

**MUSIC EDUCATION: A SOUND PATH TO STUDENT SUCCESS**

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**MUSIC EDUCATION: A SOUND PATH TO STUDENT SUCCESS**

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## **Abstract**

Music education is perceived by some as being extra-curricular, optional, or even non-essential. Through my own experiences however, I have come to value the importance of a music education as something significantly greater, both in terms of increased student achievement in other subject areas as well as in the development of desirable character traits. Research supports the many benefits of music education from infants to seniors and everyone in between. My research carries the intent of revealing music education's many positive impacts on the student body. Through a series of interviews administered with three music teachers with more than 100 years combined music teaching experience, my desire is to build an insightful study that expresses many of the intrinsic qualities an education in music offers to us all.

*Key Words:* Music education, benefits, student achievement, desirable character traits

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction .....</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Aims and Objectives.....</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Related Literature .....</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Research Methods .....</b>  | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Limitations .....</b>   | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Data.....</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| <b>    What Do Veteran Music Teachers Have to Say About the Necessity of Music<br/>    Education for All Students? .....</b>                 | <b>16</b> |
| <b>    How Can Veteran Music Teachers 'Perspectives Shape Our Collective<br/>    Understanding of the Necessity of Music Education?.....</b> | <b>25</b> |
| <b>Key Learnings.....</b>  | <b>27</b> |
| <b>Next Steps.....</b>   | <b>29</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>  | <b>32</b> |
| <b>Appendix A: Recruitment Script .....</b>  | <b>34</b> |
| <b>Appendix B: Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form .....</b>  | <b>35</b> |
| <b>Appendix C: Interview Questions for Music Teachers.....</b>   | <b>39</b> |

## **Introduction**

Friedrich Nietzsche (2017) once stated that “without music, life would be a mistake” (p. 5). How is it, then, that a music education for students is seen by too many parents, school administrators, and policy makers as being an afterthought, optional, or altogether non-essential? Music is a study equal to the traditional core subject areas encompassing language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies combined. It is of my belief from the onset of my research that students who meaningfully study music achieve greater successes not only in other subject areas, but also in the development of desirable character traits. Such attributes include discipline, perseverance, confidence, collaboration, independence, leadership, emotional well-being, and artistic expression.

All music teachers possess a plethora of positive experiences related to their own personal journeys studying music. In my experience, many students who reap the benefits of a music education find themselves achieving greater successes in other avenues in school in addition to being on the fast track to becoming productive citizens within our communities. Research involving the collection of such stories and thoughts from well experienced music teachers aims to present a panoramic soundscape detailing the often-overlooked importance of music education in our localized learning communities.

## **Aims and Objectives**

Music as part of my educational background is something that has been so positively fulfilling in my life that I do not take it for granted. A practicing music teacher can see in the faces of their own students the same emotions, opportunities, and successes that have been personally afforded for themselves through their students’ own active involvement in studying music. Through the process of learning music, students are not only likely to

achieve higher levels of success in their other subject areas, but a music education nourishes a myriad of character traits demanded in society of our youngest citizens.

Existing research provides evidence supporting music as “enhancing psychological well-being, school engagement, creativity, empathy, language and literacy, spatial awareness, and numerous other skills and qualities” (Pitts, 2017, p. 161). My own research builds upon these findings at the local level, tapping personal narratives that likewise demonstrate the strong connection between music education and success in other areas. On a personal level, I have witnessed my own students engage in musical composition (the writing of a well-written song played at a district-wide festival), take on challenging leadership roles within the community (the performing of music for heartfelt Remembrance Day ceremonies and in senior centres), and divulge earnest statements attesting that “without music they would not be here.”

I have implemented a qualitative approach to my research. All data has been collected through a series of one-on-one interviews with three well-respected and experienced music teachers with more than 100 years’ experience between them. Each of these teachers shared their own personal experiences attesting to the merits of a music education. It is my intention to present these narratives so as to generate reflection and then ultimately action by parents, students, teachers, administration, and policy makers alike to collectively recognize the vitality of music programs for all children in our schools. Pitts (2017) holds that music equips us “to live fulfilling and creative lives” (p. 160). Throughout the study, my guiding question remains: how can music education act as a sound path to student success?

## Related Literature

Music education benefits student achievement across all subject areas. As it pertains directly to biological functionality of the brain itself, Kraus and White-Schwoch (2020) recognize that music accelerates brain development as well as boosts the brain's cognitive function important for learning (p. 211). Gordon Shaw, discoverer of the Mozart Effect, supports this claim citing that "music is a window to a higher brain function" (Burack, 2005, p. 84). To further support this discovery, Holochwost et al. (2017) found that "numerous studies have demonstrated an association between music education and higher levels of academic achievement," and that there is a "positive correlation between music education and overall cognitive function" (pp. 148-149). A study by psychologist Frances Rauscher (2007) also showed that "preschoolers who were given piano lessons once a week scored 34 percent higher on tests designed to measure spatial-temporal reasoning skills -- those required for mathematics, chess, science, and engineering -- than classmates who received no music lessons" (p. 52).

