

RESEARCH PAPER

The Impact of a Music Education Program on the Emotional Wellbeing of Elementary Students in a Rural Community: A Mixed Methods Investigation

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Abstract

Background: Current research points toward health benefits related to active participation in music. However, few, if any, studies have examined the impact of music on the emotional health and wellbeing of children in the classroom setting.

Objective: The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of music education on student wellbeing focusing on experiences during music class, engagement in music activities, relationships with others, finding value in the activities, and feelings of motivation and success.

Method: Study participants will include fourth and fifth grade elementary students participating in general music classes as part of their daytime music curriculum and students in the same grade that do not have music education or an arts program at their school. The study will occur at two elementary public schools in the United States. One elementary school will host an experimental and control group, and the other elementary school will host a control group only. An eighteen-week will be carried out, characterized by a mixed counter-balanced experimental design within- (time: pre-, mid-, and post-test) and between-subject (group) factors using a mixed methods approach involving qualitative and quantitative data collected from naturally occurring groups. Students at both schools will be administered a standardized self-esteem survey, a quality of life survey, and a music survey at baseline week one, mid-term week nine, and week eighteen. The Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scale will also be implemented at the experimental school to measure both wellbeing and involvement during the music intervention.

Results/Conclusions: It is expected that participants will experience an increase in emotional wellbeing and self-esteem following the music intervention phase as evidenced by quantitative and qualitative data. If positive, outcomes will highlight the importance of music education programs in public schools and its impact on student wellbeing, hopefully leading to fewer cuts in school funding for music education.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Music Therapy, Music Education, Positive Psychology, Positive Education, Self-Esteem

Abstrait

Contexte: Les recherches actuelles indiquent les avantages pour la santé liés à la participation active à la musique. Cependant, peu ou pas d'études ont examiné l'impact de la musique sur la santé émotionnelle et le bien-être des enfants en classe.

Objectif: Le but de cette étude est d'examiner l'influence de l'éducation musicale sur le bien-être des élèves en se concentrant sur les expériences pendant les cours de musique, l'engagement dans les activités musicales, les relations avec les autres, la recherche de valeur dans les activités et les sentiments de motivation et de réussite.

Méthode: Les participants à l'étude comprendront des élèves de quatrième et de cinquième année du primaire participant à des cours de musique générale dans le cadre de leur programme de musique de jour et des élèves de la même année qui n'ont pas d'éducation musicale ou de programme artistique dans leur école. L'étude se déroulera dans deux écoles publiques élémentaires aux États-Unis. Une école élémentaire accueillera un groupe expérimental et témoin et l'autre école élémentaire accueillera un groupe témoin seulement. Une période de dix-huit semaines sera réalisée, caractérisée par une conception expérimentale mixte contre-équilibrée au sein des facteurs (temps: pré, moyen et post-test) et entre sujets (groupe) en utilisant une approche de méthodes mixtes impliquant des données quantitatives recueillies auprès de groupes naturels. Les élèves des deux écoles recevront une enquête standard sur l'estime de soi, une enquête sur la qualité de vie et une enquête sur la musique à la première semaine de référence, à la semaine à mi-parcours de la semaine neuf et à la semaine dix-huit. L'échelle de bien-être et d'implication de Louvain sera également mise en œuvre dans l'école expérimentale pour mesurer à la fois le bien-être et la participation lors de l'intervention musicale.

Résultats / Conclusions: Il est prévu que les participants connaîtront une augmentation du bien-être émotionnel et de l'estime de soi après la phase d'intervention musicale, comme en témoignent les données quantitatives et qualitatives. S'ils sont positifs, les résultats mettront en évidence l'importance des programmes d'éducation musicale dans les écoles publiques et leur impact sur le bien-être des élèves, ce qui, espérons-le, réduira le financement des écoles pour l'éducation musicale.

Mots-clés: Bien-être, musicothérapie, éducation musicale, psychologie positive, éducation positive, estime de soi

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IMPACT OF MUSIC EDUCATION ON WELLBEING

Background

In a chapter title by MacDonald et al. (2012) he asks, “*What is music, health, and wellbeing; and why is it important? And why is it important to link these concepts together?*” (p. 3). Music is universal, emotional, engaging, physical, ambiguous, social, and a form of communication. It can also affect behavior and social identity. Within music research, there is a consistent thread that links many different types of music interventions to health and wellbeing. However, an article by MacDonald et al. (2012), states that the “*diversity of approaches and findings, the heterogeneity of methods, participants, outcomes, and interpretations of findings create obstacles in theory building...and a lack of coherent and theoretical research has [potentially] limited progress in this field*” (p. 4). The present study seeks to help bridge that gap using a mixed methods approach to clarify the impact of music education in the classroom.

