

1-1-2014

# Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning

Brittany Young  
*DePaul University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Young, Brittany, "Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning" (2014). *College of Education Theses and Dissertations*. 57.  
[https://via.library.depaul.edu/soe\\_etd/57](https://via.library.depaul.edu/soe_etd/57)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [wsulliv6@depaul.edu](mailto:wsulliv6@depaul.edu), [c.mcclure@depaul.edu](mailto:c.mcclure@depaul.edu).

Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the  
Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning

By:  
Brittany Young

Master's Thesis, January 2014

Department of  
Social and Cultural Foundations in Education

College of Education

Thesis Chair: Dr. Horace Hall

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Catherine Larsen

Thesis Advisor: Jim Duignan

DePaul University 2014

*Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the  
Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning*

**Table of Contents**

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i>	3
<i>Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature</i>	12
<i>Chapter 3: Methods</i>	22
<i>i. Methodology/Research Design</i>	22
<i>ii. Conceptual Framework</i>	23
<i>iii. Collection of Data</i>	25
<i>iv. Sample</i>	26
<i>v. Method of Analysis</i>	27
<i>vi. Researcher Positionality</i>	28
<i>Chapter 4: Findings</i>	
<i>i. Findings</i>	32
<i>ii. Discussion</i>	46
<i>Chapter 5: Conclusion</i>	49
<i>i. Limitations of Research</i>	50
<i>ii. Recommendations for Future Research</i>	50
<i>Appendix A: Interview Questions</i>	52
<i>Appendix B: Paper Prompt for Student Feedback</i>	55
<i>Works Cited</i>	56

Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning

**Abstract:** The value of arts education in our nation has steadily diminished. As aims for global expansion and development become more geared towards sustaining economic and technological vitality, the role of education naturally follows a similar trajectory, making the permanent implementation of arts curriculum in schooling an obscure reality. Amidst this transition, however, arts educators are relentlessly working to create arts programs for underprivileged youth whose families often times cannot afford private lessons. This thesis will explore the essence of a music educational space that embodies this effort in order to understand the meaning making processes of development and expansion for youth. By investigating the lived experience of the students in an after-school orchestral style music program, this study cultivates an understanding of the implications of educational involvement in the arts. The findings revealed in the text will contribute to the working effort of researchers to bring the voices of students engaged in music learning to the forefront.

## Youth's Lived Experience of an After-School Music Program: Understanding the Meanings and Values Placed on Music Learning

*Colorfully themed with eager faces, married sounds and excited spirits, the halls and rooms of the south corridor of an elementary school vibrate with dynamism. As you sit back and observe, one cannot help but be captivated by the activities of the space. Children, after a full day of sitting in classes, completing school work and remaining disciplined, somehow run eagerly to engage for another two hours in educational activities that require their full attention and effort. Painfully working to apply music theory and practice to the sound of their bow or drum or dance of their fingers, the students find the self-discipline to learn how to play a musical instrument every school day, for a full year. For many of them, this will be a common theme for years to come. On top of their normal coursework, they take orchestral pieces home to practice and spend most of their free time dedicated to their craft. "What is it about learning a musical instrument that keeps these students motivated?" I ask myself as I sit back and learn about the daily practices of these young musicians. There is something here, hidden from the rest of us, that tells a story of what music can do for the nourishment of one's self. This thesis is a journey of those hidden paths of meaning making that expose the essence of a musical world.*

### *Introduction*

Understanding the role and value of music in the scope of life learning is invaluable to educators adapting to the current state of educational change and transformation. As the technological era reigns as the leading force fueling economic and

social change in this nation, concepts such as creativity, personal development and extracurricular engagement take on a new name. Education remains to be seen as one of the only solid mechanisms that will drive economic and technological expansion and is therefore utilized to reinforce the values and goals of the nation through the classroom. As our country continues to struggle with recovering from one of the largest financial crises it has ever known, educational programs that offer sound opportunities for youth development in the arts are deemed less valuable to the overall global aim for education and therefore consistently cut short of funding in public and private schooling. Little room is made for those artistic endeavors that engage youth and young adults in exploring their subjective experience in the world we inhabit. Programs centered on music education deserve more attention as they hold valuable implications for contributing to the holistic growth of the youth of this nation.

In addition to surpassing socially constructed binaries of our society through transcending defined notions of strict educational models, music education provides distinctive alternatives for building collectives, sparking creativity and guiding self-development. Learning music can have a profound effect on enhancing cognitive information processing and can help to explore learning methods that meet the needs of the individual on their unique plane of approaching problems and challenges. In this sense, it contributes to positive neurological development and offers alternative models of educational success by allowing the individual to become the facilitator of their own self-expansion (Stieglebauer, 2008). One child who plays the flute, for example may learn better through exercising the Suzuki method by which hearing sound and reproducing it is seen as a fruitful means to music learning. A proclivity to this learning may suggest

something larger for a child's overall receptivity to educational models that suit their needs. Others may find that learning through the application of music theory is more conducive to their development. Additionally, as a tenet of youth programs that emphasize group learning, music education contributes to a person's positive social development through teaching aspects of communication, sharing perspectives and working with others.

Much of what is stated above is well known universally, and can be attested to through simply engaging in conversations or observations of music students and performers. There is something taken for granted in these basic assumptions about the effects of music, however. A question that is less frequently addressed is how does one make meaning of their music world? In delving deeper, one could consider: What occurs subjectively as music is experienced at various levels? Is what is said, heard or functionally experienced in a musical learning environment what determines the level of influence music engagement has on the students? These questions are primary in my research study. Within this thesis I will explore the meanings and values that comprise the experience of music learning and link these attributes to educational elements that positively contribute to the overall development of youth.

### *Music as Experience*

John Dewey's philosophy on art and education suggests that when one attempts to understand the complexities of the arts they must be particularly conscious of the ordinary, daily life experiences that contribute to bringing any work of art into existence. Dewey asserts that too often we can tend to isolate a form of art from the conditions that

created it (Dewey, 1934). It is in exploring these conditions that one can come to a delineation of the significance that piece of art holds. The concept of experiential learning, linked directly to the notion that through one's experiences one develops ways of seeing and being in this world, is of prominent relatedness when assessing the myriad conditions of educational music spaces (Alerby & Ferm, 2005). I am looking to explore the experiences of students in DREAM and understand their perceptions and ways of being both collectively and individually within the program. This study investigates the values that students, parents and teachers place on their experience in order to give proper attention to the foundational essence that envelops the process of learning to become a young musician.

### *The Face of Current Education*

In direct response to an economy pushed by free-market ideologies such as competition, individual choice and global competition, the reformation of educational policy and curriculum standards has been one of a gradual transition towards emphasizing standardization and strict teacher evaluations. These ideologies rely on fixed models of educational training that are geared towards preparing students for the workforce, undermining the importance of developing curriculums that truly heed the educational and fundamental needs of students. Amidst this reality there are pockets of hope that exist within schools and communities which harbor spaces founded on holistic growth and utilize creativity as a primary medium of encouraging one's self-expression and agency.



Creativity as an element of experience is a fundamental premise to fruitful learning. Human beings exercise creativity in problem solving, writing, relating to the world around them and articulating themselves to one another (Dewey, 1934). It is in creating ways of making sense of the world that social beings are able to develop new forms of knowledge and understanding. Inversely, standardization and simplification, while not wholly void of creative elements, are nevertheless confined entities that limit creativity to rigid parameters that strictly fulfill their fundamental purposes. Priorities for education are geared towards maintaining test scores, grade-point averages and taking pre-conceived educational routes to success rather than a navigation of one's subjective trajectory towards learning (Yang, 2003). Through exercising standardized models of learning, creativity is hindered and relegated to specific knowledge that serves as the basis for one's active engagement with the world around them. The necessity to surpass teaching methods that are rooted in basic techniques of learning can be backed by the proven impact that engaging in creative mediums of expression has on youth development and holistic education (Dewey, 1934; Griffin, 2009; Heyworth, 2013). Thus, a lack of access to such mediums can pose a problematic barrier to the holistic growth of individuals, especially youth.