Yet the positive effects of music education are not limited to scientific measurements of increased brain activity or the quantitative data apparent from other subject areas. A music education teaches an array of desirable character traits for growing students and applicable throughout one's lifetime. Pellegrino (2011) notes some of the benefits of playing music within an ensemble as including "increased motivation, concentration, stamina, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and a stronger sense of identity" (p. 84).

Kraus and White-Schwoch (2020) point out focus and discipline as being a couple of the ancillary advantages that come from years of regular practice. They also share the

social engagement and satisfaction students feel upon engaging in a music education. Additionally, they stress the invaluable friendships formed and the confidence gained as additional residual effects (p. 213). Pitts (2017) provides further supporting evidence of character development citing that “learning instruments takes effort” and noting that students open to musical challenge “grew measurably in knowledge and confidence” (p. 163).

A music education also provides many psychological and social benefits for students. It provides a learning environment for many that is seen as “non-threatening, accessible, familiar, and even attractive” (McFerran and Hunt, 2008, p. 46). So inviting is the experience of studying music that “music-based interventions have been shown to improve spelling in children with dyslexia and to increase social responsiveness in children with autism” (Rose, Bartoli, and Heaton, 2018, p. 72). Moreover, music therapists use the properties of music “to motivate health-orientated behaviour, facilitate insight, and promote communication and expression” (McFerran and Hunt, 2008, p. 44).

From an ethical perspective, a music education also serves as an exemplar of what moral education could be. Students who actively learn in a music setting “grow musically and socially in diverse and profound ways” providing “a training ground for citizenship and cooperation” (Allsup, 2012, pp. 180-183). Allsup reveals that “the very heart of moral education is helping children to discover, cultivate, and enlarge their best selves” (Allsup, 2012, p. 185). Further to this point, 21st century employers have unanimously increasing expectations on the school graduates of today to “have not only broad and deep knowledge, but they will also possess particular character features [such as] honesty, diligence, wisdom, responsibility, creativity, patience, [and] perseverance”



(Andersone, 2018, p. 239). Joyously, an education of music continues to check off all of these boxes.

The scope of music's bounds are extensive in terms of student achievement and life-long application. Music "provides opportunities for increased sense of agency" in addition to giving its participants "a sense of belonging and communality" (Pellegrino, 2011, p. 83). Parents also reap the benefits of their children's musical experiences recognizing that they "provide their children with opportunities to socialize and connect with their local community" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 99). Also, from both a creative and emotional perspective, a music education remarkably provides an "artistic outlet for [one's] feelings" (Rose, Bartoli, and Heaton, 2018, p. 72).

The character development that is connected within the active involvement of a formal music education allows students to become more thoughtful, caring, and empathetic global citizens. One's success in life is not defined by what they know alone, but "how they behave and engage in the world" (Rubin, 2017, p. 18). It has been reasoned that "music teachers can enable students to mitigate socially destructive beliefs – such as racism and genderism – within their musical traditions" (Gowan, 2016, p. 27). Desirable character traits are achieved through music education and nurtured through an array of transformative learning experiences. The communal efforts of any musical ensemble breeds a sense of purpose where "meaning exists within ourselves rather than in external forms such as books and that personal meanings that we attribute to our experience are acquired and validated through human interaction and experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiv).

One such example is a research project conducted by Carol Beynon (2017) where

she studies an arts-based research account of transformative learning experienced by members of an intergenerational musical choir in London, Ontario. In it, two generations convene, one of senior citizens and the other of high school students, to perform songs as a unified choir with the initial goal of supporting those afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Both generations expressed the emotion of nervousness from the onset, only to have it replaced with the creation of friendships. The learning that ensued was experienced collaboratively *as equals*, and participants felt a strengthening of the community ensuring a sense of belonging for all. Transformational learning occurred as the older singers had not realized "they could learn a new piece of music and retain it in the long term" and brought upon the notion that "lifelong learning becomes a priority" (p. 28). Meanwhile, the younger students developed an appreciation for the talents and personalities of their senior and more musical-wise bandmates.

On a somewhat smaller scale yet musical in its essence, Bolden & Nahachewsky (2015) narrate through their discourse how having students create personal podcast playlists are valuable transformative learning experiences for both students and teachers alike. Here, learners have the opportunity to share their creativity with others, engage in a process of dialogue, and generate socio-cultural and socio-political associations. The authors suggest that "learning is not simply the acquisition of isolated skills or items of information, but involves the whole person and contributes to the formation of individual identity" and that "transformative music engagement involves students in a critical exploration of their own knowledge of music through representations that involve existing artistic, media, and cultural ecologies" (p. 20). Such exercises allow for soulful reflection of one's life that in turn informs meaningful knowledge construction, exercises

creativity, and promotes collaboration with others.