In the United States, music educators struggle to create consistent and viable music education programs that meet the needs of children and community members at the urban and rural levels. The lack of funding for such initiatives is especially challenging for teaching staff. Many schools (rural and urban) have eliminated their elementary and secondary fine arts programs. This is most unfortunate since music educators emphasize the immeasurable cultural and historical value of the arts in education; a well-rounded arts curriculum is the foundation for aesthetic knowledge on par with other academic pursuits (Kritzmire, 1993). The described study will examine the impact of active participation in music education classes on student wellbeing. It is hypothesized that music education will help foster a sense of belonging, engagement, and resiliency in the classroom.

As in the U.S., similar circumstances have arisen in the UK in which there has been significant decline in music education programs offered at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in free public schools over the past decade. According to the Music Education: State of the Nation Report (2019), significant progress was made with the UK’s 2012 National Plan for Music Education, however, the overall scenario is one of steep decline. It is expected that music education will only be available to privileged students in the next five to ten years and that the talent pipeline for the UK’s world-renowned music industry will greatly suffer (Daubney, Spruce, & Annetts, 2019). However, an article by John Ross (2019) shares a glimmer of hope, predicting a resurgence in the importance of the humanities and liberal arts, and a focus on personal growth. Towards this end, the present study is therefore key, timely, and

of interest to international readers within or outside of the music education profession, looking to revitalize and support music education for ages 5-19 in free public schools, in particular.

In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as: “*a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease*” (Underdown, 2006, p. 3). This definition was well received at the time because it focused on all aspects of health – emotional, social, and physical wellbeing (Underdown, 2006). Following criticisms of the 1948 definition as being unachievable, WHO expanded the definition in 1986 to include “*health as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities*” (Underdown, 2006, p. 3).

Health and wellbeing are important resources for living a good life. Research indicates that children who are healthy are more likely to feel at ease and be more open to exploring new experiences. According to Underdown (2006), children who experience high levels of health and wellbeing are more likely to develop strong self-esteem, feelings of worthiness, and to make a positive contribution to the world. Additionally, children who experience higher levels of wellbeing and involvement are more receptive to learning, resilient and willing to try out new things and activities. Music can be one of the keys to unlocking inhibitions and creating a positive environment for active participation.

Research shows that as children grow, the areas where they build relationships expand to their neighborhood and school (Hosogi, Okada, Fujii, Noguchi, & Watanabe, 2012). Once children reach the age to attend school, they begin to evaluate themselves from an academic, social, emotional, and physical perspective based on mutual relationships with teachers and friends. A healthy self-esteem supports psychological stability and positive social activity, and it is an essential ingredient for a child’s psychological development (Hosogi, Okada, Fujii, Noguchi, & Watanabe, 2012). Emotionally healthy children are more likely to develop a strong foundation that allows them to realize goals and experience a sense of accomplishment (Underdown, 2006).

Children’s wellbeing is characterized as a dynamic process, one in which a child’s external circumstances (e.g., socioeconomic background, family circumstances, and physical surroundings) interact with individual characteristics to satisfy needs to build psychological resources, competence, and promote positive social relationships (Thompson & Aked, 2009). Modern theories of wellbeing emphasize a deeper connection to oneself, others, and the surrounding environment (Mead et al., 2019). Wellbeing

refers to “feeling at ease, being spontaneous and free of emotional tensions,” (Laevers, 2011, “Well-being and Involvement”, para. 1) which is essential for good mental health, self-confidence and resilience. When there are “*high levels of wellbeing and involvement...deep level learning is taking place*” (Laevers, 2011, “Well-being and Involvement”, para. 2). Here ‘involvement’ refers to being “intensely engaged in activities” (Laevers, 2011, “Well-being and Involvement”, para. 1) and something that is essential for meaningful learning and development. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow Theory states that a person experiencing ‘psychological flow’ will experience optimal learning, intense focus, engagement, and positive emotions, facilitating learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Children experience flow when they are engaged in an activity that is appropriately challenging with regard to skill level. The results are an increase in attention span and intense concentration, progress toward goals, and a sense of time passing quickly (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). When a person is in flow, he or she is in a place of flourishing, experiencing positive emotions, and wellbeing (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Music education provides scope for facilitating positive ‘flow’ in school settings.

