever state funding changes, their approaches should change accordingly. Their argument suggests that adapting the curriculum and working hard to shape policy is sufficient to enable schools to pursue a meaningful vision of music education.

This investigation may contribute to other research to increase the knowledge of and interest in the sustainability of music education for underprivileged children. The findings from this study may also encourage educational communities to adopt attitudes to overcoming challenges for music programs with practical benefits for students’ lives.

**Limitations**

The data were collected in a single district, and while the principals represented all four schools, just five parents from three schools in the community participated. This context may limit the generalization of the findings. Furthermore, all those who volunteered as participants were focused on children's academic success through music education, which led me to analyze the data carefully to avoid bias from my own experiences. In any event, attitudes toward maintaining music practices in elementary schools and overcoming economic challenges cannot be entirely understood in the scope of one particular inquiry. Replicating or comparing this research in a broader setting may lead to more comprehensive perspectives.

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Supplementary Material

Individual Interview Protocol for Principals

Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences in sustaining music education in your school. Please, I will be recording the interview on a digital device, as well as taking notes. I plan to take no more than 60 minutes of your time. I will be using open-ended questions, which will allow you the opportunity to interject ideas or thoughts that you may have as we talk. When the transcription are completed, I will send a copy for your revision and approval.

1. Music education is a part of the program in your school, so please tell me about your experiences with children learning related to musical practices?
2. How do you explain differences in children’s musical, scientific, or mathematical aptitudes?
3. How do you define the meaning of music-making in the early education program in your school, and what stands out for you most about the school’s music program?
4. Please, tell me as much as possible about your experience involving the economic crisis and music in the school program.
5. How might a reduction in funding affect your decisions regarding music education, and how do you manage a limited budget for providing resources and opportunities for enhanced education in your school?
6. From your experience, in what ways do you believe there is hope for continuing music education in public school programs, and how might this be possible?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about music practices in your school?

Thank you very much for your time and cooperation**.**

**Focus Group Interview Protocol for Parents and Teachers**

Thank you for volunteering and participating in my study. I hope everyone is comfortable. Please, I will be recording this meeting on a digital device, as well as taking notes. I plan to take no more than 60 minutes of your time. If you feel uncomfortable during the meeting, you are welcome to leave or pass on any questions. The information is confidential, and all views and ideas are very welcome. One person will talk at a time, and the time for responses will be distributed as equally as possible. I would like for us to use name tags so that we can use our names throughout our time together. When the transcription are completed, I will send copies for each one of you to review and approval.

1. As students’ parents or teachers, how would you describe the significance of music education in school programs?
2. How do you explain links between music education and a student’s enhanced achievement results on standardized reading tests?
3. Please, tell me, if facing a budgetary cut, how could you support the school principal in keeping music education in the school program?
4. Is there anything else you would like to talk about music practices in your children's school?

Thank you very much for your participation.