The proposition of having music education available to all Alberta students is not as much a suggestion, but rather a long overdue necessity. Kraus and White-Schwoch (2020) stress that school administrators and policy makers should invest in music education because it equips students to fare better in all their courses (p. 211). So too has evidence been collected sharing that “music promotes social inclusion and emotional well-being” (Rose, Bartoli, and Heaton, 2018, p. 71). As such, school administrators and policy makers “need to be convinced of music-making’s connection to music teaching and student learning” (Pellegrino, 2011, p. 87), and facilitate the changes needed to best equip our students as tomorrow’s leaders in our society. An underappreciated interpretation towards music education by some in today’s society might unexpectedly and pleasurably shift upon hearing additional evidence shared by a selection of seasoned music teachers.

### **Research Methods**

This research study makes use of a qualitative approach to analyze thoughtful reflections, anecdotes, and insights from a series of interviews with highly experienced music teachers. I chose this qualitative approach for several reasons, the first being that there is already plenty of quantitative studies, articles, and data that share the measurable biological and physiological merits of music’s positive effects. As a teacher, I realized that I am well-positioned to collect a series of revealing interviews. These interviews, I believe, are the best way to identify the myriad benefits associated with a formalized music education.

My initial plan was to reach out to three to five music teachers across my home city of Edmonton in Alberta, Canada. Six potential candidates were contacted with three ultimately following through with completing the interview process. I reached out to select music teachers or recently retired music teachers through my school district via email or phone call following a prepared 'Recruitment Script' (see Appendix A). I then gauged their interest in participating in an interview in which they would openly share their experiences as both teachers of music and as music students themselves. Interview candidates showing interest in the study were then forwarded via email a 'Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form' (see Appendix B) to be signed off outlining intended procedures, risks/benefits, and assurance of confidentiality.

Interviews were then scheduled with the participating music teachers between the months of November and December of 2021. Careful acknowledgement and consideration were given as to not interfere with the busy weeks of preparation leading up to winter holiday celebrations. One-on-one interviews were then conducted over the phone or in person using the 'Interview Questions for Music Teachers' (see Appendix C). Interviews were recorded in their entirety using a digital recording device with a full transcription and analysis of the data collected carried out afterwards.

For each participant, I conducted a one-on-one interview of 45 to 60 minutes in length focused upon the following seven questions:

- 1) Do you feel or have you seen evidence connecting music education benefiting student success in other subject areas such as language arts, math, science, and/or social studies?
- 2) Do you feel or have you seen evidence connecting music education positively

developing student character traits such as discipline, perseverance, punctuality, collaboration, independence, leadership, emotional well-being, artistic expression, and/or other?

- 3) Do you find music education to be an important part of student development and success overall?
- 4) In your own personal experiences as a student of music, did music education help you succeed in other subject areas?
- 5) In your own personal experiences as a student of music, has music education positively shaped your character development?
- 6) In your own personal experiences as a student and/or teacher of music, have there been any negative experiences to share?, and
- 7) Do you have any other noteworthy thoughts, anecdotes, or ideas to share pertaining to the importance of music education in our schools?

An emphasis on sharing openly and honestly was a driving factor towards attaining the most purposeful data collection. I first created a broad set of questions before making them more specific and geared towards the interviewees' more personal experiences (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 55). I very much enjoyed the conversations I shared with participating music teachers and greatly value their shared stories.

After transcribing each of the interviews in their entirety, I arranged the transcribed interviews by question as opposed to keeping all responses from each participant grouped together. Simultaneously I assessed the content of each response by "reading it several times and conducting an analysis each time" (Creswell, 2019, p. 238). The impactful first-hand experiences shared with me through the music teacher

interviews somewhat expectantly reinforced the importance of music education in both local and global contexts. Throughout the process I continued to keep sorted the two main drivers of my research findings, where upon a music education:

- 1) increases student achievement in other subject areas, and
- 2) facilitates the development of desirable character traits.

### **Limitations**

Although the responses collected from the three interviews conducted for my research are sincere, thought provoking, and richly affecting in support of music education being made available to all Albertan schoolchildren, there would need to be further research and discussion across an array of stakeholders to fully propagate a systemic change towards the misconstrued undervaluing of music education. Firstly, several more interviews would need to be conducted across a composite of school districts including those teachers with not necessarily as much experience as the ones used in this study. Additionally, purposeful open dialogue with administrators and leaders in school districts would have to be conducted to address present stigmas and even more likely budgetary restrictions that might be deterring music programs in schools from blooming towards its full capacity.

Parents and parent groups also need to voice their support for music programs within all schools after recognizing the multitude of research made available and its overwhelming support towards the many benefits their own children are set to experience should they be able to actively participate in formalized music study. Specialized doctors and researchers must also continue to produce quantitative data that continues to draw upon connections between learning music and increased brain function as well as

developing desirable character traits for our impressionable youth. These limitations and potentially other additional steps are not to undermine the value of the interviews that were conducted for this paper. Instead, this study is designed to be interpreted as a starting point of which to jump off from. Furthermore, it acknowledges the vastness of the ensuing collaborative efforts required to bring music education the respect it justly deserves.