### *DREAM Music Program*

DREAM music program is an organization that aims to inspire social change in the community through providing an outlet for youth that encourages their talents and individual capacities as life learners. This concept of social change represents the perceived positive influence that a music program will have on youth and in turn have on

the society surrounding them. In this vision, teachers, parents and community members will be impacted by the presence of a community orchestra and will be led to recognize their own capacities for self-development. Directors seek to accomplish this task through offering an orchestral style music education to students in a space that fosters the importance of accountability, confidence, mutual peer respect and unity while engaging the community in the student's endeavors.

DREAM has been operating for five years and resides in an urban, Title I school in the Midwest. The school dwells in a community of a predominantly Hispanic population of first and second-generation immigrants. Outlets for youth involvement and development rarely exist outside of school doors; therefore youth that are not involved in extracurricular activities have very few social means to develop out of school. Those that are involved in the music program attend music class for two hours every day immediately following regular school hours. They play in concerts at least once a month and learn new material on a continuous basis. Participation is completely free and open to anyone who expresses interest in joining (capped at 150 students total). Peer teaching, one-on-one instruction and group style practice are all utilized in this space. Particular learning contexts are specific to each method, providing a variety of options for students who learn differently than others.

The program has yet to qualitatively assess its intended purpose and impacts. While its operation remains consistent and the population of students grows steadily, directors of DREAM deem it vital to explore the lived experience of those in the program in order to build the program appropriately. This study will contribute to such an

exploration and seek to identify the overall meanings and values placed on experience in the program.

### *Research Purpose*

Throughout this thesis, I will explore the lived experience of participants in the music program, including students, parents and teachers. I have centered the primary focus on making the voices of the students heard so as to invite an in-touch perspective of what is lived and learned in this space. Due to the underwhelming amount of music education programs in primary school curricula, I deem it necessary to argue the implications that music education can have on the overall development of the youth in order to urge educators, policy makers and academics to make a space for artistic involvement in the daily curriculum for students. Through contextualizing the impacts that music learning has on students, I hope that I can provide a functional resource to those individuals that strive to make progress in the educational realm.

The study expounds on four primary themes that constitute experience for individuals involved in the music program. Development of self, challenge, positive reinforcement and a shared sense of the collective are guiding values that reinforce reasons for motivation and engagement. Students navigate their experiences based on these values and utilize them to make meaning of their lives and interact with the world around them. Throughout the research, I found that all students had applied meaning they gained from engagement in the music program to other aspects of their life. In building their individual life compass, they found that the values reinforced in the music space deemed appropriate for other areas of their daily, functional living. Foundational support

will be provided in the findings that attest to the given nature of the music program and its role in cultivating positive shared experiences amongst participants.

### *Researcher's Role*

It is important to take note that prior to my arrival as a researcher, the students were engaging in their daily practices without disruption by an inquisitive observer aiming to understand their underlying motivations for engagement. My inquiry sparked a new sense of self-reflection for the students by which they were nudged into the role of consciously reflecting on their experience and delving deeper into what it means for them. It is through encouraging this that my role as a researcher is significant, in that it has altered the dynamic of the space by my active presence in it.

Often, because of the uniqueness of my involvement with the program, students were confused as to whether they should view me as an authority figure or simply one of their peers. This negotiation of roles was articulated through verbal and nonverbal expressions by which my informal conversations with students would elicit discussions involving my interest about their experiences rather than discussing technical musical content that would normally be covered with an active teacher in the program. My inquisitions sparked their own curiosity about the significance of their experience and how it could be contextualized differently through penetrating less frequently explored perceptions of experience. It is unknown what lasting impact my presence in the program had on the shared space. However, it is important to acknowledge that my engagement as a participant observer enabled me to create a unique dynamic through which I could both observe interactions and play an active role in guiding the students in a deeper exploration of what meanings and values constitute their own subjective

experience. It can be implied that such an exploration would give students another tool to recognize their own role in cultivating outcomes suitable to what they perceive as fruitful means to their individual development.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### *Introduction*

As a starting point to expanding research on children's lived experiences of music learning, it is necessary to engage an inquiry on pre-established literature regarding the subject. Knowledge of the evidentiary power that music has on individuals is primarily rooted in social theory and much less proven through empirical and qualitative methods (Griffin, 2010). It is through exploring music learning through qualitative means that this study can contribute to the dearth of empirical knowledge that currently exists on the subject (De Nora, 1999; Griffin, 2010). In the past decade there has been an augmented interest in re-conceptualizing the discourse on music education to focus more on children's voices and personal accounts of their lived musical experiences in an effort geared toward redefining music curriculum in formal schooling (Bartel, 2004; Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Green 2005; Griffin, 2011; Majno, 2012).

Music education settings have been utilized to engage young offenders and immigrant refugees as a way to explore whether music learning has an effect on self-esteem, behavior and literacy skills (Anderson & Overy, 2010; Cheong-Clinch 2009). Advanced youth music ensemble participation has been studied to identify the meanings and values placed on early childhood and youth music learning (Hewitt & Allan, 2012; Smith, 2008). Researchers have explored the more informal aspects of music engagement ranging anywhere from the random rhythmic play of children in a schoolyard to music reflexive practices individuals engage in (De Nora, 1999; Lum & Campbell, 2007). Additionally, ethnographic studies that span multiple schools and music educational

programs have been implemented to determine the dominant themes that emerge across states and nations, bringing a universal scope to the benefits of music curriculum (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Green, 2005).

Griffin, in an extensive literature review of children's music experiences both in and out of school notes that there is a "clear need for further inquiry into children's music experiences in their daily lives" (2010). Engaging a deeper understanding of what is currently taking place within music education programs can act as a vehicle for developing more comprehensive curriculums that suitably meet the needs of students (Griffin, 2010). Studies that have adhered to this call for re-envisioning music curriculum (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Lum & Campbell, 2007; Green, 2005; Griffin, 2009), as well as literature that explores areas of youth music engagement (Anderson & Overy; Cheong-Clinch, 2009; De Nora, 1999) will sufficiently offer sound, foundational support for this research study. The literature explores the meanings, values and motivations for music engagement that embody youth's music learning experiences. In this chapter, I will identify emerging themes that expound on the personal, neurological and social effects of music learning.

### *Music and the Brain*

In recent years, studies have emerged that provide evidence of the neurological processes of the brain that are triggered and altered by directly engaging in music learning (Freeman et al., 1998; Hallam, 2010; Rajan, 2000). Hallam (2010) posits that if an active engagement with music happens early on in development and for an extensive period of time a person can undergo "cortical reorganization", which is an occurrence that significantly affects the way the brain processes information. Though this change in brain

processing must occur over an extended period of time in order to become permanent, once established, it can have major implications on how a person will learn in the future and transfer their information processing onto other activities (Freeman, 1999; Hallam, 2010). This change in information processing holds major implications for children who engage in music learning at an early age and continue learning throughout childhood; as their learning trajectories can be significantly altered on social, neurological and musical dimensions (Hallam, 2010).

Musacchia, Sams, Skoe, and Kraus (2007) find that playing a musical instrument can elicit changes in both the cortex and brainstem functioning. The young classical musicians in their study showed an increased activity of neurons in the brain in response to both music and speech sounds. Such responses enhance one's perception of sound tremendously while simultaneously affecting the way they process information (Hallam, 2010). The longer a person is exposed to music learning the more hard-wired these changes in information processing become, increasing an individual's ability to enhance greater surveillance of sensory space. This reaction is found to depend on the type of musical learning taking place, in which different instruments have distinctive effects on the varying sensory enhancements of the brain.

Processing of pitch in string players is characterized by longer surveillance and more frontally distributed event-related brain potentials attention. Drummers generate more complex memory traces of the temporal organization of musical sequences and conductors demonstrate greater surveillance of auditory space (Munte et al., 2003; In: Hallam, 2010; p. 270).

In all, literature reveals that consistent and structured exposure to music learning can increase a child's ability to formulate words and develop a more comprehensive



vocabulary, increase their reading level, raise intellectual development and enhance modes of creativity (Catterall & Rauscher, 2008; Hallam, 2010; Simpson, 1969). The multi-sensory skills that a child develops from learning music has been linked to an increase in second language acquisition (Cheong-Clinch, 2009). Regions of the brain that process language also process forms of musical stimuli, making language and communication key components of the musical and neurological process (Hallam, 2010; Speh & Ahramijan, 2010). Research suggests that music has evolved as a technological vehicle for social bonding and that neuroscience plays a role in such a phenomenon (Freeman, 1998). Freeman asserts that the rhythmic behavioral motions that are generated by music can lead to a deeper state of consciousness and emotionally felt power, which can lead to creating trust amongst mutual members of a community (p. 1-2, 1998).

