

Research Article

Supporting Music Education in Elementary Schools in a Low-Income Rural Area

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The purpose of this generic qualitative inquiry was to describe parents and educators' attitudes toward the sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area. Sources for this research included interviews, focus groups, and observations. Participants were principals, parents, and teachers from four elementary schools and three parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) in a small district in a low-income rural area in the southeast United States. Data were analyzed through open coding to describe details on maintaining music in this elementary school. The themes emerged were reasons for supporting music education in elementary schools and principals' leadership in overcoming economic challenges in music education. Findings indicated that efforts to maintain music in a school program are motivated by the evident impact on students' academic performance and everyday activities. The results confirmed that educators' determination and leadership skills are the support for music in the school curriculum.

1. Introduction

Music educators are frequently confronted with school budget restrictions and ever-diminishing resources. According to Major [1], when funds are insufficient, music education is one of the first programs to be cut from the school curriculum. Burrack et al. [2] also stated that although experts on school budgeting committees recognize the significance of music for educational quality, funding for music education is often reduced during budgetary cuts. However, the main objective of music education in underprivileged areas is to provide adequate means to influence students' lives [3]. Thus, sustaining an improved education with scarce resources in rural areas is challenging for instructional leaders, which demands determination and administrative abilities [4, 5]. Consequently, those teaching music or seeking to support music education in their school programs must constantly be motivated and aware of policy changes and any resulting difficulties [2, 6].

Specific literature evidenced motivating reasons for supporting music education in elementary schools. For instance, Lee Nardo et al. [7] stated that musical

communication is an essential and integral part of each child's life, starting with lullabies sung by parents and continuing with interaction with playmates and preschool activities. Tu [8] also highlighted that each child has a distinct level of music aptitude from birth that naturally evolves until it stabilizes at around nine years of age. Accordingly, Patrick's [9] argument was toward music education as an effective and natural way to work with young children in their early learning activities.

In an era of global developments that bring diverse groups of people into closer contact, music is also one way to help integrate multiethnic classrooms [10]. Music in school programs provides opportunities for interaction and personal development by cultivating learning behaviors, interest, and common sense [11, 12]. In addition, music education experiences can lead to constructive accomplishments, enabling children to develop greater tolerance, and self-discipline, essential attributes in today's diverse American society [13].

Barry and Durham [14] affirmed that despite the benefits of music education, 71% of 1,500 school districts in the southwestern region of the United States reduced the time

for music in favor of reading and math. Similarly, in the southeastern states, Ladd et al. [15] reported that government investments in education are more directed toward outscoring standardized math and reading tests. According to Puryear and Kettler [5], rural schools in the United States are attended by 20% of the nation's students, and few principals advocate for the inclusion of music in their programs. Reference [16] assumption was that music education in public schools is still underfunded compared to numeracy and literacy skills. However, Clasquin-Johnson [17] demonstrated that allocation of funding for music education relies on educators' awareness, especially in disadvantaged regions.

The precise difficulty is that in addition to budget cuts for music education, music instructors and their students experience different problems caused by policy instability in school districts [18]. Providing music education requires an adaptable curriculum with the flexibility of instructional activities as a way to ensure and achieve significant educational benefits [19]. However, music education, within a flexible model, demands particular school conditions and managerial proficiency [20]. Consequently, instructional leaders are forced to expend considerable effort on administrative procedures supporting school music programs [6].

Furthermore, educational funding is more political than instructive, so financial allocations to public schools are related to effective leadership [21]. Thus, in low-income rural schools, the effectiveness of professional management in developing a music program is the correct approach to students' school achievement [22]. Besides, the vision of a music program for rural communities where music can be explored and invented allows students to understand and express their identity [23].

According to Kettler et al. [24], there is a gap in the research regarding the decisions of public school principals in low-income areas concerning supporting music education in the curriculum. In addition, the shortage of information on the effectiveness of musical practices results in unconcern about supporting music as part of a school program [25]. However, Regelski [26] stated that challenges supporting music education are a call to defend music in school programs and, as a result, influence students' lives.

