

Understanding Music Education through the Lens of a Generalist: A Case Study of Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract

Research suggests teachers with prior experience with music are more likely to do curriculum integration. This case study examined how teachers' beliefs and personal musical experiences impacted how music was used in the context of an urban elementary school serving students of color. Thirty-seven teachers completed an anonymous ten-minute survey developed in collaboration with school administration. Findings demonstrated that teachers who experienced music as a child or spent time listening to music as an adult were more likely to have positive beliefs about music and integrate it into their curriculum. Also, two teachers individually participated in interviews. One supported a music program without reservations, and the other was more skeptical about musical benefits and felt other subjects should be prioritized.

Keywords: Music education; teacher education; curriculum; teacher experiences; educational collaboration; music programs.

"Music education opens doors that help children pass from school into the world around them—a world of work, culture, intellectual activity, and human involvement. The future of our nation depends on providing our children with a complete education that includes music."—Gerald Ford("Quotes | Illinois Music Education Association," n.d.)

1. Introduction

Music has the power to bridge cultural, economic, and social divisions. It is present in every society and is a natural human activity (Zatorre, Chen, & Penhune, 2007). Music in an education setting can have numerous positive effects on a student. Our study set out to understand how generalist elementary classroom teachers view music education and if their beliefs about music, in general, have any bearing on them supporting a robust music program at their school.

2. Objectives

The goal of this research project was twofold. First, to address a gap in the academic literature on how the musical beliefs and personal experiences of general education school teachers' impact, if and when, music is used as part of the curriculum in the context of working-class urban schools that serve majority-minority children. Second, to provide the school administration with information on whether teachers would support the development of a robust music program.

3. Literature Review

Research indicates that there are numerous benefits of music when used in the classroom setting. Teachers often use music to aid in the instruction of other subject areas (Abril & Gault, 2005). This use of music curriculum can enhance cognitive skills and language acquisition (Collins, 2014). These benefits may also be useful to students learning English as a second language (Paquette & Rieg, 2008). There are many ways that teachers can integrate music in their pedagogy.

Many teachers will use music to supplement another subject rather than teaching national music education standards developed by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) in the mid-1990's (Miksza & Gault, 2014). Duling (2003) found that pre-service teachers were most comfortable with the national standards when their college coursework prepared them. Pre-service teachers that had prior musical experiences themselves were also more comfortable with using music (Duling, 2003). Moreover, pre-service teachers who had at least two semesters of college-level music methods or fundamentals classes showed greater positive attitudes toward music as a subject in the school curriculum (Pietra, Bidner, & Devaney, 2010). General classroom teachers also feel more comfortable with integrating music if they have the support they need (Miller, 2013) such as a collaboration between classroom generalists and music specialists. In all, training and support are essential in increasing teachers' use of music in the classroom.

Administrators also play a significant role in supporting music education in their schools. According to Abril & Gault (2007), many principals felt non-musical goals were more important in a music program and thought the state of music in the elementary schools were positive but still had room for improvement. Unfortunately, many principals find standardized testing, federal laws, budgeting, and scheduling as having a negative impact on their music programs (Abril & Gault, 2006). Despite the numerous challenges, administrators recognize the benefits of music education and rank its use in the development of "self-esteem" as a high priority (Payne, 1990). The current study partnered with administrators to better understand generalist teachers' views on music education.

4. Method

A case study design was chosen based on the small population of teachers at one school. This approach allowed us to understand a complex issue through analysis of a small number of participants. This method also allowed us to examine a real-life situation in which teachers would support a robust music program at their school. A review of the literature provided scaffolding for understanding general teacher beliefs, and a quantitative survey was developed in conjunction with the school administration. Thirty-two teachers or 89% of all teachers at an urban elementary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) completed an anonymous ten-minute survey. Teachers were asked to respond to questions about their demographics; music experiences; attitudes, beliefs, and comfort with music; willingness to integrate and attend a professional development session; and finally their ideal situation. Two teachers also participated in interviews that lasted 45 minutes each. Each interview consisted of one teacher and two members of the research team and was structured as a free response to elaborate on the survey questions.

