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### Engagement in Music Education in the Upper Elementary Grades

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Engagement in Music Education

Engagement in Music Education in the Upper Elementary Grades

A Quantitative Research Methods Proposal

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Abigail Jirik

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science  
in Curriculum and Instruction

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Moorhead, Minnesota

**ABSTRACT**

The following research was based on observations from the researcher's time in the elementary music classroom and addresses the decline of willingness to participate in students in the upper elementary grades. The research addresses the following two research questions; how do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class? And in what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner? The researcher selected fourth and fifth grade students as the participants in the study. Students were given surveys asking questions about participation and attitudes towards music and were also observed. The researcher found that there was some correlation between family attitudes and students' willingness to participate in music related activities. The researcher also found that students prefer to experience music through instruments and technology. The researcher hopes to incorporate more family education and community outreach, along with more technology-based instruction to her methods of music education and will encourage other music educators to do the same.

*Keywords:* elementary music, music participation, attitudes towards music

**DEDICATION**

With great pleasure, I dedicate this action research to my family; my parents, Tom and Mary, and my fiancé, Jakob for their unwavering support, and my sister, Sarah, for her assistance in organizing data. I also dedicate this research to my peers in the music education field. It is a privilege to learn and grow with so many amazing and inspiring educators.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

As a teacher in the field of elementary music for three years, the researcher has observed a decline in the willingness to participate or engage in music lessons, particularly those lessons that involve forms of singing. This decline seems to begin to happen in the fourth grade and becomes more noticeable in fifth and sixth grade. Students become less responsive and more likely to mess around rather than engage in music instruction. The subject of music, particularly in elementary school, is largely assessed and graded based on engagement and participation. Instruction and learning in music happen primarily through experiences, so when students choose not to participate or engage, they are losing music experience. In conducting this research, the researcher hoped to discover her students' background when it comes to music, reasons music participation and engagement may be declining, and in what ways teachers can change and adapt their instruction to encourage participation and engagement through the older elementary grades.

### **Brief Literature Review**

Literature previously written about this topic supports this study in determining how attitudes towards singing and music education may affect participation and engagement in elementary music class and how the material can be better presented to engage the older learner. The researcher was able to find literature regarding forms of research, the importance of music education, some reasons there might be a loss of engagement in programs across the world, attitudes towards music and singing, and suggestions for improving engagement.

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Szucs (2018) wrote an article in 2018 claiming that 13–15-year-old students who participate in music in some way perform better in other subjects and academic feats. This was one of many studies reviewed that aligned with emphasizing how important music education is to students. In numerous articles, authors of studies and reports hypothesized and listed proven reasons for significant loss of engagement across music education and curriculum including outcomes-based curriculum, traditional, unchanging methods of instruction in music, gender implications, increased support for STEM subjects rather than the arts, and loss of teacher engagement. Other researchers found information supporting evidence that parents and the environments in students play a large role in their willingness to engage and participate in music activities.

Many of the studies read added many suggestions for increasing this loss of engagement and participation, suggesting things like seeking to increase inclusive opportunities, using creation as an instructional method, using podcasts and more popular, mainstream music, and putting emphasis on the environment in which students are learning.

Most of the studies reviewed were done on secondary and post-secondary samplings, so this may suggest a call for an increase on the elementary level. The researcher hoped to obtain data from her students on their attitudes and their families' attitudes towards music as well as their preferred forms of music education and instruction.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Background on the researchers' students' music experiences and attitudes was observed prior to the survey and research. The researcher inquired use of music in their home life, parent encouragement in regards to participation in extracurricular music activities (like piano or violin



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lessons), and parent attitudes towards singing. She also asked students to rank and rate different school centered and non-school centered music activities to get an idea of what ways and methods her students prefer to learn music concepts. Getting an idea of what they respond best to will help structure lessons in a way that could potentially increase their participation and willingness to engage.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Engagement and participation are vital to music curriculum and instruction. Students cannot learn music concepts without the experiences and when they are not engaged or participating, they are losing those experiences vital to their learning. While teaching elementary music the last three years, the researcher noticed a decline in the engagement and participation of students in the upper grades. She performed this study because she wanted to find out why there is a decline and what teachers can do to prevent it and increase or hold engagement throughout the elementary ages.