### *Musical Evocation of Consciousness*

Providing opportunity for musical exploration is essential to any early childhood program. Through music making, children are actively engaged with their senses: they listen to the complex sounds around them, move their bodies to the rhythms, and touch and feel the textures and shapes of the instruments (Rajan, p. 34, 2010).

Literature reveals that as a direct effect of music learning both on a physical and social level, young musicians appear to have a more grounded perception of the world around them (De Nora, 1999; Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Rajan, 2000; Speh et al. 2010). Rajan (2000) conducted Montessori school research on music education classrooms for youth and found that students become more aware of the environment in which they are living once engaged in music learning processes. This takes place on various levels at

which a child may become more aware of their relation to themselves, to peers or teachers and to the community as a whole (Hewitt & Allan, 2012; Rajan, 2000).

Researchers learn about this increased awareness through engaging in in-depth interview processes with students and asking them to reflect meaningfully on the elements that make their music learning experience possible and enjoyable (Hallam, 2010; Hewitt & Allan, 2012; Rajan, 2000).

A prerequisite of music expression is the necessity for the musician to tap into their inner desires and emotions in order to express him/herself through sound (Lakhyani, 2012). Additionally, understanding sound and becoming perceptive of internal and external surroundings is vital to obtaining a comprehensive grasp of the material being learned. It is through this sensory process that the aforementioned may be attained, in which a music student's ability to become acquainted with the environment around them comes as natural a process as becoming acquainted with the music. Lakhyani (2012) concludes through her research with pre-service teachers that training in the arts is essential to the holistic process of learning and that the arts can aid an individual in perceiving and re-imagining ideas in unique and creative ways. Bringing this creative element to education is found to invoke children to become more engaged and attentive as subjective beings in the learning process and as a result increase their desire to perform well, gain discipline and socialize with like-minded individuals (Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Lakhyani, 2012; Speh et al., 2010). Alerby and Ferm (2005) suggest that it is only from our being in the world as subjective, conscious, feeling beings that we can begin to experience music and thus give meaning to it. The experience of music learning then, is a dynamic one, by which to gain knowledge one must experience something and by

implication some meaning is derived from that experience (Alerby & Ferm, 2005). This creation of meaning eventually leads to an individual's realization that music embodies feelings, feeding the creative process and expanding the individual's perception of what it means to live and be in this world (Albery & Ferm, 2005).

### *Re-Constituting the Self*

Hewitt and Allan (2012), exploring an informal music education program, found that students need to feel satisfaction in order to stay motivated and engaged in music learning. This satisfaction cannot be reached if a child is not in tune with what aesthetically and emotionally pleases them. By honing in on their individual music preference, a child can better identify what sounds uniquely move them to play, what emotions they wish to express, and create their own aesthetic based upon those personal inclinations (Cheong-Clinch, 2009). De Nora (1999) analyzes this process by exploring the notion of what she terms "technology of the self" by which an individual utilizes music to exercise self-regulation in mobilizing a desired state. A common impetus for youth's music engagement is the desire to feel 'relaxed' or 'less-stressed' (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Cheong-Clinch, 2009; De Nora, 1999; Hallam, 2010; Hewitt & Allan, 2012). As a result of Heyworth's (2013) study on the musical experiences of an elementary school classroom, positive reflections of well-being resulted in a student's perceived sense of belonging to the group which in turn elicited positive feelings of happiness, peacefulness and calm (p. 241). Music students often correlate the sounds of different pitches and chords with a desired feeling they wish to express (Hallam, 2010; Hewitt & Allan, 2012). For example, some musicians express being partial to a minor

scale that sounds like a sadder tune rather than a major scale that resonates a high pitch and is more naturally associated with a happy feeling. The ranges in between these scales enable a musician to navigate their musical expression based on the emotions and aesthetic they wish to express through sound. Such a process evidences both the neurological and social functioning of music by which musical expression triggers multiple functions within the brain and emotional strata (Hallam, 2010). De Nora posits that music acts as a guide to social agency, serving as an organizing force in life and mobilizing musically engaged individuals into feeling, thinking and acting beings (1999).

Barrett & Smigiel (2007) established that children in music educational settings are driven by the desire to gain skills that will contribute to their individual growth and musical development and thus seek challenges that will fulfill such desires. In this manner, challenge is considered to be a vital component of musical experience for young musicians who wish to excel (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007). Hence, musical engagement gives students feelings of success and accomplishment that will increase motivation and feelings of self-efficacy (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007; Cheong-Clinch, 2009). Barrett and Smigiel found that students search for music to identify their "sense of purpose" in life, finding ways to integrate it into their daily lives and centering their sense of accomplishment on the goals they achieve through musical endeavors. As Hallam (2010) would assert, success is a necessary tenet of music engagement for youth, as it ensures that they gain a positive experience, extending a positive influence in social and personal development (In: Heyworth, 2013).

*Music Education as a Vehicle for Social Motivation and Bonding*

In music educational settings where group learning takes place, students undergo a process of social learning (Anderson & Overy; 2010; Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Griffin, 2010; Hewitt & Allan, 2012). As Vygotsky theorizes, it is through social interaction that a child's process of cognitive development occurs (1978). Though social learning occurs in most any educational setting where children are interacting with one another, it is important to identify the personal, social and musical dimensions that are simultaneously occurring in a music setting. According to many scholars music engagement is an intersubjective process that draws groups and communities together (Alerby & Ferm, 2005; Heyworth, 2005). As Sawyer (2008) would state, "Group musical improvisation is one of the purest examples of human collaboration" (p.50). Anderson and Overy (2010) state that learning how to collectively socialize with a group, as in making an individual decision that will affect the entire group, is just as much a part of the learning process as cognitive development. From this process comes a shared sense of accountability and reliability that all children bear the responsibility of adhering to when making decisions and progressing collectively. Cheong-Clinch (2009) identifies music educational sites as key spaces for children to learn about social interaction and communication. Performing in front of others instills a confidence and greater self-esteem. Facilitating group work increases communication skills and musical expression with others and gives children the tools to make themselves understood (Cheong-Clinch, 2009; Griffin, 2009; Hewitt & Allan, 2012).

Through her research study on children's' music experiences both in and out of school, Griffin (2010) discovered that participants expressed a shared unity of purpose as one of the main driving forces for their desired continuation in the music learning process. The students expressed that learning together and relying on one another was what made attending the music program something to look forward to (Griffin, 2010). Hewitt and Allan (2012) concluded that advanced ensemble music students reported that what they enjoyed most was meeting new people and maintaining their friendship network and that their sense of self-esteem depended on the positive feedback of the conductor. Further, students were more likely to repeat attendance based on the positive experience they gained. This positive experience was inextricably linked to social dimensions of the music learning experience (Hewitt & Allan, 2012; Griffin, 2010). Barrett & Smigiel (2007), in exploring the meanings and values shared in a music youth arts setting, found that children collectively understood their musical space as one that fostered a sense of community or "family". They referred to one another as brothers and sisters and distinguished the significant differences between the type of community that teachers created for them in a music setting compared to the formal school setting, calling the teachers in formal school more "distant" and "less-engaged" (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007).

### *Conclusion*

Music education has a clear impact on youth who engage in music learning practices. The extent to which such effects carry on throughout the lives of the students is much less explored, as it would require years of intensive research and follow-up. It can only be assumed that the tools developed from exposure to music learning will act as

permanent fixtures within the navigational trajectories of experience and learning for individuals. Experiential learning is one of the most influential mediums through which human beings navigate life (Dewey, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978). In experiencing something directly, an individual forms knowledge through a process of making meaning of that experience. As a dual process, experience and knowledge influence change (Dewey, 1934; Alerby & Ferm, 2005). It is our task as qualitative researchers engaged in understanding the nuances and complexities of youths' music educational experiences to explore the depths of those experiences and deconstruct the meanings and values that they place on them (Griffin, 2010). This literature has offered constructive insight on such engagement by evidencing empirical research that explores the outcomes of music learning on personal, neurological and social levels. In this thesis I will further contextualize these effects and draw upon the lived experiences of children in a music education program to explore the depths of meaning they place on music learning through bringing their voices and insight to the forefront of inquisition. I have approached this inquiry asking the questions: What values and meanings do the children place on their experience in this music education program? How are these values and meanings learned, lived and shared amongst members of this music community?