### **Data**

The three participating teachers I interviewed had amassed more than 100 years of related music teaching experience. Collectively they provided me with a wealth of insight, knowledge, and perspective towards my research. My first interview was with Gill (a pseudonym), a recently retired music teacher of 38 years. Like many teachers, the schools in which they teach as well as teaching assignments change regularly, especially over the course of a 30+ year career. The vast majority of Gill's teaching experience, however, was centred around leading orchestral bands at the high school level in the city of Edmonton's west end. My second interview was with a music teacher named Rich (also a pseudonym), who continues to teach after more than 35 years of teaching experience. Rich's history includes teaching at both high school and junior high school levels and predominantly in and around Edmonton's city centre. The third interview was with another recently retired music teacher having 31 years experience to be named Chet (a pseudonym). For most of his tenure, Chet had the opportunity of teaching music to junior high school level students in the west-central Edmonton area.

My objective for conducting face-to-face interviews was to create an intimate yet professional space for interviewees to openly share their invaluable wisdom. During the

interviews I remained cognizant of keeping my “personal feelings and opinions at bay to avoid biasing the data” (Parsons et al., 2013, p. 97). Furthermore, I recorded all conversations using a digital recording device to later playback and transcribe for accuracy. I am steadfast in my beliefs that music education is understated in our schools, however I was obliged not to influence but instead to collect the thoughts and experiences of my colleagues. Each of my participants inevitably provided poignant first-hand accounts offering a deep understanding of the importance of music education in our schools for all students in our province.

### **What Do Veteran Music Teachers Have to Say About the Necessity of Music Education for All Students?**

The first question posed in my interview asked whether a connection can be made between student success in music and other subject areas. Gill sees it pertinent to address what exactly the meaning of ‘success’ truly is before revealing it as being “the innate desire and willingness to challenge oneself to be better today than yesterday.” Gill continues to share his understanding of music having “a direct link to math,” a tie-in with science noting “how pitch and tone blend together,” and a connection to language arts citing “a true musician is always telling a story.” Acknowledging a common thread between music students and top academic achievers, Gill declares that there is unmistakably “a definite correlation!”

Rich echoes Gill’s sentiments recalling “several positive effects” that lend credence to a music education benefiting student success in other subject areas. Rich states in his experience that “when students progressed in choir, instrumental, or ensemble playing, the effect extended to improve both enthusiasm and confidence in their



other subjects.” To further his point, Rich also shares that playing Renaissance music while simultaneously working on period assignments in their social studies class, as an example, seems to “kindle [student] interest.”

Chet’s take on drawing a connection between studying music with increased academic success in other subject areas proved no less thought provoking. Although he cites a connection between the two, in his long experience teaching junior high school band, “kids who stick with music in grades eight and nine are generally high achievers already.” A sort of chicken and egg situation, Chet believes that for many students who choose to continue with optional music study, they tend to have a proclivity towards achieving a higher level of academic success regardless. Chet reminisces upon a quote applicable to the situation: “smart people tend to be smart at a lot of things.” Chet also recounts a specific student from his time teaching who said that “coming early to before-school rehearsals made it easier for him to get out of bed, to get to school, and to be excited about going there.” I would suggest that having a course that has the ability to motivate select students who would otherwise be reluctant to attend school altogether as undeniably essential.

The second question posed asks whether they have seen any evidence connecting a music education positively to the development of desirable character traits in their students. Gill echoes a similar student story reflective of Chet’s:

I am reminded of a student I had several years ago. It was at what was considered an ‘inner city’ school with many students having many challenges in their personal lives. I was surprised to be asked to attend a group parent teacher meeting for a very good music student of mine. At the meeting I was actually

surprised to hear that the student had a noticeable attendance issue. The other teachers all mentioned they actually scheduled tests, quizzes, and assignments on the days this student had music classes! Why? He was one of my best music students. He always found a way to be at school for music.

Gill continues that when students “play [music] together, the sense of joy, accomplishment, and excitement is tangible,” and should not school facilitate these positive experiences in our students’ lives? Furthermore, Gill introduces a theme that underlies perhaps the greatest importance of a music education and that is the creation of a “sense of belonging and value within a group.”

Rich recollects the “entirely student driven” music ensemble performances at senior lodges as being joyously received and solidifying a vital sense of community. Rich shares another story recognizing the “ripple effect” that teaching his music classes would have on a pair of students he bumped into years later while shopping. They stopped him and surprisingly shared with their ex-teacher:

A school, especially the classroom is a special place where the use of the intellect takes prominence in a setting of elevated language and apropos behaviour. To avoid being a burden to others when one is bored is the essence of civilization. In a word: manners!