This study proceeded with the current national policy, which according to Garza et al. [27] promotes school autonomy by allowing principals to articulate their views on education, set appropriate directions, value teachers' leadership, and build community helpers. Therefore, evidence of principals as music education facilitators may enable others to weigh the best models and significant impediments that benefit music education experiences. An investigation may also offer educators insights for encouraging music in school programs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe parents and educators' attitudes toward the sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area.

Leithwood and Riehl's [28] Instructional Leadership Philosophy was chosen as the conceptual framework for the research. Leithwood and Riehl's philosophy is related to the

educational administrative functions of leading people while distributing responsibilities and roles among teachers and parents who could be influential supporters. According to Neumerski [29], effective instructional leadership contributes to the learning success of all children regardless of their economic circumstances. Effective leaders develop hope, trust, and optimism in their subordinates [30].

Given this conceptual framework and the study's purpose of describing parents and educators' attitudes toward the sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area, the two research questions that guided this research were as follows:

- (1) How do principals in a low-income rural area explain their reasons for supporting music programs in elementary schools?
- (2) How do parents and teachers feel about their principals' leadership in dealing with economic challenges related to music education?

2. Method

A generic qualitative inquiry was chosen to provide perspectives on attitudes toward the sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income rural area in the southeast United States. Merriam [31] stated that a generic qualitative inquiry (also called interpretive or basic qualitative inquiry) is the basis for all qualitative studies and can be articulated as a research procedure. According to Merriam and Tisdell [32], a generic inquiry is a flexible way to understand and ascertain the significance of people's views and experiences. Patton [33] also defined the generic inquiry as a qualitative approach that allows in-depth interviews and gathering field notes without constraining the research within a particular tradition.

The research data collection began after ethical considerations on the investigation, participants' privacy, and hiring a professional to transcribe the recorded conversations (a more detailed description of ethical procedures may be found in [34]). A purposive sample was selected with due permission from the district superintendent, who cautioned not to mention the names of the participants, schools, and the district. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to nine principals from elementary schools in the district and those listed as members of each school's parent-teacher organization (PTO). The inclusion criterion for this sample was involvement with music education. The affirmative answers came from four school principals and eight members from three PTOs (six parents and two teachers).

The sample consisted of 12 adults. Patton [33] stated that there is no protocol for sample size; rather, the amount of detail and contextualization represents the wealth of qualitative inquiry. The study's researcher conducted and recorded digitally individual interviews with each principal ($n = 4$) and distinct focus groups with PTO members from three schools ($n = 8$). Participants agreed to use e-mail to clarify uncertainties arising from their conversations. The chosen locations for the 45- to 60-minute individual interviews and focus groups were according to participants'

preferences. The digital records yielded adequate data (reported in the findings) but insufficient to understand. Therefore, additional data were collected during the three weeks of unobtrusive observations while visiting the schools and PTO locations.

When transcribing the data, pseudonyms were created for each of the volunteers: Olly, Mac, Doty, and Bart were school principals. Fern, Josh, Linda, Teddy, Vanny, and Zack were parents. Nya and Suzie were teachers. The four interviewed principals have managed their schools in the selected district for over 10 years, acting as knowledgeable supporters for music education. They all hold Master of Arts degrees in School Administration, and Doty also has a Doctorate in School Leadership. Likewise, the participants in the focus groups consisted of parents and teachers, four women and four men from different backgrounds, and active members of the PTOs from three of the selected schools. Fern, Linda, and Vanny chose the school for their children motivated by music education in the program. Josh, Teddy, and Zack defended music education due to its effect on their children. Likewise, Nya, a classroom teacher, considered music lessons helpful in improving general learning skills. Suzie, a music teacher, experienced positive results from students attending her classes.