## Methods

### *Research Design*

For this study I have taken an ethnographically framed approach drawing on methods of phenomenology. The ethnographic framework allows for a continuous process of formulating meaning of what is said, exchanged, and experienced between people in a natural setting over time (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Van Maaen, 1988). As an active observer, I conducted fieldwork and participated in events that allowed me to view the everyday practices within the music program. Through this observation I paid close attention to the language, behavior and social exchanges of students, teachers and conductors in order to understand the values and meanings shared amongst them. Finlay (2009) notes that many qualitative approaches borrow and build upon phenomenological methods and techniques, as phenomenological research implies building rich descriptions based on the subjective experiences of participants living a phenomenon. Varying approaches can be taken using phenomenological methods that are distinguished by identifying the specific aims of the researcher (Finlay, 2009). For this study, I aim to understand the essence of an educational music space through the voices of multiple participants. Thus, I have interpreted data through the lens of viewing a phenomenon as "one shared by many" (Finlay, 2009). This empirical phenomenological approach involves returning to experience in order to retrieve comprehensive descriptions, which lay the groundwork for a structural analysis of the essence of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). Both methods share a common paradigm that underlines the importance of understanding experience in order to give meaning to the essence of an explored phenomenon (Lester, 1999).



### *Conceptual Framework*

The concept of experiential learning, linked directly to the notion that through one's experiences one develops ways of seeing and being in this world, is of relative importance when assessing the myriad conditions of youth development. I am looking to explore the experiences of students in the music program and understand their perceptions of and motivations for music learning. I intend to investigate the meaning that students, parents and teachers make out of their experience in the music program. The term *lifeworld*, introduced by Husserl (1936/1970), represents the idea that to understand experience a researcher must get as close as is possible to listening to and understanding rather than explaining how participants see the world. The *lifeworld* perspective requires an understanding of the reflexive process of participants in which the researcher views the participant as a conscious actor in constructing his/her meaning of the world (Finlay, 2009; Husserl, 1936/1970; Langdridge, 2008). It is only through directly engaging in something, however, that one can truly possess a subjective knowledge of that object of experience (Alerby & Ferm, 2005). Therefore, by reflecting on the ways that individuals perceive their experiences, deductions can be made about how they make meaning of those experiences. In turn, the experiences that participants reflect upon, and thus give meaning to, compose the data. I have employed this framework in my research by engaging in lengthy and in-depth interviews with participants as well as analyzing the participant's communicative (verbal and non-verbal) expressions of their perceptions of the musical world that embodies their experience.

Dewey asserts that we cannot ignore the seemingly mundane and ordinary practices that feed a body of work. It is in exploring these conditions that one can come to

a delineation of the significance that piece of art holds (1934). This concept supports the ethnographic framework of the study, by which an understanding of the everyday experiences of those involved with the music program is examined so as to provide a foundational basis to understanding the phenomenon of music learning and performance. The study is seeking to explore the practices and exchanges that form the meaning and value of music participation. What feeds the process? What are the tiny bits of behavior and interaction that, when put together, symbolize an experience in its entirety? This research study considers the subjectively lived experiences of students in the music program as representative of the dimensions of a music educational space shared by many. It makes the voices and narratives of those who directly engage in music learning practices a pertinent focal point for conceptualizing how and why music is instrumental to the lives of the individuals who engage in it.

The music program resides at a Title I public school in a large urban neighborhood in the Midwest. The total number of students is roughly under 1200 and the predominant ethnic background of students is Hispanic, constituting 90 percent of the student body. Eighty six percent of students are eligible for reduced price lunch and many come from low-income neighborhoods surrounding the school area. Additionally, many of the students are from first or second- generation immigrant families, being many of the first in their families to speak English fully and attend school in the United States. The music program welcomes any student, regardless of race or gender and often times admits sibling together. It currently holds about 125 students and has reached the maximum students allowed due to funding and teacher availability.

### *Collection of Data*

In utilizing a multi-method framework, I have implemented data gathering techniques that are relative to ethnographic and phenomenological frameworks. I actively observed the music site for four hours a week for 10 weeks and wrote extensive field notes that described the exchanges between students-to-teacher and student-to-student, the behaviors, words, musical content and normal day-to-day activities that encompassed the music program. Field notes are a vital part of both data collection and analysis for ethnography and participant observation, especially when utilizing an ethnographic research design (Gibbs, 2007). I engaged 4 students in in-depth, semi-structured interviews about their reasons for being a part of the program, motivations for continuing, perceived challenges and weaknesses of the program and their overall reflection on how music plays a role in their daily lives (See Appendix A. for interview questions). Engaging in interviews that allow open-ended dialogue and explore the perceptions of individual's lived experiences is a vital element to conducting phenomenological research. As phenomenology identifies the essence of an experience, a fundamental tool to achieving such understanding is conducting interviews, spending time with participants and creating the most natural setting possible for them to share their lived experience with the researcher.

The student's ages ranged from 9-12 and their experience levels varied from 1-3 years of attendance in the music program. I also conducted interviews with two teachers and one parent from the program on their perceptions and lived experience of the program's benefits, impact and overall quality. As a part of a take home project, I assigned students of the intermediate and advanced classes a small paper prompt that

asked them to reflect on how music plays a role in their life. They were allowed to share anything they desired and feedback was based on voluntary, anonymous participation. I received 35 prompts back and used those to contribute to the data. In addition, I have accessed pictures and testimonies given from directors of the music program as evidence to support findings. In all, the data encompasses a wide range of artifacts through observation, informal dialogue, semi-structured interviews, and written reflections of students, teachers and parents in the program to provide a comprehensive analysis.

### *Sample*

The sample of participants was determined through the voluntary participation of students who were actively involved in the program. The sample size consisted of 7 participants, 4 of which are music students, 2 music teachers, and 1 parent. The research was structured so that I may be able to speak with a student from each level of music performance ranking, that being beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Additionally, I spoke with two teachers who agreed to speak with me early on in my observation period. These teachers have both been a part of the program for more than two years and are knowledgeable about the common practices in the program and various aspects of student engagement. The site coordinator assisted me in contacting a parent who has three children in the music program, all who attend at different levels and have been involved in the program for varying amounts of time. For purposes of obtaining parental feedback, I deemed it beneficial, as a researcher, to engage with a parent who had undergone transitional dimensions of seeing her children in the music program from mild to heavy involvement.

For the paper prompt activity, the intermediate and advanced classes were chosen based on the writing level of the children (See Appendix B for sample of paper prompt). Most children in the beginner classes were under the age of 9 and therefore retrieving written feedback from them would have deemed more difficult. Therefore, we opened the activity up to those that had advanced in the music sections and were predominantly over the age of 10. Their decision to respond was completely voluntary. All participants in the study were notified that their participation would remain anonymous and were given consent forms that ensured the privacy of the information they disclosed. Names of both participants and the music program appear as pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of participants.

### *Method of Analysis*

As the primary process of analysis, I have decoded and coded all data by which I categorized passages, observations and pictures based on common themes that emerge from them (Gibbs, 2007). I have inserted some of my own personal interpretations and revelations that developed throughout the research process as a testimony of my lived experience as a participant observer. Direct quotations, narratives and researcher reflections will represent the findings. The conceptual framework of the study guided the analysis process, by making understanding and listening to experience, rather than describing it, the focal point of analysis. My analytical approach is therefore more open-ended in nature, allowing for the reader to experience the *lifeworld* of participants through dialogical excerpts and student testimonies (Gibbs, 2007). Due to the research design method of the study, coding and analyzing data according to themes proved an

efficient approach to representing the findings. Additionally, any connections made between prior literature on music learning and current findings of the study will be established and discussed as an addition to analysis and interpretation of data.