Rich continues to smile as he continues to talk about one of these boys and how his at one time euphonium player later went on to study to become a teacher, worked as a loans officer, and is now pursuing a masters degree. Back in his formative years, he

would demonstrate eagerness at band practices all the while assuming the role of self-described “band manager” supplying reeds and valve oil to those other students in need, thoughtfully tidying the music room without direction, and assuring that there were “cookies or licorice” available to all after each rehearsal. Rich’s face lights up when he shares these memories of this particular student and how his music education would be the catalyst for turning him into the esteemed young man he is today.

Chet meticulously breaks down each of the character traits I had proposed in my question. For discipline, Chet acknowledges “the rigor of the setup routine and just even being ready to begin learning how to play music” as learnable moments in one’s development. For perseverance, Chet cites that students having “a little more difficulty than other students would do the extra work to fit in.” On the other hand, “when the high achiever all of a sudden runs into something that does not come easily, I saw evidence of students saying, ‘No, I can do this!’” Furthermore, Chet delightfully shares that for the stronger students there is almost intrinsically the development of empathy towards those students who tend to struggle more. With regard to punctuality, this too is learned through a music education not only because of student enthusiasm towards playing, but also through “the realization of deadlines and expectations to be ready.”

Chet recounts invaluable student learning with regard to collaboration, in particular the first ten minutes of each class as students get ready to play and are warming up. A guest in his class once noted aloud how delightful it was to witness “kids teaching each other!” On the other side of this coin, Chet notes that the development of one’s independence is on display through music education as evidenced by students being “driven through passion” and “taking the initiative to figure stuff out on their own.”

Leadership is another character trait advanced upon by music students, specifically on flex days when students have the opportunities to “step up and help one another out, and to take turns at being the leader” in order to achieve a common goal.

Lastly, a character trait greatly developed through the active participation of music education in Chet’s judgment is the students’ emotional well-being. Chet revisits the idea of students needing the music room as a “place to belong.” “Fitting in is not always easy,” Chet continues, while his primary mission as a music teacher is to “create experiences kids could enjoy and that make coming to school just a little bit easier to get going in the morning.” Hearing Chet’s discerning stories, I recall one of my own brilliant music students. I met Stevie in grade seven and she was new to the school, had no friends, quite introverted, and excessively shy. She enrolled in music with me and also joined our lunch hour choir group. By grade nine she was a classroom leader, competent songwriter, and matured into a truly special person. She appreciatively shared with me at that moment that had it not been for our music classes together, she would not be standing there today.

The third question I presented to my interviewees was if they find music education to be an important part of student development and success overall. Gill’s response for this question focused heavily on the formation of pride, both individually and as a group. Gill specifically singles out the importance of music performances and witnessing firsthand the sense of “joy, pride, and accomplishment displayed by the musicians.” He continues to say that even the disappointments of certain performances offer students tremendous opportunities to “learn and grow” both in the moment as well

as when “we continue to grow and move forward as people as our journey continues throughout our lives.”

Rich expands on music education experiences being important parts of students’ lives. Having recently bumped into some students from close to 30 years ago, Rich was told by them that they “credit music class with bonding their friendships and for inspiring them.” Additionally, Rich shares a humorous anecdote whereby “one mother was not happy with me when she explained that due to my influence, her son who she had other plans for, had joined a band and was performing in California, and was concerned about his future!” As fate would later reveal, this student would go on to establish an exciting career as a singer-songwriter, performer, and producer.

In Chet’s mind, a music education adds to student development and success overall by “giving kids a chance to belong and succeed.” He elaborates, “It offers kids that were not necessarily the most academic a way to fit in really well with the academic kids.” Furthermore, music education “makes that whole experience of junior high [for students], when they are going through adolescence, just a little more stable and more pleasant.”

My next question asked the interviewees to turn the mirror in on themselves and reflect on how their own personal experiences as a student of music has aided them in other subject areas. For Gill, he intimately shares how following his mother’s footsteps as a church organist at age 15 dramatically helped him in his understanding of God and his faith. Gill expresses that the sharing of one’s gifts and talents given by God “relates to everything that we do.” For the duration of his life thus far, Gill considers himself

“blessed to have discovered a path playing music,” while it has also “led to a truly fulfilling career filled with joy and happiness.”

Rich’s response does not directly link a connection between music and other subject areas per se, however his reply is nonetheless profound and engaging. He shares:

The effort to improve theoretically, emotionally, and technically as a student or professional musician dramatically deepens the understanding of persistence, determination, and being omnipotent. It applies everywhere to most everything, yet is most readily seen in the progression of musicianship.

As for Chet’s contemplation, he offers yet another angle to appreciate and ponder. “From my own personal experience,” he begins, “academics came very easy. I had to work harder at music than I had to at academics.” This perspective presents the idea of a music education inclusively offering challenges for those students who want to be challenged. Chet continues, “having soaked up all the music in school brought me joy that I did not get anywhere else.”