In an article by Hills et al. (2011), research shows that self-esteem is a widely used construct in positive and formal psychology. While no one official definition exists, the field of psychology views self-esteem as “a feeling of self-appreciation” (Hosogi, Okada, Fujii, Noguchi, & Watanabe, 2012, Definition of self-esteem section, para. 2). Other definitions by Brinthaupt and Erwin (1992) and Cook (1987), describe self-esteem as the degree of liking oneself and feelings of self-worth in comparison with others. Likewise, Coopersmith (1967), defines self-esteem as “*positive and negative attitudes towards oneself*” (as cited in Hosogi, Okada, Fujii, Noguchi, & Watanabe, 2012, Coopersmith self-esteem inventory section, para. 1). Studies also demonstrate the importance of home, peers, and school environment in the global self-esteem inventory in pre-adolescents (Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011).

An article by Hallam (2010b) reveals that concerns about children’s health and wellbeing has led to a growth in research on the effect of the arts and music. Research suggests that active engagement with music in a group setting creates a positive learning environment that can enhance self-perceptions, creativity, self-expression, development of social skills, and contributes to health and wellbeing across the lifespan. This contribution to community cohesion can provide long-term benefits to society (Hallam, 2010; Heyworth, 2013).

Current research highlights the direct and indirect health benefits related to active participation in music. Some of those benefits include: the release of dopamine in the brain, increased secretory immunoglobulin A, reduction of cortisol levels, and temporary elevations in heart rate (Hallam, 2010; Rickard, 2014). However, very little research has been conducted on the impact of music and its emotional, social, and intellectual effects in a positive health context, and it is seldom “interpreted within the wellbeing context” (Rickard, 2014, para. 3) of flourishing. In this article, flourishing refers to the ‘good life’ and high levels of wellbeing and mental health (Huppert, So 2013; Keyes, 2002). Author Martin Seligman (2011), the father of positive psychology, proposed the PERMA model of flourishing, which is comprised of positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), accomplishment (A) (Seligman, 2011). In his book “Flourish,” Seligman (2011) maintains that the “*engaged life...is about flow: being one with the music, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity*” (p. 11).

Seligman asserts that positive education can and should be taught in schools to help students flourish. In the article “Positive Education” by Seligman, Ernst, Gilham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) positive education is defined as education for traditional skills as well as happiness. The need for positive education arises from an increase in mental distress and depression among children worldwide, little life satisfaction, and the need to preserve the synergy that exists between learning and positive emotions (Seligman, 2009). The authors also maintain that skills to increase resilience, positive emotion, and engagement can be taught to children. Implementing purposeful and engaging music learning activities in the music classroom could serve as a positive psychology intervention (PPI) and a form of positive education to facilitate the development of resilience, positive emotions, and engagement in the learning process. Likewise, as a PPI, music education can be the vehicle to provide an opportunity for students to experience positive relationships, meaning, accomplishment and hopefully, higher levels of wellbeing.

Science now demonstrates that strong connections between emotions, the brain, and wellbeing. In the noteworthy study “Music, Feeling, and the Human Brain,” researchers Habibi and Damasio (2014) note that music-related affect – feelings and emotions – can be understood from a neurobiological perspective along with a psychological or sociocultural perspective. According to the researchers, music has the capacity to trigger emotions which induce feelings or mental experiences (Habibi & Damasio, 2014).

Music may change the state of the nervous system in the brain by fostering homeostasis and life regulation through positive feelings (Habibi & Damasio, 2014). Authors Habibi and Damasio (2014) state, “*there is unequivocal evidence that the emotive states induced by music and the feeling states that follow them, engage the homeostasis-related neural systems of the human brain and prompt physiological changes in several sectors of the body*” (p. 99) Thus, music-induced feelings are beneficial because they can contribute to wellbeing.