### *Researcher Positionality*

In order to provide the truest and most un-tainted data reflective of the lived experience of others, phenomenologists suggest that researchers practice the "epoche" process through which a researcher sets aside or "brackets" his/her pre-conceived ideas, biases and assumptions about the studied phenomenon (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that such a process can not be perfected and without flaw, as the researcher is a subjective individual who comes from certain experiences, passions and identity constructs that are embodied in their very being. Moustakas (1994) suggests that in order to develop the qualitative research process from the start, one must be driven to explore it--a drive that more than likely is rooted in their relation to the subject. Recent researchers would challenge the possibility that one could approach a study without bias and they make known the importance of understanding the subjective experience of the researcher and allowing their visibility as an "interested and subjective actor, rather than a detached or impartial observer" (Lester, p.1, 1999). To adhere to both standards of researcher reflexivity, I have engaged in a reflective process that explores my personal development towards this study and interests in the topic at hand.

Though I never explored performing music on my own, until very recently, my appreciation for it has always been much less of passive listening and more of an active involvement with sound. Throughout my life, the one thing that could bring complete

balance to my mind and body was music. Given that music played such a large role in my life I found that I could connect with others and understand them a bit more just by knowing what musical aesthetic pleased them. I was drawn more to people not by what facts they could spout off or what books they'd read but rather how they experienced themselves subjectively through music. In recent years, as a product of self-exploration and a reconstruction of my own self-identity, I explored myself in my personal and spiritual life and pursued interests in self-expression through creative means. I also began to refigure what was important to me and found that music was somehow always centered right in the middle of my very existence. I reflected on my background as a child growing up in a musically inclined family. Every holiday, my uncles and cousins would dissect the album covers of my parent's collection to find the names of the composers, producers and instrumentalists while playing the congas, the piano or any musical instrument they could get their hands on. Technical music language often surrounded me, becoming a part of my working knowledge whether I sought it or not. In some way or another, music has always been a part of the very fabric of my identity. I have never played a musical instrument and therefore do not have many biases when it comes to understanding the meanings one may develop from instrumental learning, which is the primary focus of this study. Though, recently, I have embarked on my own personal journey of learning how to play the flute, such an experience is removed from this paper and is more an exercise of my search for personal growth and self-fulfillment.

Recently, I was completed in a masters program that was centered on the foundations of education, which allowed me to intellectually engage the values and constructions placed on education throughout history. I perused literature and

contemplated philosophies on educational justice, curriculum standards and cultural constructs of the "educated person". A reoccurring theme that was involved in many class discussions focused on how the current educational system and policy makers alike are failing to incorporate one vital element into dominant discourse, that of subjectivity. It is in welcoming the different voices of individuals and offering them a space to explore not only themselves but others that one can come to a deeper understanding of their own self interests, learn to respect the interests of others and all the while become educated. I was immediately drawn to understanding the role that creative spaces played in social and educational environments and was eager to learn how I could contextualize this inquiry in an academic sense. I thought, "what is it about arts, music and poetry that allows people to come together with others that are different from them and make it seem so effortless?" I wondered how I could take the shared energy that is felt whenever I enter an artistic or musical space and describe that energy in words, so as to argue its merit, especially at a time when society seems to be so alienated from itself. From this, I developed research interests that revolved around the collective and understanding and embracing difference in artistic spaces.

I was given the opportunity to collaborate with the director of a music education program that offers children free orchestral education year-round. The project, a brainchild of a bigger music-social movement, has been around for five years in the mid-west. Its purpose is to provide an opportunity for children who cannot afford to learn music privately to join a group of students that would learn and perform music in an orchestra setting. The program directors hope that this opportunity can contribute to the lives of young people in a positive way, acting as a violence prevention mechanism and a



vehicle for pushing overall positive youth development. Centered in a large urban city at an elementary school whose dominant population consists of lower-income, first generation immigrant students, the music program offers its services to those that are less likely to be afforded such an opportunity. In the city in which these students live, music lessons are \$200 per hour, not including the initial cost of the instrument, making sustaining music learning for many, nearly impossible. Offering the students and families of the school with a chance to learn a musical instrument with no cost to them, provides a space for growth and learning that contributes to their social and emotional development. Their implementation centers on these overall goals and strives to make a difference. However, no deeper inquiry has been undertaken to explore if they are in fact fulfilling the purpose they intend to.

I was immediately drawn to the overall purpose of this organization and eager to explore its essence, in an effort to put words and meanings to an art form that is so abstract and often unspoken for. I entered DREAM music program each day with a fresh set of eyes, capturing the essence of a child-like mind, opening myself up to exploring the tiniest of details about the environment that I observed. In order to provide a foundation for understanding how meaning is conferred onto the music learning process, I explored the site ethnographically and phenomenologically, removing any of my personal assumptions about what role music can play in the lives of individuals and seeking to expose those taken for granted assumptions that many have of creative learning. This study is reflective of the subjective experiences of the individuals that experience the music program on a daily basis and I am proud to be a part of making their voices heard.

## Findings

I will begin with an excerpt of my initial encounter with the program, to provide a contextual background for the space and the people in it.

*Once you turn the corner on Beuton Street, you will see hundreds of kids that have dispersed from school doors. Some are holding each other's hands or the hands of their parents and loved ones who were there to greet them when the school bell rang. I walk in the opposite direction of most, towards Door 1 of the elementary school, into a now nearly empty building. The walls inside of the elementary school are colorful and welcoming, displaying student work and portraits taken of students and their families. Next to the portraits are stories of the families that explore their lives, background, and culture. Hallways are also lined with colorful mosaics of figures like a football, palm tree or a boy picking cherries from a cherry tree. In one small corridor of the school, people of the music project set up within different rooms. There is a lot of chatter and movement, instructors haul music stands across the wide-open hallways to various classrooms and locations, children scurry to and fro, locating their instruments and assigned practice room. Some instructors walk through the halls with students, taking them to their belonged room for practice. One boy volunteers to get a fellow classmate and bring him back to class, as he has wandered off. The students seem to exhibit a lot of autonomy. They sort themselves out and don't seem to need much guidance.*

*I sat for a while in the beginner's orchestra practice, where the students with little to no experience, learn the basics of music performance. As things quiet down and practice commences, you can hear the echo of drums being banged on from the second story, the strings of violins down the hall and the humming of flutes coming from the*

*auditorium. As the beginning tuning session comes to a close, the teacher walks around and allows students to make their own rhythm for the class to follow along. The instructor has them clap it out a couple of times to practice the rhythm and then play it. "You are all doing a good job staying steady," she says with a huge smile as she walks around the classroom and finishes tuning the last bit of instruments. After this warm-up, the percussion group comes in to set up, while everyone else remains quiet. They catch the rhythm in the middle of the next practice round. The boy on the xylophone counts his measures until the next. He nods his head and exclaims a silent, "yeah!" because he stayed on cue. The group continues practice; one girl who plays the clarinet waits patiently for her cue and draws a tulip on her music book until then. Practice carries on for about an hour, the children take a quick 15-minute break and then reconvene.*

In approaching the investigative process with students, teachers and parents, my aim as a researcher was to explore the subjectively held perceptions of lived experience in the music program. I accomplished this by observing the music site daily and asking students questions that ranged from more simplistic to reflective, nudging them to draw upon their experiences in order to understand their personal understanding of the music learning process. The teachers and parent I interviewed were asked about their perceptions of the music program experience for their individual lives, as well as their reflections on how they felt it impacted students and the broader community. The yielded results from interviews and field observations exposed a connecting thread of elements shared amongst all participants. This narrative reveals the essence of the music program by bringing to light the meanings that are placed on the individual experience,

music as a learning process, and the collective experience. The findings represent the meanings and values children place on their experience and are supported with foundational data that reflects personal testimonies, which encompass the ideas and attitudes collectively shared in the program. Some personal notations made by the researcher will be included, as a testament and alternative look at how an outsider perceives the culture of the program. Four emergent themes are highlighted, revealing the development of self, motivation of challenge, positive reinforcement and concepts of the collective as representative of the shared essence of the music program.