I next asked the music colleagues how they feel their personal experiences as a student of music has positively shaped their character development. Besides the obvious response of providing a career teaching music, Gill concludes decisively that it is the “lifelong friends, mentors, and supporters” found in “music groups, choirs, jazz bands, and concert bands” that have “strongly influenced” him and “made me who I am today.” Gill expands that the music ensembles he has been associated with “always gave me a sense of purpose, belonging, and pride.”

Offering another point of view, Rich cites “music as fluid architecture.” When asked to expand on this, he states:

We need form in music, and we need form in our lives. Focusing on details, practice routines, being on time, playing in time, listening to others, cooperating and combining efforts into an aural structure... these music education ingredients carry over into our lives: freedom, order, responsibility, maturity, fluidity, etc.

Yet another heartfelt reflection, this time by Chet, he shares how playing in the school band, joining cadets, and attending various summer band camps honed his leadership skills. Along with this, Chet exclaims, “Playing music sort of grabbed me. For a lot of people work is just something that they endure. Learning, playing, and teaching music was never anything I just endured – it was joyful.” This sentiment is undeniably felt by each of my interviewed music teachers.

Shifting gears, I wanted to hear of any negative experiences the participants had with regard to either being a student or teacher of music. What came almost immediately to Gill’s mind was achieving “a negative result in a music festival.” Even so, he notes the immense learning opportunities from such occasions and how it “pushed me more to become the best educator I could become.” Again noting just how blessed his career has been, he takes the most pride “knowing I was there to support and encourage those who were maybe less talented, but needed someone and somewhere to feel supported and encouraged, and just have a positive sense of belonging.”

Rich recalls his “music pursuits stalling several times, but in high school it was rekindled because of my band teachers.” He remembers audition processes sometimes

being quite stressful... “my knees locking and blood rushing from my head!” But Rich also thinks of various negative comments he received along his musical journey. For this he notes that such insensitivity can “lead to increased self-doubt for some, or perhaps a desire to disprove the naysayers” for others. Rich reminds us all to “always consider the person first, and the music second.”

Chet takes my question on negative experiences in yet another direction. He cites that any negative experiences are never about the students nor the music itself. Instead, he reveals that the hardest moments as a music educator are instead predominantly bureaucratic in nature. For example, he shares that over the course of time out-of-province band trips were increasingly more difficult to pull off. “Field trip forms used to be more simple, while today parent volunteers need police checks!” Band trips are a significant part of Chet’s music curriculum, while he also shares:

No student five or ten years down the road will say ‘remember when Mr. Chet said such and such in social studies.’ However, I run into students I had from over 20 years ago and they still remind me about the band trips we went on, or the music festivals.

My final question presented to the music teachers is for them to share any noteworthy thoughts, anecdotes, or ideas reinforcing the importance of music education in schools. Gill somewhat surprisingly surmises that “music education is far more important for those students who may not be as naturally talented.” Gill continues that a music classroom is “a positive place to feel a sense of accomplishment and just feel a sense of belonging to a group with a strong identity.” Students may not necessarily



continue with music when they leave school, but they will most certainly “remember the connections they had while they were in the band.”

Rich recalls majestic moments in his teaching career noting “the majority of music students *love* the experience.” He carries on recalling amazing moments from a 35 year tome of memories including having a Hollywood film composer and opera singer guest lecturers, having both students and parents alike all abuzz after Christmas concerts, and reconnecting with past students many years later and seeing how they have transitioned successfully into adulthood built upon the merits of their time learning music. Rich also merrily attests to hearing from many of his student alumni the phrase, “You inspired us!”

As for Chet, his final takeaways on the merits of a music education reiterate the notion that “adolescence and coming of age is difficult enough as it is.” Moreover, music education “made the school and the experience better for me, and that is all I have tried to do through my teaching career.” He then empathetically puts himself in the shoes of today’s students and points out the cooperative nature of a school music program and how there may not be a more inclusive subject area for all students to experience.

## **How Can Veteran Music Teachers’ Perspectives Shape Our Collective**

### **Understanding of the Necessity of Music Education?**

Through the analysis of all three interviews, it is shared that there is a list of benefits that students studying music will take with them throughout their lives on seemingly all fronts. Music education connects students directly with all other subject areas both by boosting overall confidence for developing students in addition to providing additional

challenges for already high achievers. It is also concurred by each of the veteran teachers interviewed that music education fosters an environment upon which desirable character traits are readily developed. Attributes such as discipline, perseverance, manners, sense of accomplishment, and emotional wellbeing are but a select few that rose highest to the top.

Perhaps the most revealing idea discussed by all interviewees was how music education provides a sense of belonging for its students. The unmatched inclusive nature of a music classroom provides students who may struggle academically to have a setting in which to share with the higher achievers in achieving a greater collective goal. Likewise, the higher achievers have a community to offer them new challenges, all the while building empathy towards others around them and even presenting mutually beneficial mentorship opportunities.