5. Results

5.1 Demographics

The school serves a majority-minority population consisting of predominantly Latino students reflecting the surrounding community. Thirty-two or 89% of all teachers at the school completed an anonymous ten-minute survey administered at a faculty meeting. Reflecting the general teacher population, more women (72%) than men completed the survey, and a majority of the teachers (56%) had 15 or more years of teaching experience. Survey responses were spread evenly across grades K-6. Concerning the racial/ethnic background of teachers, 90% identified as Latino, 7% as Asian/Asian Pacific Islander, and 3% as white.

5.2 Music Experiences

We asked teachers about their experiences with music and 42.9% experienced music at their school as a child at least once a week (See Chart 1.1). Teachers were also asked about their time listening to music using such sources as the radio or streaming services. Over half, (61.3%) of teachers listened to music "1-3 hours a day." Surprisingly, nearly 13% listened to music ten or more hours a day. (see Chart 1.2)

Chart 1.1. Music Experiences

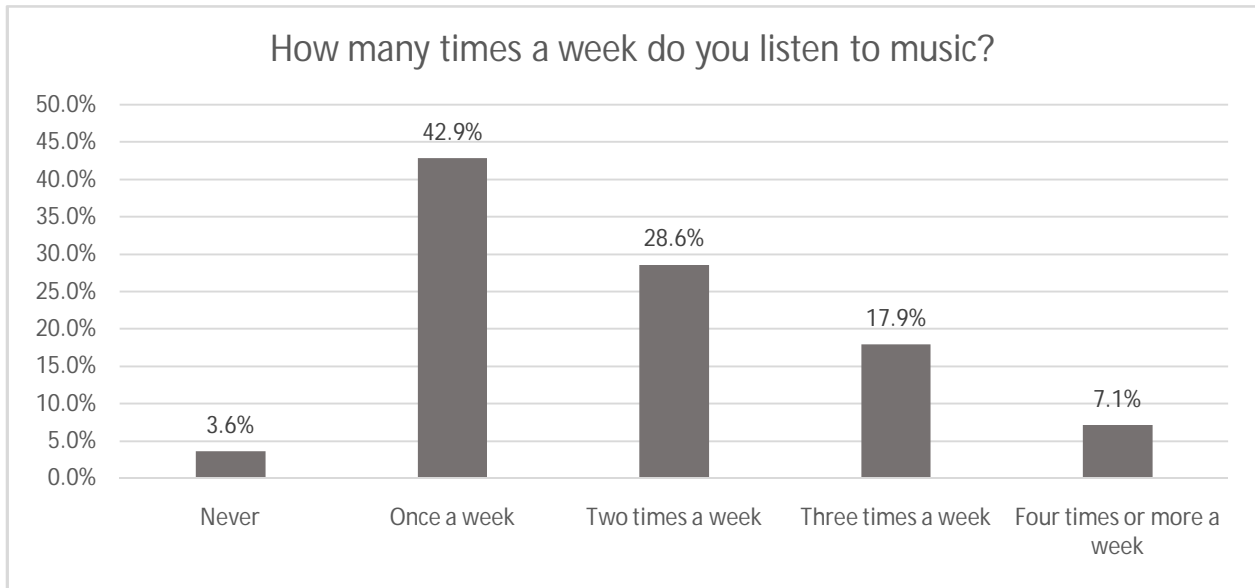
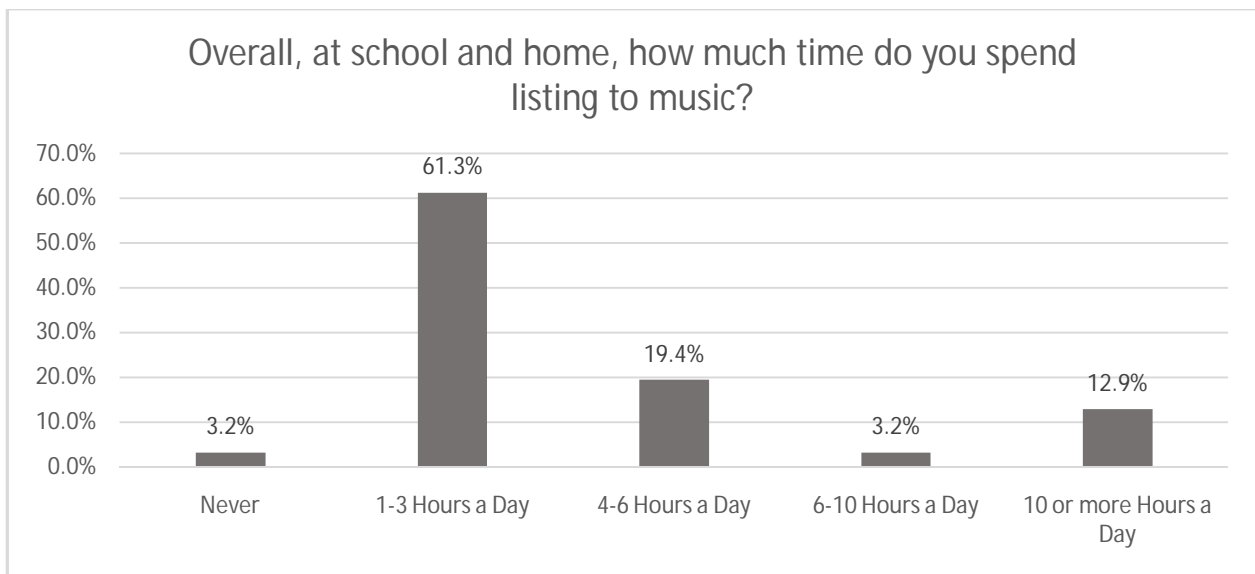