### ***The Development of Self***

The participants share a perception of the benefits of learning a musical instrument as a fundamental tool to aiding self-expression, boosting self-esteem and producing the feeling of protection. They view music learning and performance as an outlet for making something of one's self and striving to be a better person. In response to a paper prompt asking students to share their perspectives on music, many expressed that it allows people to have better lives through listening to and making beautiful music. Students perceive playing music to contribute to their positive well-being and overall happiness.

The students express feeling more confident as their involvement with the music program progresses and believe that this self-confidence is a positive reflection of their development. Overall, confidence is consistently encouraged in the music space, breeding students that assert themselves and become more comfortable with who they are as individuals.

Eduardo, a four year student, expressed, "I think the music program influenced me to be more confident and meet new people" (Eduardo Perez, personal communication, July 25, 2013).

When I spoke with two teachers about their perceptions of the student's developmental process, they regarded major changes, mostly in a student's overall positive self-development:

Analise has been teaching in the program for two years now and says:

"We see confidence really, really go up. A lot of the shy kids, still are very shy about talking, but you give them an instrument and suddenly their speaking/ And you know for a lot of kids, that is their voice. And none of them would have the exposure to the art/music world were it not for this program" (A. Renaldo, personal communication, July 20, 2013).

Brandon, a teacher in the program for four years, shared:

" The kids that have stuck through the program, I can honestly say that they are different. Because I knew them when they started. They are better off, have more self-esteem and are just a different person" (Brandon Herron, personal communication, July 30, 2013).

The most dominant response from participants regarding the perceived essence of the musical space was their discovered ability to express themselves through sound. Music serves as a form of communication for them, aiding an understanding that surpasses words and opens a space to transform one's subjectivity and all hardships into a creative form of expression. Additionally, music is seen as an armoring for participants. Students and teachers alike value the

profound ability of music to protect and support them when feelings of being misunderstood or disconnected arise.

Gina and I spoke for a long while about her motivation for playing music. She has been playing the viola for two years now and sees herself continuing on through high school and beyond. She mentioned that she was thinking about quitting in the fall because she started to feel that the music program was becoming too easy for her. After some reflection, she shared with me what determined her decision to stay in orchestra:

"Music is like something special, like I have a connection. Its more than ordinary, I feel it within me... If I ever stopped playing music, it'd be like taking something away from me. Like, my mom would never do it but if she did take my viola away, it'd be like a punishment, because it's to the point that music is like my home or something" (G. Deloria, July 20, 2013).

Gina sees music as an outlet for her personal expression, claiming it allows her to express what she is feeling and calm her when she is feeling stressed. When I asked her what stressors exist in her life she mentioned the disruption in her family life and separation of her parents as being a burden on her emotions. She looks to music to sooth those feelings that come from such an adjustment, and sees it as a way to stay happy and relaxed (B. Young, field notes, July 20, 2013).

Leann, a third year oboe student, expressed similar sentiments as Gina. She describes the feel of the oboe as a deep expression of sound. "For me, this sound reminds me of a deep voice, which would remind me of someone that protects me and will always be there for me, that's what the cello reminds me of." "Usually when I'm down," she says, "I can play the cello and I just feel like I'm in another world. It helps me express myself" (L. L'hereux, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

She also attributes her involvement with music to her improvement in school. "Before I was part of the orchestra, I didn't focus. I had a really big problem. But once I joined, I got more aware of stuff and ever since I've gotten better grades and improved overall" (L. L'hereux, personal communication, July 10, 2013).

In all, students exhibited a strong attachment to their music learning experience, by which an intimate relationship between developing their sense of self confidence, determination and development of self is interwoven with their ability to learn and expand through musical performance. For them, their development is seen as a basic element of their experience. They are able to contextualize their self-confidence, or lack thereof, prior to joining and acknowledge that their involvement has had a direct effect on their changes they've undergone.

### ***The Motivation of Challenge***

The experience of being challenged by teachers and challenging oneself is an impetus for continued involvement in the program. The children see rising to challenges

and overcoming them as an indication of their overall success in their music learning experience. If material is lacking substance and does not produce a challenge, the students lose interest in it quickly, which causes them to lose focus. One student attributed this loss of focus and feelings of boredom to influencing her contemplations of leaving the program. Other students expressed the same, stating that there have been times when they've lost touch with their experience because it was not challenging enough.

Leeann equates challenge with the essence of learning. "Some pieces aren't that challenging and I expect them to be, because then I learn more. I just learn more out of it, than pieces I normally feel comfortable with. Its like more practice than improvement" (L. L'hereux, July 10, 2013).

Challenge is highly sought after and is an essential element to establishing the "before" and "after" effect for students by which they can gauge their improvement in learning their musical instrument. They implement ways to challenge themselves outside of the music classrooms so as to return with a mastery of certain notes or songs.

When asked what makes going to orchestra fun, Gina expressed that she enjoys getting new music that she can site read, even though she's never practiced it. "Sometimes I take my instrument home and practice the fingering. I don't really write the notes down, um because I like to memorize/ I like going to the intermediate level class because you have harder music. Cause right now, it's a little too easy. My teacher



usually gives me a piece that I can work on, so it's harder. I like to push myself more" (G. Deloria, July 14, 2013).

Additionally, the students place value on self-teaching and self-discipline as important tools to becoming more successful at their craft.

In my first meeting with Lindsay, she walked me through the beginning stages of learning how to play the flute. She showed me how to position my lips over the hole and walked through the positioning of my fingers over each note. We went over it again and again until I felt comfortable. After our brief tutorial, she asked me if I would like a balloon animal. She pulled out an air pump and balloon from her bag and began to craft a puppy for me. When I asked her how she learned this, she replied, "It's much like music, I don't like to rely on the Internet or TV to teach me things. I read books and explore on my own to learn these skills. It's fun, I like to challenge myself." I asked her what she liked about challenging herself and she replied, "When I started playing my flute and realized how fun it is to actually have hands on experience with learning something, I realized that it made me much happier" (L. Johnson, personal communication, May, 15, 2013).

An interesting link yielded from the data depicts a process of overall youth development that begins with challenge. This concept falls in line with one of the main aspects of the program initiative. As a personal testament of the students who are intimately involved in the program, feeling challenged is a value that fuels a large part of motivation for

learning. Challenge feeds the process of learning in order to propel students to the next level of progression. From this progression, a student feels the positive rewards of self improvement and thus seeks to develop even further, taking initiative for his/her experiences and engaging in more challenging opportunities for growth. Taking such initiative has profound effects on a student's autonomy and expression of agency, which then aids them to hold more accountability for their actions and naturally become leaders for those newer students that are beginning the process of musical development. This process then is perpetuated in this space and becomes cyclical in fashion.



(Diagram by B. Young, October, 10, 2013)

### ***Positive Reinforcement***

One of the most valued elements that feeds the instrument learning process for students in this music space is the feeling of positivity that is reinforced by self

development, feedback from parents and teachers and a child's perceived impact of their development on their life trajectory.

Students express feeling like they have a "special talent" that has changed their life and that music will be their key to going onto college and being successful in life. For the participants, music experience is equated with a better way of living and seen as a tool they can utilize to make the lives of people in their community better as well. Parental support is also an indication of success, which reinforces a feeling of accomplishment within the students. The positive feedback of their family members makes them feel good and pushes them to stay dedicated.

I asked Eduardo about his experience with concerts and how he feels about his musical experience in general. He shared:

"I like being in concerts when they clap, because people know that we are a team, that we are special and they know that we are, like in our future, we are going to have something awesome coming up. It's just a feeling I get... Every family member is really happy with my music. They say that I'm a really special person and one day I will be someone in the future. They say I'll have a really good career. It makes me feel good, makes me feel like I should never stop" (E. Perez, personal communication, July 27, 2013).

Feelings of positivity influence the family members that are involved in their children's musical experience. Speaking with one mother who has three children in the program, I asked her how her kid's involvement in music has changed her life? As the interview was in Spanish, her oldest son translated for her and gave this response:

"It makes her happy. It makes us happy as well, mentally and emotionally and just hearing us play just makes her happy to hear the sound coming out. Music helps to express feelings that words can't at times. That is how she sees it and that is how I see it. She says that everybody who does fine arts, sometimes the people that they are surrounded by can change what happens. Like if they are in a good atmosphere with others a lot can change. Mentally, emotionally, economically, a lot of positive advantages" (M. Perez, personal communication, September 1, 2013).