Each music teacher interviewed reflected on the numerous cherished experiences they had through an education in music both as a teacher and a student. Furthermore, they fondly celebrate the lifelong friendships forged during such pleasurable exposure through learning music. I found it particularly poignant to consider how music is not a subject that is designed to be endured, but instead to be immensely enjoyed (even through the sometimes challenging moments of practice). The learning of any subject should be a delight for all involved, but it so happens that the subject of music most readily carries out such positive emotions.

Any negative angles tied to music education seemingly have little to nothing to do with music itself nor the involvement of its students. Instead, any challenges presented are most commonly centred around increasing bureaucracy involved in the organization

of field trips, the sometimes gut-wrenching feedback received from festival adjudicators, inadequate funding or program support from administrators/districts, etc. Resonating strongest with me is how any obstacles that seemingly arise through the process of learning music are not to be run away from nor feared. Instead, music teaches us to meet any and all challenges head on with steadfast determination.

### **Key Learnings**

The fundamental driver of my research is to bring attention to the importance of music education within our school system. After analyzing all of the data from the music teacher interviews paired with the existing scholarly evidence, compelling evidence is revealed which shares that the presence of a music education in students' lives acts as a powerful tool towards developing the minds and character of our youth. Key learnings uncovered include:

- 1) In agreement with the research of Kraus and White-Schwoch (2020), Burack (2005), Holochwost et al (2017), and Rauscher (2007), a strong argument can be made that music education increases student achievement across *all* subject areas. Music is language arts: it is poetry, metaphors, rhyming, and storytelling. Music is math: it is meter, tempo, counting, and fundraising. Music is science: it is tuning, vibration, dynamics, and resonance. Music is social studies: it is culture, nationalistic, individual, and teamwork. Music is a second language: it is a universal language understood regardless of where on the earth one is residing. Music is physical education: it requires the fine-tuned development and control of specialized muscles, reactions, and breath.

- 2) Music education develops a myriad of character traits desirable of today's youth harmonious with the findings of Pellegrino (2011), Kraus and White-Schwoch (2020), and Pitts (2017). Such attributes include an increased sense of discipline, perseverance, confidence, collaboration, independence, leadership, emotional well-being, and artistic expression. I would entertain that there is no other subject besides music that can address each and every one of these traits.
- 3) Astonishing personal experiences were shared by music teachers through their interviews. These stories can take unexpected directions, yet can be weaved together into the narrative. Such stories may include ones whereby students disclose to teachers comments like "without music class, I wouldn't be standing here today." Statements such as this exhibit the impact of how music education in young students' lives cannot be overstated and are congruent with the discourses of McFerran and Hunt (2008), Rose, Bartoli, and Heaton (2018), and Allsup (2012).
- 4) As Rodriguez's (2019) article disclosed, parents who studied music themselves also have favourable memories of their youth when participating in music and desire similar experiences for their children. Furthermore, she shares the regret many parents feel for stopping their own musical studies. Ultimately, parents need to be more vocally supportive about the many benefits beheld in music education.
- 5) The evidence that has been presented paints an overwhelming positive picture of the effects of an education including music. School administrators, school districts, and provincial governments *must* take note and recognize the need for meaningful and structured music programs for each and every school within

Alberta. The wisdom of these experienced teachers suggest that every child ought to experience the satisfaction of studying music regardless of location and socioeconomic standing.

Music makes children more adept in all facets of their lives. Parents of students who study music also rejoice in their children's successes. Not only music teachers, but teachers of all subject areas can celebrate the riches of music education. Finally, administrators, districts, and governments bear the responsibility to allocate the funding required to have music programs available in all Alberta schools. It is long past due to not have music as merely an option in select schools across our province. Instead, music education must be recognized as the indispensable melody that resonates between all of our lives.

### **Next Steps**

A curriculum that includes music enriches the lives of every student who participates in seemingly an infinite number of ways. Positive connections are made between music and each of the core subject areas, while so too is the development of character traits, not only desirable to students within the school setting, but throughout one's life journey as well. The next steps would be to shout (or sing!) from the rooftops the findings of this study with students, parents, school administrators, and policy makers with the intent of painting a more honest representation of the importance of music education being needed in all Alberta schools. For too long, music has been perceived by some (and in turn treated) as a niche subject area in our schools. A structured, meaningful, and enjoyable music program in all schools needs to be accessible to all students regardless of one's

misconceived views of its importance, socioeconomic background, or preconceived proficiency of one's playing.

Of course to implement such policy change it would require further extensive dialogue amongst all stakeholders in addition to a deep policy analysis of the state of music education in present day Alberta. What this study aims to accomplish, however, is to present the valuable perspectives of three extremely knowledgeable music teachers sharing the importance of what a music education can offer to those fortunate enough to actually experience one. Used as a jumping off point in conjunction with additional quantitative research (i.e. a collection of student grades across all subject areas by both music and non-music students, student/parent surveys, etc.), an argument for music education in all schools can be better realized.