Before each session, the participants received a consent form explaining the freedom to participate in or withdraw from the study, which was confirmed and then signed at the first meeting. Using open-ended questions (Table 1), the researcher guided the discussions while encouraging the conversation and monitoring the response time for each participant, which concluded within the scheduled time.

The NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and codify the data. Following Merriam and Tisdell [32], the codifying process was inductive and cyclical among questions, records, and field notes until saturation. After this methodological exploration, the data was organized within categories and relationships, and a summative technique was applied to produce a clear consensus for the report. Cross-verifying data from multiple sources (interviews, focus groups, and field notes) helped assess the consistency of the study findings. According to Patton [33], “triangulation in whatever form, increases credibility, and quality by countering the concern (or accusation) that a study’s findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator’s blinders” (p. 674). Once completing the report, each participant received a copy to check the accuracy. Then, to ensure the authenticity of the data and analysis, an external auditor familiar with elementary school music education acted as a peer and reviewed the field notes, transcripts, and new themes that emerged from the data.

2.1. Findings. The data gathered from individual interviews, focus groups, and notes from observations yielded considerable information. A focused analysis helped to determine whether the results confirmed, contradicted, or extended the results of previous research in the discipline. In creating the categories, repeated terms related to the research questions were used as codes that generated two themes: reasons for

supporting music education in elementary schools and principals’ leadership in overcoming economic challenges in music education. These themes were developed using the interviewees’ words recorded during the interviews and focus group meetings. For better clarity, brackets, and ellipses were used to edit the transcripts.

2.2. Reasons for Supporting Music Education in Elementary Schools. When arranging the data into categories, the codified terms revealed agreement among the participants concerning the significance of music in the educational process and opportunities for both teachers and learners. During an individual interview, Olly, a principal, described his considerable involvement with music education in the elementary curriculum.

My experience with sustaining musical programs in education [is] providing 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 other content areas of math, science, reading, even art and physical education.

The focus group discussions also yielded statements concerning the benefits of music education in elementary schools related to classroom learning. When talking about the links between music education and academic achievement, Josh, a parent, said the following.

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.

Vanny, a mother, assumed that she was impressed with her son’s interest in making music and how he transferred such interest to his academic tasks and everyday activities. Nya, a teacher, agreed with Vanny and added the following.

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 their students. Doty, 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.

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

TABLE 1: Questions for individual interviews and focus groups.

Individual interviews	Focus groups
On the district website shows you have sustained music education in your school program for over 10 years. Please, tell me as much as possible about this experience.	Considering music as part of elementary education programs, how do you explain the ways to establish links between music education and academic learning?
How might a reduction in funding affect your decisions regarding music education?	If facing a budgetary cut, how could you support the school principal in keeping music education in a program?
How do you reconcile with political conditions to include the practice of music in the curriculum to meet the needs of your school?	How would you describe the leadership practices of your school principal in dealing with possible disagreements regarding his/her educational vision?
What advice do you have for school principals in low-income rural areas to help them sustain music programs?	

Note. Adapted from "Principals' Leadership Practices for Sustaining Music in K-3 Education" by Clark, I. F. [34] (doctoral dissertation, Walden University, pp. 146-148).

There is an increased percentage of students wanting to participate in the 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, they learn how to play different kinds of instruments.

Likewise, Dotty said that music education could 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 [a] student's achievement as well.

Regarding the significance of music education in school programs, all four principals (Bart, Dotty, Mac, and Olly) mentioned the effects of music on students' brains. Bart stated the following.

Well, just stimulating the brain for the musical things they're doing in there, whether it can 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.

Mac emphasized the value of scheduling music classes in his school.

I certainly think that music effects on the brain. Our children's . . . brains are really developing at this age. So, I think that listening, learning, thinking about 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.

Equally, Olly 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.

Dotty, who had faced several challenges from curricular adjustments, also shared her view.