Advancement is a huge indicator of success in the program because it rewards a student's musical progression with movement to the next level of performance. Therefore, students seek this and gear their experiences towards progression in order to obtain the positive rewards that come from improvement.

Kayla shared her excitement about potentially becoming leader of her cello group. "If I work a little harder and can master this song, they will make me the director of our cello group. I really really want to be leader. I never thought I'd say that because I'm so shy. But its such an honor, it'd feel so good to reach that level" (K. Hill, personal communication, July 15, 2013).

Additionally, Eduardo shared, "When I advance it makes me feel good because I know that all of the practicing is for a good cause" (E. Perez, personal communication, July 27, 2013).

Student teaching also elicits positive responses for students. It reminds them that they too were once in a beginner position and makes them feel good to be able to teach what they've learned to a younger or newer student, who may not know the material as well. Student teaching is utilized frequently in this space, as a way to humble students and give them tools to work with others at all performance levels as well as instill within them the confidence that they too can be teachers.

When discussing her methods of teaching she implores with another student, Gina shared:

"Sometimes I grab her viola, I play the whole music. And then I say, "okay let's start with the first note", so then I play it and she grabs the viola and I tell her where to put her fingers and then she plays it two or three times and she gets it. It makes me feel so good" (G. Deloria, personal communication, July 20, 2013).

### ***The Collective***

An emphasis on family, mutual respect for others and friendship is commonly shared amongst all participants. The music program's basic values are predicated on creating a space for students and the community that harbors trusting relationships and acts as a collective hub for bringing people together. Therefore, the activities that teachers and directors implement revolve around the collective and the universal concept of "one bow, one sound" that makes each individual vital to the overall finished product.

During my field observation, I had the opportunity to explore the dynamics created in this music setting. I often sat in on rehearsals that would occur one or

two days before concerts and noticed the patience and respect each ensemble would pay to another. One student would go up and play her solo piece while over seventy students sat quietly in the auditorium listening and acting as her audience. I noted the ages of the children, only a handful were older than 12 and most were younger than ten, as they sat still and silent. The rehearsals lasted anywhere from one to two hours and all the while each student or group is shown the same respect as the last.

Additionally, teachers frequently reproduce the concept of “one bow, one sound” during practice. In one cello practice, I observed Analise delegate the role of "listener" or "lead" to different students throughout the practice. That student was charged with the duty of playing along with the group on a piece while examining and taking mental notes of how they could improve their sound collectively. An emphasis is constantly placed on hearing one another and achieving unison of sound through that connection (B. Young, field notes, June 16, 2013).

Mutual respect for others is highly valued in this space. The students attribute this dynamic to something that significantly stands out from formal school and interactions with kids outside in the streets. To them, the ability to problem solve, communicate and work through arguments with others is made easier through the music program.

Eduardo referred a lot to no longer being a kid on the street who "does nothing" since joining orchestra. He talked about the friends he had before joining and said

that he talks to them less now because he perceives their priorities in life to be much different than his own:

"They are more into the ghetto life and I'm more into the...how should I say, I think normal life? They usually hang out on the streets and make little problems." I asked Eduardo if the students in orchestra were involved in the ghetto life. He responded, "No, there is never much conflict here. We are all usually good friends with each other and if there is ever a problem we know how to solve it. We talk it out and see each other's side of the story and we talk about opinions" (E. Perez, personal communication, July 20, 2013).

Remarking on the evolution of students in the program Analise commented:

"We've stuck kids together that were in bullying situations and you have to be careful about doing this but if they're supervised they can put all of their problems out the door, they can just play it out. Especially boys who get to really dig in and be aggressive and they are friends now. It's amazing. We have this one bass and cello player that were always fighting and now they're friends because they play together" (personal communication, July 22, 2013).

A trusting environment is created through the implementation of student teaching, group style practicing and students having the autonomy and responsibility to stay on track with their assigned schedules, escort themselves and others to class and provide feedback of things they would like to see different about the program. This sense of confidence and

reliance that teachers instill in the students boosts their self-esteem and their own personal sense of accountability.

"So, I know only from what I see and talk to the students about, but these kids have a lot more responsibility and they are a lot more mature at this point in their lives.

Because they are responsible for taking care of their instruments, knowing their music, practicing their music. So some of them do get frustrated when going back to a regular school setting where they have to stand in line and be told what to do all the time, because they know they can do so much more. We let the kids take responsibility, give them their schedule and then they are responsible for coming to their classes.

And it's surprising because if you give them responsibility they step up to the plate" (A. Renaldo, personal communication, July 20, 2013).

### **Discussion**

Challenge, progression, positive feedback and well-being are the primary values constituting children's experiences in the orchestra program. All are somewhat interlinked, relying on vital elements such as trust, appreciation of the collective and personal accountability to perpetuate the shared cycle of meanings individuals in the program share. The process of development is important to take note of in regards to music learning. Many students are mentioned as having begun the program less confidently, less present in school and containing more self doubt. Each aspect of their social development is thus affected once time is spent in the music program, aiding them to exhibit higher levels of confidence, self-esteem and a better ability to focus in class. Prior literature written on the subject corroborates these findings, indicating that students whose musical experiences elicit feelings of accomplishment and progression are likely



to develop stronger feelings of self efficacy and assertiveness both in and out of school (Barrett & Smigiel, 2007 & Cheong-Clinch, 2009).

Student's success in the music program transcends the music space in guiding meaning making processes for other aspects of life, in the sense that many will seek out activities and groups that carry similar values of the music program. The children see their music learning as something that constitutes more than a distraction after school and attribute their experience to various avenues of their overall self-development. Barrett and Smigiel found that students subscribe a "sense of purpose" to their music learning experiences (2007). This subscription aids children in a quest to pursue challenge and center their sense of accomplishment on music, seeing it as an outlet to obtaining discipline, plan their future and maintain a healthy wellbeing. The positive experiences they gain from music learning also drives them to pass these feelings onto others, believing that with music, individuals can collectively aim to create better lives for one another.

Additionally, students make meaning of social interactions through valuing the collective, mutual respect for others and problem solving as necessary elements that work to create a positive atmosphere. The values they take from the music space are held more closely to their navigational trajectories for social interaction, a finding that exposes the effects that creative expression can have on one's willingness to work with others. As Griffin (2010), discusses in her study on children's music experiences, a shared unity of purpose was one of the main driving forces of motivation for students to enjoy learning. Creating friendships, relying on others and creating familial like bonds fuel the entire learning experience. These outcomes are particularly important to assess when expanding

afterschool programs and formal schooling classrooms alike, in that there exist fundamental elements which encourage learning, that can be utilized in any space, if made a priority by educators.

Overall, the findings in this study expose the effects of music learning on children by understanding the meanings and values that students place on their experience. It speaks to the undeniable fact that environments which emphasize self confidence, group learning, shared responsibility and mutual respect naturally motivate children to accomplish more, become more focused and individually seek challenges that will further their development. The investment made by educators in this space contributes to the healthy well being of students, translating into all aspects of their lives and the lives of those around them. Parents, teachers and the community benefit positively from these experiences by identifying pride, progression and transformation with student's and their individual experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Through an in-depth exploration of children's lived experience of a youth music program, this study sought to engage a deeper understanding of the meanings and values applied to music education. Education, as a vastly ever-changing model due to economic expansion and technological advancements, demands consistent attention. At the root of this need is the indefinite reality that youth are the bearers and perpetuators of societal values and interests. Thus, we must immerse ourselves in understanding the lives of youth and exploring what contributes to their positive and holistic development. Investigating a site that emphasizes youth development through hands-on musical engagement is primary for conducting such an investigation.

The results yielded in the data revealed that growth and challenge through music learning are experiences commonly strived for amongst students who express interest in music education. A necessary tenet to continued interest, however, is based on positive feedback, visible improvement and overall development of self-esteem. Additionally, an emphasis on the collective and creating a friendship network are highly valued within this site. These dynamics, if stripped of their ties to music learning in general, can more than likely be reproduced in myriad educational arenas. Thus, this study will contribute to reifying the significant purpose of arts and music education programs as well as act as a guide to educators and program developers who seek to advocate for positive and successful youth development.