### **Research Question(s)**

1. How do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class?
2. In what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner?

### **Definition of Variables**

The following are the variables of the study:

#### ***Independent Variable(s)***

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Independent variables are those affected by the other variables in the study. Thomas (2020) describes them as “the cause” (Thomas, 2020). In this study, the independent variables were the ways curriculum and instruction were presented to students and the attitudes and dynamics towards singing and music of families, communities, and the students themselves.

### ***Dependent Variables***

Thomas (2020) describes dependent variables as the effect, or the outcome of the independent variables (Thomas, 2020). In this study, dependent variables were the students’ willingness to participate in music and singing activities and their level of engagement in these same activities.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were the researcher’s fourth and fifth grade students. These students attend a rural public school in Midwestern Minnesota. Participants are those that were the subjects of the research who provide the sampling.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although a great deal of literature has already been authored regarding participation and engagement in music, why it may be declining, how attitudes in the home or community may affect it, and what we as educators may be able to do to improve it, little has been done in reference to the elementary age of students. In conducting more research at the elementary level, music teachers can restructure the way upper elementary music students are taught to better hold their engagement, which in turn may help improve their engagement and participation through the secondary years as well.

## **Research Ethics**

### ***Permission and IRB Approval***

In order to conduct this study, the researcher sought out MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Mills & Gay, 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study was sought from the school district where the research project took place (See Appendix A).

### ***Informed Consent***

Protection of human subjects participating in research was assured. Participant minors were informed of the purpose of the study via the Method of Assent (See Appendix B) that the researcher read to participants before the beginning of the study. Participants will be aware that this study is conducted as part of the researcher's Master Degree Program and that it will benefit her teaching practice. Informed consent means that the parents of participants have been fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study for which consent is sought and that parents understand and agree, in writing, to their child participating in the study (Rothstein & Johnson, 2014). Confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time will be outlined both, verbally and in writing.

### ***Limitations***

The environment in which the student completed the survey was neutral in nature, so that students felt they could answer the questions honestly rather than just answering the way they felt the researcher and teacher wanted them to answer, or their family wanted them to answer. Students completed the survey at school in their own classroom under the researcher's

supervision. She clearly explained to them the purpose of the study and emphasized that it was acceptable for them to answer honestly about their feelings and attitudes towards music.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the topic of research, the engagement of upper elementary students in their music courses, a brief literature review, the problem, the loss of engagement, purpose, seeking out reasons for the loss in engagement to improve instruction in a way that fosters engagement and active involvement, and research questions, defined the significance of the study, personal observations, and provided background on research ethics were introduced. In the next chapter, the full literature review will be presented.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

By the time students reach fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, it is very difficult to feel as if instruction in the music classroom engages or interests them, especially in regards to singing, and therefore raises concerns about students closing off their willingness to learn. The researcher began to seek out the reasons for students' lack of participation and engagement in music lessons in the upper elementary levels. She hypothesized that in the strong sports community she works in; it may have to do with attitudes toward music in the home and community. She also began to seek out what methods of instruction in regard to music and singing may better engage and interest the older learners in the school. These issues and hypotheses evolved into the following research questions; how do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class? In what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner?

### **Body of the Review**

#### ***Context***

The articles used in this research describe different methods of research in music education participation, the importance of participation and engagement in music education, an outline of studies done on the attitudes of music and music education, and suggestions for how to improve instruction in music education to potentially make it more engaging for upper elementary students.

#### ***Methods of Research***

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A majority of the research and studies included in this literature review rely on and used survey-based, observation-based, and data analysis-based research. Survey based research was conducted on students, parents, and teachers on a variety of subjects from their background in music, their perceptions of music education, and the effect of music on their lives. Researchers used observation-based research to look into engagement in a variety of different music class activities. Data analysis research was used primarily to compare grades and test scores in other subjects against participation in elective music classes or extra-curricular activities.

One rather interesting form of research discovered while reading through literature was used on elementary aged students to study their perceptions of music. The research was conducted by Cosaitis and Southcott (2015) and is based on a visual analysis. The study asked elementary aged students to draw “Music and Me”. Researchers were able to analyze the drawings and conclude, in a way that overcame the obstacle of language barriers and students’ inability to properly verbalize thoughts and feelings, that a majority of young students enjoy music to some extent, but not always in the school setting, rather in an aspirational way (Cosaitis & Southcott, 2015).