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 individual interviews and focus group discussions revealed that all participants recognize the value of music education in students' lives. For instance, as a principal, Mac stated that despite students' different socioeconomic levels, he tries to offer the same opportunities to all learners. Similarly, Dotty expressed her satisfaction in observing how music can positively affect students and those who teach music. Suzie, a music teacher, shared that the enjoyment of music helps motivate students to come to school. As a principal, Bart affirmed that he would never give up providing time for music education in his school.

2.3. Principals' Leadership in Overcoming Economic Challenges in Music Education. The data analysis also revealed that resources to support music in elementary schools are a significant challenge. During interviews, the principals expressed their conviction that music in a school curriculum is essential for children's education. They explained that each principal gets an equal amount of money but that it is complicated to work with insufficient funds. As a principal, Mac demonstrated his interest in overcoming challenges, emphasizing active musical instruction in his school and told about his experiences 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 questioning how funding cuts might affect decisions regarding the music curriculum and how principals might manage a limited budget for enhanced education opportunities, Dotty stated the following.

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 community to provide for your students.

Mac also reported similar efforts to overcome economic challenges to music in his school program. He said the following.

We do units with 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 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 [principal can] find people in their community who would be interested in helping with that if they just ask.

Dotty demonstrated her hopeful attitude for the maintenance of music education in public school programs, explaining that as state funding changes, the school community in rural areas should also change and said the following.

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 teacher, Nya described her observations.

Our society [lacks] social connections, 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 . . . [Learning music] is 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 kids, [whether] talented or not, how to express themselves in a positive way through music.

The question about parents' supporting principals to keep music education in the school program generated an exciting discussion in one of the focus groups. Fern, a father who was usually silent, suggested the following.

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 our kids.

When parents were asked about raising funds to support music education in their children's school, Teddy replied that he tried to involve local businesses. Linda shared her experience making cakes to sell and raise funds for her children's school. In his turn, Josh expressed his aversion to fundraisers but agreed with Linda, saying the following.

If the school needs some 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 parents demonstrated an interest in working to keep music education in their children's school. Zack lamented the limited budget for enhanced education opportunities and suggested the following.

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 recognized that their efforts to overcome fiscal crises were encouraged by the effect of music on students' learning and parents' interests. Olly said that allowing parents to discuss strategies, shape policies, and achieve their goals is a way to motivate their involvement. Likewise, as a principal of a bilingual school, Mac explained his laborious 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 schools that are able to communicate 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 the vision for a dynamic music program in his school, Olly also affirmed the following.

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 education in schools encourages reaching that goal. As a music teacher, Suzie 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 opinion, suggestions based on parents' experiences will help educational authorities realize that music education is indispensable for every child.

3. Discussion

The objective of this study was to describe parents and educators' attitudes toward the sustainability of music education in elementary schools in a low-income, rural area. By exploring and answering the research questions, the inquiry revealed that participants of the study (principals, teachers, and parents) in a low-income district in the southeast United States are involved in a budgetary challenge to maintain music education in their school programs. Those participants identified challenges as an encouraging process for educational decision-making for their children. According to them, the positive impact of music on students' academic performance and everyday activities motivates their efforts. Thus, in supporting music in school programs, the following were considered:

- (i) Reasons for supporting music education
- (ii) Overcoming economic challenges
- (iii) Shared leadership

Overall, in this study, participants' responses agreed with the literature that music education could help achieve visible learning results [6]. Likewise, offering music within the learning period during early childhood has the most probability of a positive effect [7–9]. Moreover, in a rural area, opportunities for quality education for students enrolled in a program are highly significant to district goals [21]. Even agreeing with the cited evidence, the study's participants also pointed out that maintaining music education in a public school program is always a difficult task. Indeed, according to the interviewed principals, music education in elementary education requires specialized professionals, and the school budget is generally not enough to hire them.