With an increased awareness on the benefits of music education I would anticipate increased funding to be made available towards existing school instrument repairs, the purchasing of new instruments and sound equipment, and the supporting of new and varied music programming. Additionally, a truly effective and all-encompassing music program need not be limited to only concert bands and choirs. Piano studios, guitar and string ensembles, as well as coursework in music history, theory, improvisation, and composition are also anticipatory to promote student opportunity and growth.

All of the music teachers I interviewed as well as many others have understood the positive impacts of music education throughout their lives and wish to share such similar experiences with everyone. So many times I have had adults share with me how they wished they had studied music when they were younger. Time and time again I assure them that it is never too late to start, however it is obvious that the learning is so

much more significant to a child's developing body, mind, and soul. I do not wish to force the findings of this study upon anyone; however, I do want a clear and concise portrait to be made available to anyone appreciating the true and numerous positive benefits of music education. To do so would put our youth on a sound path to student success.

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## **Appendix A: Recruitment Script**

“Hello [insert name of potential interviewee here].

I was wondering if you might have the time and interest to participate in my research project I am conducting for my Master of Education capstone project through Concordia University of Edmonton?

The aim of my research is to collect data that reveals the benefits of music education with a particular focus on its role in the development of valued and valuable character traits. I wish to interview school music teachers to discuss their experiences as both teachers and students of music via email or phone call. Such personal accounts, I suggest, can reveal the positive impact of music on youth.

Although I would be very happy to have you share your unique experiences with me, I respect your decision to decline for whatever reason.

However, if you are interested, I can forward to you through a private email a consent form with more details and we can arrange a convenient time to meet and conduct our interview together.

Thank you so much for listening and for your consideration!”

## **Appendix B: Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form**

### Study Title

Music Education: A Sound Path To Student Success

### Researcher

Shawn Lamble

Before agreeing to participate in this research, I strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

### Explanation of Procedures

The aim of my research is to collect data that reveals the benefits of music education with a particular focus on its role in the development of valued and valuable character traits. I wish to interview school music teachers to discuss their experiences as both teachers and students of music. Such personal accounts, I suggest, can reveal the positive impact of music on youth.

Participation in the study involves a face-to-face or telephone interview, which will last for approximately one to two hours. The interviews will be conducted by me, and will be audio-taped and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

### Risks and Discomforts

If you elect for a face-to-face interview, this will be conducted under COVID-safe conditions at a mutually agreed upon location. This research poses no greater risk

to participants than that ordinarily encountered in daily life. It is not designed to induce psychological duress. However, as a teacher myself, I know that it can be cathartic for participants to share challenging stories with a like-minded colleague. While cathartic, the recollection of unpleasant memories associated with their music teaching/learning experiences can cause distress. I will strive to keep the fact of your participation private at all times.

### Benefits

I believe that my teacher participants will benefit by allowing them the opportunity to reflect and share their own pleasurable experiences in both studying and in teaching music. Also, other educators and society at large might benefit from music teachers' perspectives on the benefits of music education.

### Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during this project. Data and information will only be available to myself and my research supervisor, Dr. Lorin Yochim. There will not be any identifying names in the research notes or on the transcripts. Your names and any other identifying details will not be collected and will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The recordings will be destroyed at the completion of my Master of Education program. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research project final report and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings.

### Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty.

You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question we might ask you. Even if you agree to participate now, you can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. You can withdraw permission to use data from the interview up until the final publication of the research project final report, after which all recordings and transcripts will be deleted. Until that point, all research materials will be privately and securely stored in the interviewer's home under lock and key until deleted in its entirety upon research paper being completed in May of 2022.

#### Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask me any questions that occur to you during the survey or interview. If you have further questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact me or my supervisor using the contact information given below. If you have other questions or concerns about the study please contact the chair of the Research Ethics Board at Concordia University of Edmonton via e-mail at reb@concordia.ab.ca.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I

understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

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Participant Signature

Date

Researcher contact information:

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## Appendix C: Interview Questions for Music Teachers

Please answer the following questions honestly. Your participation is much appreciated!

Teacher name:

School(s) taught at:

Grades/classes taught:

Years of teaching experience:

- 1) Do you feel or have you seen evidence connecting music education benefiting student success in other subject areas such as language arts, math, science, and/or social studies?
- 2) Do you feel or have you seen evidence connecting music education positively developing student character traits such as discipline, perseverance, punctuality, collaboration, independence, leadership, emotional well-being, artistic expression, etc.?
- 3) Do you find music education to be an important part of student development and success overall?
- 4) In your own personal experiences as a student of music, did music education help you succeed in other subject areas?
- 5) In your own personal experiences as a student of music, has music education positively shaped your character development?
- 6) In your own personal experiences as a student and/or teacher of music, have there been any negative experiences to share?
- 7) Do you have any other noteworthy thoughts, anecdotes, or ideas to share pertaining to the importance of music education in our schools?