Chart 1.2. Music Experiences



5.3 Beliefs About Music

Teachers were asked four questions about their beliefs about music, two with a positive bias and two with a negative bias. These questions focused on classroom management issues. When asked with a positive bias, a majority of teachers felt that “music education can help with classroom management” and “music education can help children with behavior problems.” (see Chart 2.1) When asked with a negative bias, most teachers disagreed that “music activities can be disruptive” and that “music activities can be distracting.” Surprisingly, the negative bias questions saw a small spike in teachers that agreed with the statements. (see Chart 2.2)

Chart 2.1. Beliefs about Music (Positive Bias)

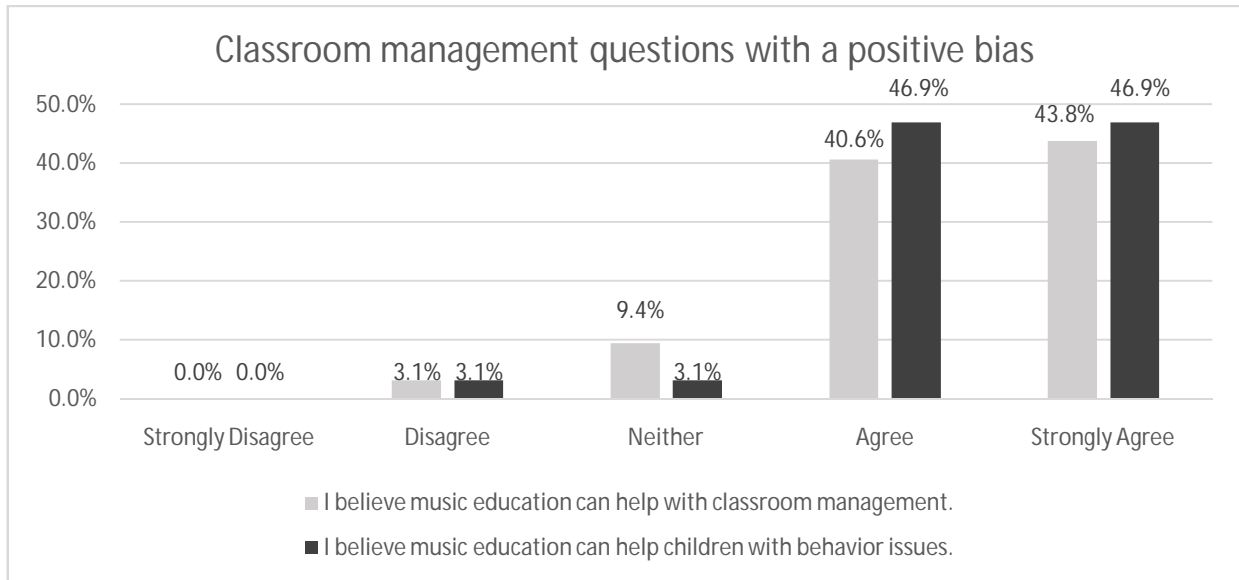
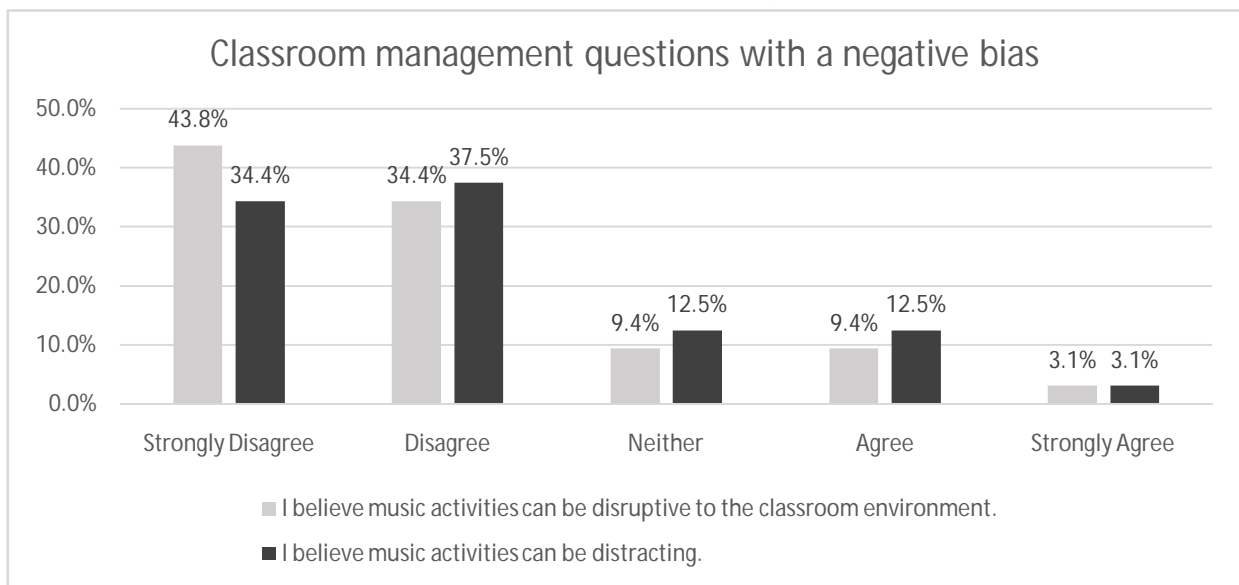


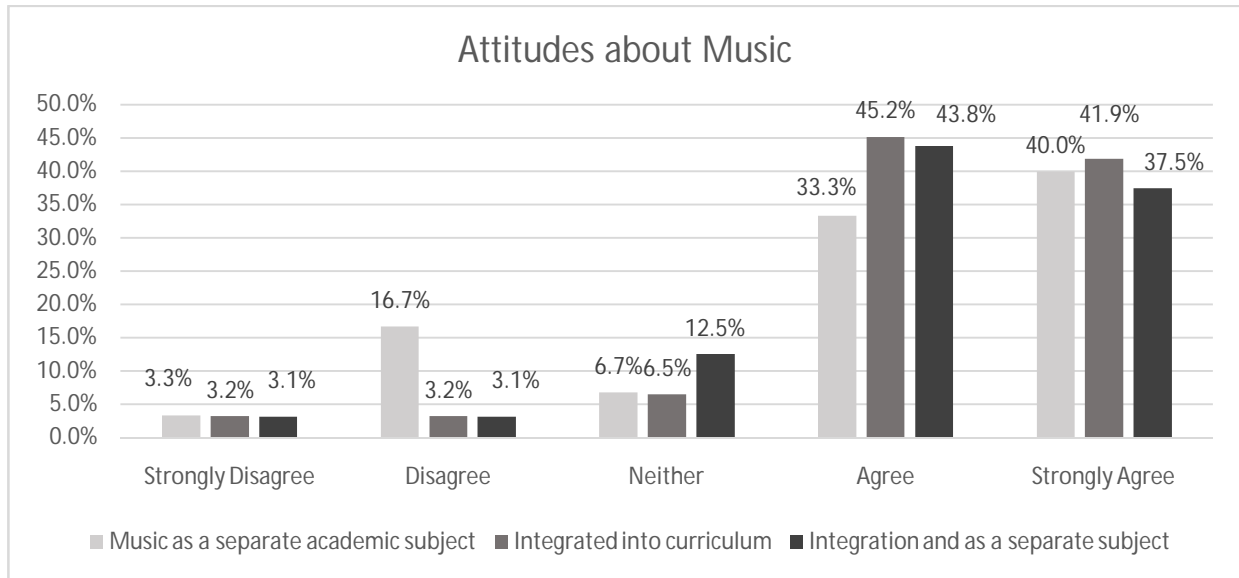
Chart 2.2. Beliefs about Music (Negative Bias)