The interviewed principals stated that they count on support from the stakeholders in the district, but they do not ignore possible policy changes. Therefore, they plan conditions to stabilize music in their programs should any budget cuts occur. Barry and Durham [14] argued that music inclusion is the most crucial factor in creating an academic curriculum. Thus, as one of the principals observed, managers should be alert that if state funding changes, the school's administration should also change.

Barry and Durham [14] also questioned economic crises leading educational managers to reduce music teaching time in favor of reading and math. However, the principals from the selected schools demonstrated that the financial crisis and the lack of mandates could not influence keeping music in the curriculum in their school programs. They also expressed their expectation that parents would choose their school, and despite economic challenges, music education in the program may be the way to attract them.

Garza et al. [27] stated that, like any school district, the budget is always limited for everyone, but the politics of school autonomy encourages educators to try to find alternatives. Accordingly, to maintain student motivation and parent/teacher interest, the interviewed principals stated that they apply their leadership abilities and creative

approaches to overcome challenges to their decisions. Indeed, to lighten the staff workload, those principals look for volunteer instructors among artists in the community, which reinforces the appreciation from teachers and parents.

Participants in this inquiry manifested their understanding of the priorities of educational policy within a limited budget. Contrasting with previous research, where principals are held responsible for including music in school programs [5, 17, 19, 20], this study revealed that parents and teachers mutually assumed this responsibility. This shared attitude does not devalue the principals' leadership and responsibilities as administrators. Such reciprocity clarifies the principal's role in developing and maintaining a connection that promotes and supports the program's success.

The findings of this study revealed that the educational community's collaborative behavior encouraged the principals to deal with insufficient funds to keep music education in their schools. The principals also confirmed that they count on community involvement, demonstrating trust, and valorizing their voice as a significant influence in the district. Thus, the example of the mutual efforts of those principals, teachers, and parents may lead others to a consensus on the educational value of maintaining music in a school program.

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted drawing on the literature review, which revealed a lack of information about parents and educators' efforts to sustain music education in low-income rural areas. Much of the prior research was focused on successful educational leaders dealing with political and budgetary challenges to improve education in public schools. However, evidence of how music education can be maintained in a school program is still scarce. The literature also revealed that in pursuing enhanced education, "there is much to do to free traditional schooling from its narrow agenda" [35] (p. 462).

The investigation was realized in four elementary schools in a low-income rural area, where there have been music programs in place for more than ten years. The data were collected in a single district. While the principals represented four schools, only two teachers and five parents from three of the nine schools' PTOs participated. All volunteer participants were focused on children's academic success through music education, which led to a careful analysis of the data to avoid bias from the researcher's previous musical experiences.

Considering the reasons for supporting music programs in elementary schools, other school principals might look at the selected district as an example. In addition, educators can enhance their tactics by understanding that music is a part of children's lives. The increased percentage of students' participation and enjoyment in music classes revealed in the study might be a rationale for supporting music in school programs. Thus, the sustainability of music education would be a valuable investment with evident influence on students' lives and their families' satisfaction.

When dealing with economic challenges related to music education, shared leadership among principals, parents, and

teachers was noted as a strength of efficient administration. Allowing the educational community to participate in school management approaches is easier to influence decision-makers. The results of this study demonstrated that it is not enough to argue, but it is also necessary to “roll up our sleeves and participate” (as one of the parents said) to determine the root of the problem regarding public policy and budget restrictions.

Thus, as a contribution to filling the literature gap, this investigation may inspire other researchers to increase knowledge and interest in the sustainability of music education for underprivileged children. Reasons for supporting music programs in elementary schools and dealing with economic challenges cannot be entirely understood in the scope of one inquiry. However, educators and parents from other districts might find positive approaches from this study that apply to their specific circumstances.

Data Availability

The recorded data used to support the findings of this study have not been made available online due to ethical procedures. The author collected data for this research as a Walden University student. To protect participants privacy, the data can be accessed through the author within the limits of the Walden Institutional Review Board.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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