### **Limitations of Research**

During interviews, I engaged students in brief discussions about their lives outside of the music program, as in school and family life. However, considering the scope of my project, I was not able to delve into this facet of life more intimately with participants by developing interviews solely on this topic. This area of inquiry would be pertinent to providing a more holistic view of participant's lived experience overall and could engage the factors that serve to limit or influence student's motivations for learning. I observed in the field for a three-month period, however was not able to attend more than one actual concert production. I am unsure of the implications such exposure might provide, however more time spent could have elicited unforeseen data. Lastly, I did not utilize a comparative sample that would allow me to gauge student's music learning experiences against regular school experiences. Doing so would have worked to further solidify my data. I do, however have personal testimony from both teachers and students that discuss the nature of the music program versus the nature of their in school classroom experience. Lastly, a more in-depth exploration of societal needs of the surrounding community would deem supportive to this research endeavor by providing a lens for understanding detailed demographics and narratives of student's family lives and their perceptions of race, class, and gender as it pertains to their experience in particular educational settings.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Research done on both in and out of school experiences of music learning is limited and should be expanded further (Griffin, 2010). In building programs that

provide music and arts education, it is essential for educators to have current and supported resources that reflect the truest understanding of how students navigate these spaces and what elements do or do not contribute to healthy development. Length of time spent in the field exploring the cultural and social foundations of music programs is one recommendation for contributing to further research. Assessments of the specific curriculum and teaching methods utilized by different music programs may also implicate substantial guidelines for educational programs. As reflected in this study, qualitative examinations that expose the true essence of experience through the voices of the youth that live it is essential to truly comprehending the effects of different educational models and concepts that individuals implement.

Additionally, a more in depth exploration of the role of the arts in bringing people together amongst difference in culture and background is of relevance, given the consistent needs to transcend boundaries of race and class in order to create spaces for individuals to understand and embrace one another. This study opens up spaces to explore myriad narrowly focused research topics that can collectively work to expand educational research in general. For example, further investigating the motivations that arise from participant's shared feelings of mutual respect and personal and group development will always be of prominent significance to the field of education and deserves consistent attention. Researchers should seek to build upon the established principles of holistic education and continue to expand its purpose and value through qualitative inquiry.

## Appendix A

*The interviews were open-ended and conversational in nature, therefore some questions were either not asked or more questions that are not included on this prompt were asked in addition.*

### Students

Begin by introductions and getting to know one another...

Can we start by you telling me a little about yourself?

What instrument do you play?

What made you decide to play this particular instrument?

What experience have you had so far with playing music?

How does playing music make you feel?

Can you tell me a story about your time here at DREAM?

Do you have friends here?

What about in school?

What do you guys do for fun?

What do your friends think about you playing music?

Your parents?

Do you have any other siblings or family members that play music?

Do you practice at home?

How do you perform in school?

What do you think you'd be doing over the summer if you weren't coming here everyday?

What is your favorite song to play?

How does music make you feel?

What do you like to do for fun?

## Teachers

How long have you been a part of DREAM?

Can you tell me a little bit about what brought you to this point in your career?

Why do you play music?

What are the teaching methods you use when teaching students music?

How do they respond to these methods?

What does music mean to you?

Do you have any ideas as to what it means to the kids?

Can you tell me about any adverse experiences you've had with any students?

Why do students come here to learn everyday?

What do they gain or stand to lose through participation?

Do you gain anything from it? If so, what?

What kind of environment do you think this music school creates?

How do you feel about the job you have now?

What do you perceive your responsibilities to be?

Do you ever experience any conflict amongst the kids?

How do you view the overall experience of students in this program?

## Parents

Hi, can you tell me a little about (insert child's name)?

Where is your family from?

How does he/she perform in school?

Have you seen any changes within your child since they started learning music?

Do you think they enjoy it?

Do they practice at home?

What other things does she/he do for fun?

What are your hopes for your child?

As a parent, do you encourage your child to practice?

How does it make you feel when you go to concerts or watch your child play their instrument?

What are your perceptions of the DREAM project?

Do you attend concerts?

What do you think about them?

How do you think your child responds to music?

Has he/she ever said anything about why they continue to play?



## Appendix B

Paper Prompt handed out to students in the advanced orchestra with anonymous response.

Tell me a story about how music is a part of your life. You can talk about anything you'd like. You can tell me about why you decided to learn how to make music, or about the musical instrument you play and why you like to play it. You can even tell me about the kind of music that you listen to at home or with your friends!! These are just some suggestions, but feel free to share anything you'd like about your relationship with music. Thank you very much!

## Works Cited

- Alerby, E. & Ferm, C. (2005). Learning music: Embodied experience in the life-world. *Philosophy of Music Education, 13*(2), 177-185
- Anderson, K & Overy, K. (2010). Engaging scottish young offenders in education through music and art. *International Journal of Community Music, 3*(1), 47-64.
- Barrett, M. S. & Smigiel, H. M. (2007). Children's perspectives of participation in music youth arts settings: Meaning, value and participation. *Research Studies in Music Education, 28*, 39-49.
- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S.K. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. 5th Ed. Boston, MA: Pearson, Inc.
- Catterall, J. Sl., & Rauscher. F. H. (2008). Unpacking the impact of music on intelligence. In W. Gruhn, & F.H. Rauscher (Eds.), *Neurosciences in music pedagogy* (pp.171-201). New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Cheong-Clinch, C. (2009). Music for engaging young people in education. *Youth Studies Australia, 28*(2), 50-57.
- DeNora, T. (1999). Music as technology of the self. *Poetics, 27*, 31-56.
- Dewey, John. (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York, NY: Minton, Balch & Company.
- Freeman, W. J. (1998). A neurobiological role of music in social bonding. In N Wallin, B. Merkur & S. Brown (Eds.), *The Origins of Music* (411-424). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Finlay, L. (2009). Debating phenomenological research methods. *Phenomenology & Practice, 3*(1), 6-25.
- Green, L. (2005). The music curriculum as lived experience: Children's "natural" learning processes. *Music Educators Journal, 91*(4), 27-32.
- Gibbs, Graham. (2007). *Analyzing Qualitative Data*. U. Flick (Ed.). Chennai, India: Sage Publications.
- Griffin, S. (2010). Inquiring into children's music experiences: Grounding in literature. Update: *Applications of Research in Music Education, 28*(2), 48-49
- Griffin. S. (2009). Listening to children's music perspectives: in-and out-of-school thoughts. *Research Studies in Music Education, 31*(2), 161-177

- Hallam, S. (2010). The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people. *International Journal of Music Education*, 28(3), 269-282.
- Hewitt, A. & Allan, A. (2012). Advanced youth music ensembles: Experiences of, and reasons for, participation. *International Journal of Music Education*, 1-19.
- Heyworth, J. (2013). Developing social skills through music: The impact of general classroom music in an Australian lower socio-economic area primary school. *Childhood Education*, 89(4), 234-242
- Lester, S. (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. Taunton, UK: Stan Lester Developments.
- Lum, C. L. & Campbell, P. S. (2007). The sonic surrounds of an elementary school. *Journal of Research in Education*, 55(1), 31-47.
- Majno, L. (2012). From the model of El Sistema in Venezuela to current application; learning and integration through collective music education. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1252(1), 56-64.
- Mussachia, G., Sams, M, Skoe, E., & Kraus, N. (2007). Musicians have enhanced subcortical auditory and audiovisual processing of speech and music. *Proceedings of The National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 104(40), 15894-15898.
- Rajan, R. S. (2010). The music within. *Montessori Life*, (2), 34-37.
- Sawyer, R. L. (2008). Learning music from collaboration. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47(1), 50-59.
- Simpson, D.J. (1969). The effect of selected musical studies on growth in general creative potential (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern California). *Dissertation Abstracts*, 30, 502A-503A.
- Smith, W. (2008). Learning a music instrument in early childhood: What can we learn from the professional musicians' childhood memories? *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(4), 54-62.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yang, E-J. (2003). Creativeness as an educational ideal in dewey's philosophy. *Philosophical Studies in Education* (34), 129-138