5.4 Attitudes About Music

In our study, attitudes about music were measured using three questions. Over 87% of teachers stated that they believed “music should be integrated into the general curriculum.” Teachers were asked if “there should be separate music time and it should also be integrated into the general curriculum” and over 81% agreed with this statement. More than 73% agreed that “music should be taught as a separate academic subject.” However, slightly over 16% disagreed with this statement. (see Chart 3)

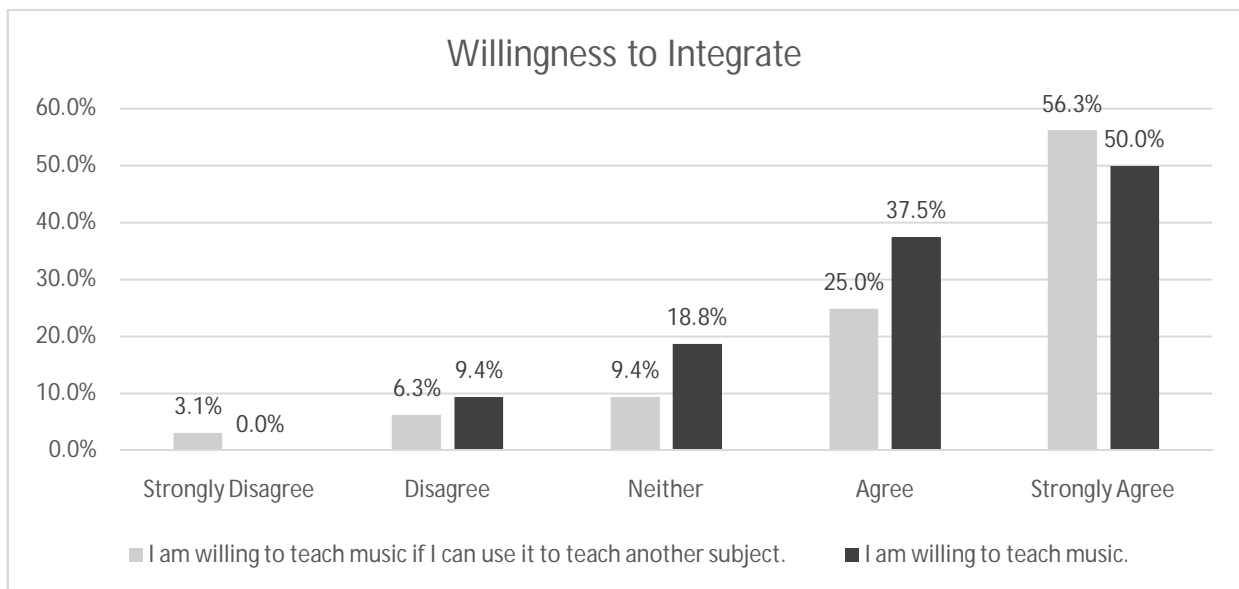
Chart 3. Attitudes about Music



5.5 Willingness to Integrate

Teachers were asked if they were willing to teach music if it could be used to teach another subject. Most teachers, over 80%, agreed with this statement. A blanket question about teachers’ willingness to teach music, in general, was also asked, and a majority of them agreed with the statement. (see Chart 4)