There is a notable lack of research that examines the impact of music on the emotional health and wellbeing of children in the classroom setting. Music is one key to unlocking inhibitions and creating a positive environment for active participation. Positive music experiences have the potential to build connections between people, thereby enabling them to strengthen and enhance interpersonal and social relationships and emotional wellbeing. Studies indicate that the general music classroom is where the most significant work is accomplished (Stanley, 2014; Hoffman, 1981). The results are a positive influence on a student’s personal and social development, value beliefs, the sense of belonging, engagement, and behavioral self-management (Heyworth, 2013; Bloom, Perlmutter, & Burrell, 1999). Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the influence of music education on wellbeing as measured through the construct of wellbeing in fourth and fifth grade elementary students who are participating in general music classes as part of their daytime curriculum. The primary research question is as follows: Does participation in a daytime music education curriculum and related experiences help children to improve wellbeing, quality of life, and cultivate positive social interactions with others? It is hypothesized that participants will experience an increase in wellbeing and self-esteem following the music intervention phase as evidenced by quantitative and qualitative data including an increase in positive responses on the three student surveys and higher scores on the Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scale. Active participation in music classes will be positively correlated with higher scores on the self-esteem, quality of life, and music surveys during the music intervention phase. Active participation in music classes will also be reflected in higher scores on the Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scale during the music intervention phase.

METHOD

This research protocol has been written following the Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials (2013 SPIRIT-statement.org) guidelines.

Design

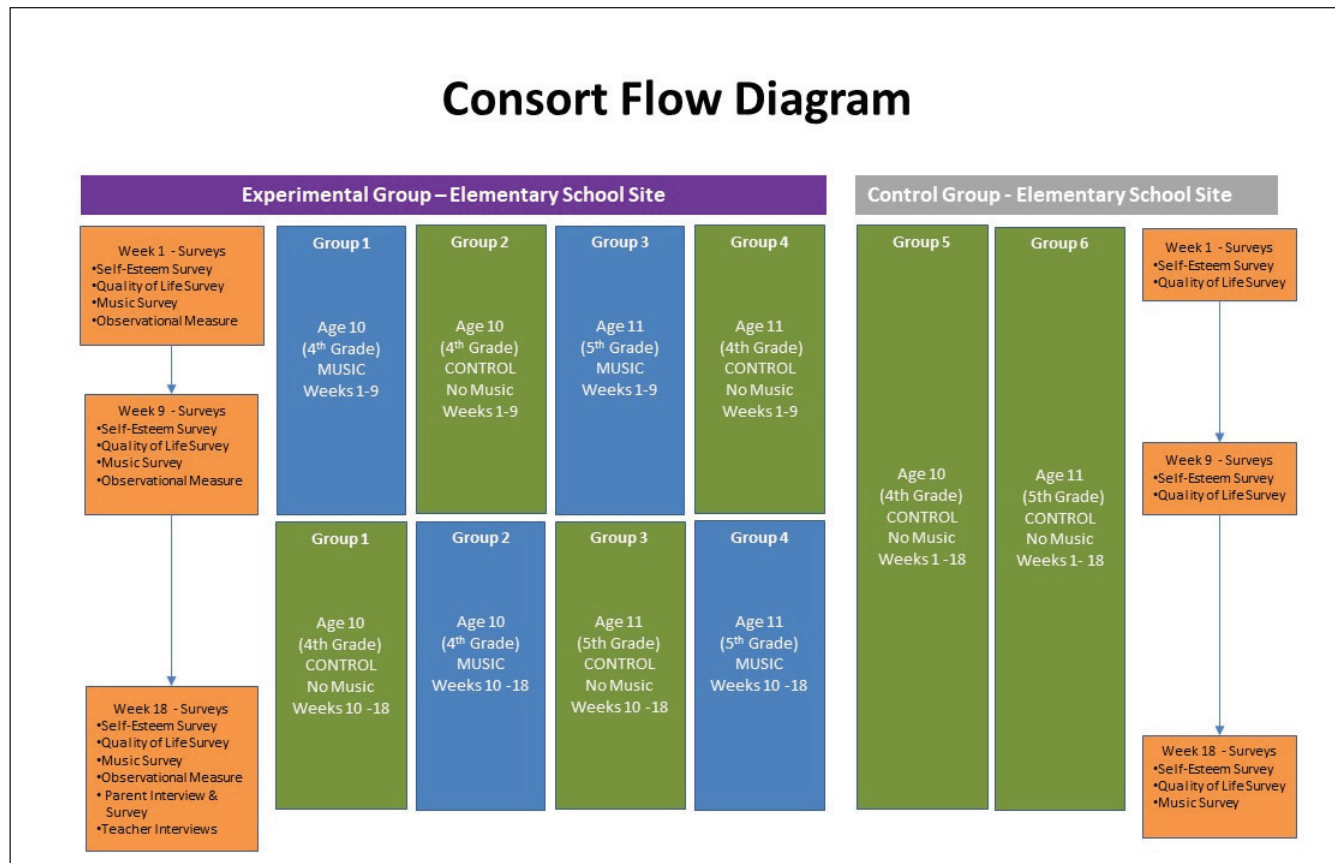
This is an eighteen-week counter-balanced study with a pre-, mid-, and post-test characterized by a mixed, counter-balanced, experimental design with within- (time) and between-subject (group: intervention and control) design using a mixed methods approach involving the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from naturally occurring groups (*Fig 1*). The music education intervention study will occur at two elementary public schools. One elementary school will host the experimental and control groups and the other elementary school will host the control group only. The school hosting the control group only does not have a music education or fine arts program built into their daily curriculum thus providing a second, natural control group. The experimental/control group elementary school has two teachers per grade level. The control group school has four teachers per grade level.

The study will occur over an eighteen-week period (one school semester). Music classes are forty-three minutes, three days a week for all students at the experimental/control group elementary school for the duration of the school year. There are eighteen weeks in each of the two school semesters and a total of thirty-six weeks for the entire school year. Participants at both schools will complete three surveys at week one, week nine, and week eighteen.

At the experimental/control group school (weeks 1-9) one class of fourth-grade students and one class of fifth-grade students will receive active music instruction (e.g., singing, playing instruments, and group movement activities) for a total of nine weeks. The other class of fourth and fifth-grade students will serve as the control group (i.e., no active music instruction or participation) during that same nine-week period (i.e., weeks 1-9). Students in the control group will learn about music through paper and pencil activities until week ten. During week 10-18, the students in the experimental group will become the control group and the students in the control group will become the experimental group, reflecting the counter-balanced design. In sum, there will be a total of eighteen weeks involved in the research project – nine weeks of active music participation and nine weeks of inactive music participation for each group of students in the intervention condition. The control group school will receive no music instruction for the entire eighteen-week period.

A standardized self-esteem survey (Coopersmith, 1981; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011), a quality of life survey (Bullinger, 1994), and a music survey designed by the author will be given to the students at the experimental school at baseline week one, mid-term week nine, and week eighteen (i.e., the end of the semester).

Figure 1: A CONSORT flow diagram – a counterbalanced study with cross-over design that will include within and between subject design using qualitative and quantitative data collected from naturally occurring groups



Additionally, an observational measure, the Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scale (Laevers, 2011), will be implemented at the experimental school only by the researcher during the same week the students complete the surveys. This observational tool utilizes a five-point Likert scale with one being the lowest level of involvement and wellbeing and five being the highest level of involvement and wellbeing. Data will be collected at the same three timepoints (i.e., week one, week nine, and week eighteen) that the students complete the surveys. Students will be observed by the researcher while they are participating in music activities during their regular music class time three different times in the semester (i.e., the same weeks that the surveys are completed).

In the same week that students at the experimental school complete the surveys, the control group school will be given the

identical standardized self-esteem survey, quality of life survey, and a modified music survey at the same data points as the experimental/control group school. The total time estimated to complete the surveys at each data point is 20-30 minutes. Parents at experimental/control group school only will be given the opportunity to participate in focus groups, be interviewed, or complete a survey at the end of the eighteen-week period. Teachers and administrative staff at the experimental/control group school will also be given the opportunity to be interviewed or fill out a survey at the end of the eighteen-week period.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment will occur at two rural elementary public schools in fourth and fifth grade classrooms. The experimental/control

group elementary school has two teachers per grade at the elementary level with approximately 20-25 students per class. The control group elementary school has three to four teachers per grade at the elementary level with 20-25 students per class.