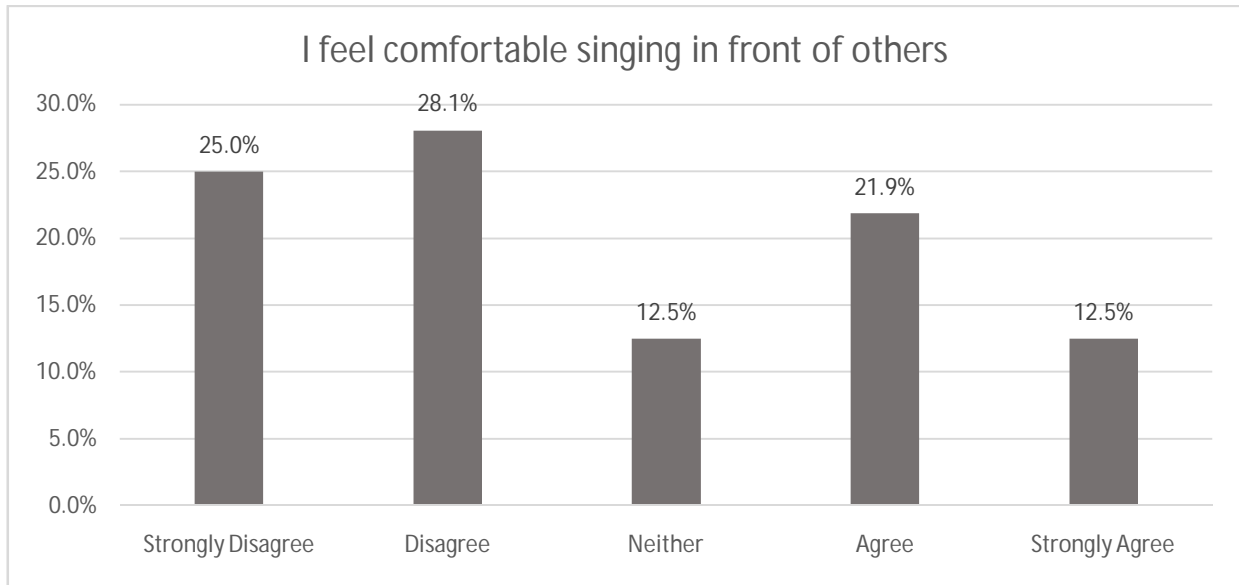
Chart 4. Willingness to Integrate



5.6 Comfort with Music

Two questions were used to measure comfort with music. A slight majority of teachers (56%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, “I feel others are judging my musical abilities,” while 22% agreed that others were judging them. (see Chart 5.1) Teachers were asked if they felt comfortable singing in front of others and a slight majority stated their disagreement with the statement. (see Chart 5.2)

Chart 5.2. Comfort with Music



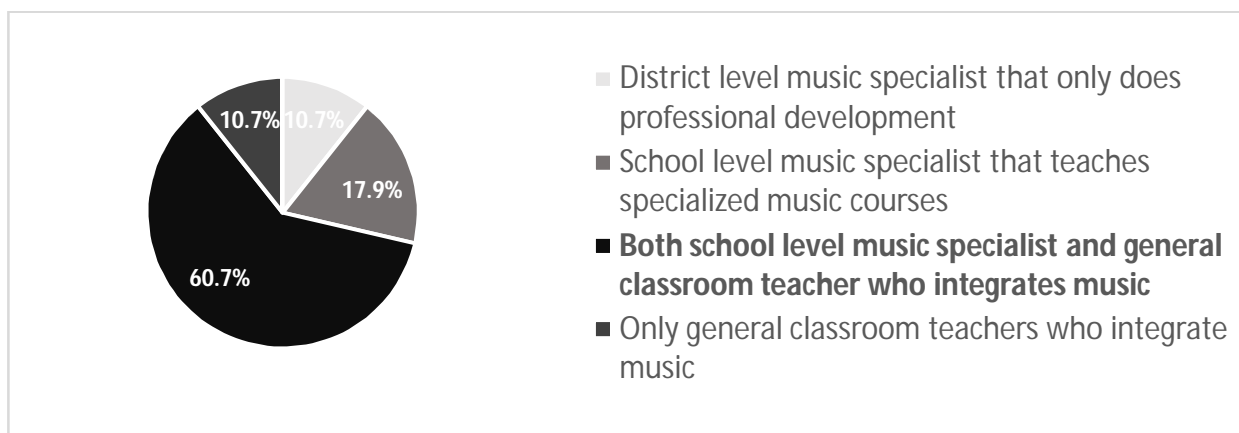
5.7 Professional Development

Teachers were asked an open-ended question, “if professional development were to be offered at your school, what would you be interested in learning more about?” The responses ranged from specifics such as “academic songs to go along with lessons” and “music fundamentals” to “anything.” After digesting all the comments left by teachers, the overarching theme was that general classroom teachers were interested in teaching music but did not have adequate training to do so.

5.8 Ideal Situation

Finally, teachers were asked about their ideal situation. Over 60% felt that both a school level music specialist and a general classroom teacher who integrates music would be ideal (see Chart 6).

Chart 6. Ideal Situation



5.9 Interviews

The two teachers that volunteered to speak about music education at their elementary school represented two very different perspectives, one for music in any form and the other supportive but skeptical of its benefit or implementation. The first fully supported music education, envisioning a program like “El Sistema” in Venezuela, a music program that places children in ensembles from a very young age. This teacher taught percussion and cultural lessons using drums from around the world. The teacher also had prior musical experience and currently utilized music as a single subject on its own and also integrated it into other lessons. The second perspective was skeptical of support, stating that “music isn’t the magic bullet” and was doubtful of claims about musical benefits.

This teacher argued that students need more focus on English and math concepts leaving no time to add music to the curriculum. She also suggested that incorporation of music would work best in the after school setting.

5.10 Collaborating with Administrators

The school principal asked the faculty involved in this study to collaborate on the research project. This collaboration supported the goal of further understanding attitudes toward music integration at the elementary school. Moreover, the team provided support by attending the schools Spaghetti and Music Night dinner, which was held to raise awareness and funds for the school's future music program. Ultimately, results of the current study were shared with school administrators to assist the goal of increasing music instruction opportunities to majority-minority students at this urban school.

6. Conclusions

This study focused on generalist elementary classroom teachers and their views on music education. Specifically, if their beliefs about music, have any impact on them supporting a robust music program at their school. A little over 40% of teachers, at least, experience music as a child once a week. Furthermore, as adults, half of them listen to music 1-3 hours a day. Our research demonstrated that over 70% of teachers agreed that it should be a separate academic subject. Teachers overwhelmingly believed that music education could help with behavior problems. Furthermore, a majority of teachers were willing to teach music if it were used to teach another subject. Overall, the data suggests teachers at this school are supportive of the development of a music program and their ideal situation would include support from a music specialist and music integration into the curriculum.

A greater understanding of how generalist teachers' perceptions impact instruction can be used to build robust music programs at other low-income urban schools that serve majority-minority children increasing the opportunity to learn and enjoy music. There were some limitations to the research design. Though the study represented 89% of the teachers at a single school, it may not be used to generalize to a larger population of teachers in other schools. More research can be done at the school and district levels to expand our research to provide a larger sample. This project has the potential to increase music instruction and integration in general classrooms at one urban school by providing evidence of potential challenges. Further research on music education should be done in inner-city majority-minority schools to understand how music can be used to provide a well-rounded equal opportunity education for students. Additional questions should be explored such as, why music is currently not offered across the curriculum and why music is often not part of the equal access to education equation. A lack of music education programs is symptomatic of unequal access to quality education, however, when music education programs are available they may be one way to narrow the equality gap. In sum, this study gives us a small glimpse into teacher's beliefs about music education while leaving room for expansion into more nuanced questions.

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