Approval will be obtained from the administrators at both schools to allow their fourth and fifth grade students to participate in the music education research project. Students and parents will be provided with information sheets about the study and asked to complete informed consent forms and child background information forms. In this study, the researcher is also the classroom music teacher. To prevent potential undue influence or coercion, each child will be reassured by re-reading the script in the child assent letter that they do not have to participate or answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Students choosing not to participate in the study will still attend music class, but they will not complete the surveys administered as part of the study. At the experimental/control group school, parents/legal guardians of the fourth and fifth grade students, teachers, and administrators will also be recruited to participate in the study. Parents will be given the opportunity to participate in focus groups, be interviewed, or complete a survey online. Teachers and school administrators will be asked to participate in an interview or complete a survey online.

Ethical considerations

Written approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance, Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Oklahoma. Written consent was obtained from participants and parents or legal guardians. The current research study was approved by the University of Central Oklahoma's Office of Research Integrity and Compliance's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on November 26th, 2018 – IRB Application #: 2018-142.

Procedures

Music is social in nature and group singing and music making is a key component in creating positive musical experiences. As noted by Hallam (2010b), *“Engagement with music can enhance self-perceptions, but only if it provides positive learning experiences which are rewarding. This means that overall, the individual needs to experience success”* (p. 282). The music intervention for the study was carefully selected to encourage active participation. Learning to play a ukulele while singing was chosen for the music intervention. All students were taught three basic concepts, how

to tune a ukulele, three basic chords, and a simple strumming pattern for accompaniment while singing during the music intervention phase. The students will learn how to play three songs (*He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*, *Yankee Doodle*, and *Over My Head*) using the same set of chords for each song.

Experimental Group

The first phase of the music intervention will begin during the first week of the semester for the experimental/control group school's fourth and fifth grade participants. The second phase of the music intervention will begin during week ten just after a mid-term break. The third and final phase of the data collection process will begin during week eighteen of the school semester.

Control Group

The school categorized as the natural control group does not have a music or arts education program. Their daily curriculum is comprised of academics, computers, and physical education (PE). Student participants at this school are completing the same surveys at the same data points as the experimental/control group school apart from the modified music survey with questions that are appropriate for their educational environment.

Data Collection and Outcome Measures

Demographic information will be collected (i.e., age, race, gender and potential physical diagnosis, mental health diagnosis, and learning disorders) for the control group and experimental/control group school. Additional demographic information will be collected at the beginning of the participant surveys including age, grade, and number of siblings. Student participants at both schools will be assigned a participant identification number that will be used for each data point. A numbered master code sheet will be created to enable the researcher to link the survey with the demographic information to the background information sheets. Additional background information regarding potential mental health diagnosis, an individualized education plan (IEP) for learning disorders, and/or a physical diagnosis is also being requested from parents/legal guardians.

Data Management

Audio recordings will be collected during the parent, teacher, and administrative staff interviews, and these will then be transcribed, anonymized and coded according to established qualitative research methods (Braun & Clark, 2006). All audio recordings

and master code sheets will be kept in a locked storage cabinet and destroyed or deleted once the dissertation is completed. U.S. Federal Regulations requires all signed consent forms to be held for 3 years following study closure.

Sample Size

The initial goal for recruitment is 50% of the fourth and fifth graders at the control group elementary school and 75% of the fourth and fifth graders at the experimental/control group elementary school. The control group school has four teachers per grade level and the experimental/control group school has two teachers per grade level. Each school has 20-25 students per class.

RESULTS

The quantitative data analysis will be conducted by the researcher using a mixed-effects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine group differences over three data points on dependent variables which include self-esteem, quality of life, wellbeing, and involvement in music class activities. The qualitative data analysis will be conducted by the researcher utilizing thematic analysis for coding and theme development to identify patterns across the dataset, following the Braun and Clark (2006) six step procedure.

DISCUSSION

Music educators claim that the value of music, philosophically speaking, is a way of knowing, a means of humanizing society, and a symbol of our emotive and biological five senses as well as a resource for creativity, imagination, and personal expression (Kritzmire, 1993). They believe that by *“providing students with a clear message that the intrinsic and aesthetic qualities of the arts make them a vital, irreplaceable component of the human experience should be the core of [our] arts instruction”* (Kritzmire, 1993, Values and Arts Policy, para. 4). Our study will provide an evidence base to better support such claims.

It is anticipated that results will highlight the beneficial effects of music education in the general school environment and we hope that the findings will have broad, international implications. It is expected that our research will be able to provide a platform for promoting music education as an essential component for daytime school curriculum, and highlight the importance of music education and the arts at a young age. ■

Citation

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