### ***The Importance of Engagement in Music Education***

Szucs (2018) discussed her research on the influence of music education on a child’s development. Szucs conducted research on 13–15-year-old students in three different schools through a questionnaire asking about everything from music participation, to family economic status, to family dynamic in regards to music, extracurricular activities, and contents of the family library. Her research found that students who study music in some form fare better in other subjects or academic feats. GPAs across all three schools were consistently higher in students who study music (Szucs, 2018). Likewise, a data analysis study done in a public school

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in British Columbia found that students who had some form of music participation had higher academic achievement than those who do not (Guhn, Emerson, & Gouzouasis, 2020).

Music education can benefit students in other ways as well. Pitts (2017) conducted research on how music education can foster a lifelong engagement. Pitts surveyed both parents and children to find out exactly how music can shape people's lives, how home attitudes affect music, and questions about musical skills and confidence in music. Her research concluded that parents play a large role in whether or not children are open to musical challenges and have an awareness of the effort of music making (Pitts, 2017). Orzolek's (2020) research found that participation in music ensembles such as choir or band that put an emphasis on collaborative learning paves the way to an increase in participation and it encourages the "art of fellowship" which leads directly to a growth not only in musical confidence and skill, but a growth in the ability to collaborate and work with other people in a cooperative way (Orzolek, 2020).

Music can be used as a tool for teaching and success in other subjects, which was the basis for Bintz (2010)'s study. Bintz noticed that schools significantly struggled with engaging boys in literature study, which correlates with engaging boys in singing activities, as was cited in Orton and Pitts' study (Orton & Pitts, 2019). Bintz goes on to talk about the "seamless link" between science and phonics when he tasked his students with rewriting the words to known song "Row Row Row Your Boat", which shows the importance of positive attitudes towards singing and music (Bintz, 2010).

### ***Loss of Engagement***

In numerous articles, authors of studies and reports both hypothesized and listed proven reasons for a significant loss of engagement across music education and its curriculum. Mellizo

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(2020) blames outcomes-based curriculum as a potential loss of engagement. Mellizo claims that a teacher's perspective of music education can be given significant power over another, thus not expanding any views or perceptions and losing student interest. She cites the example of teaching new songs. Some teachers prefer to teach by ear while others prefer to teach by reading off the staff. Most will tend to teach what they feel most comfortable with rather than changing it up to suit a variety of learning styles in their classroom (Mellizo, 2020). Bradley and Goble (2020) similarly cite traditional, unchanging teaching methods as "numbing" and worry that it can also lead to loss of engagement in students (Bradley & Goble, 2020). Newman (2019) claims music should absolutely be taught by a music teacher, and if it is not, that may be another reason that engagement is lost (Newman, 2019).

In their study, Orton and Pitts (2019) found that gender implications should be considered in regards to students' willingness to participate. Their study found that boys often feel reluctant to participate in music and singing because they are worried they are inadequate and will not live up to the expectations of the teacher and their peers. They found that girls are most concerned with judgment from their peers for participating or making a mistake (Orton & Pitts, 2019). Arostegui (2016) reported that music is on the decline in education in 2016. He suggests that there is a disconnect between music education and the industry of music and non-STEM subjects and activities like music have become more for the very poor (as a safe space and sense of community) and for the rich (those who can afford lessons and classes outside of school) but less for those in the middle. Music has become less available to everyone. Music is not a standardized subject, and Arostegui suggests that its simply because we, as a society of teaching, do not yet know how to standardize it.



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Salvador (2019) suggests that perhaps a loss in student engagement is due to a loss of teacher engagement. The increased pressures of teaching in the twenty-first century; stress, management (time and classroom), workload, and a general lack of support seem to be taking away from the joys of teaching. Salvador says, bottom line, teachers' needs and well-being need to be taken care of and assured before they can help students (Salvador, 2019). Deborah Bradley also warns teachers to be aware of too rigid instruction or being too tough, suggesting that students are inadequate or not good enough. Bradley discusses the idea of Agoraphobia, or a fear of the open, often refers to someone being afraid of open spaces, but Bradley explains that it can also refer to teachers being afraid to open up their philosophy of music to include other philosophies or methods of instruction, even if they may benefit students who learn in different ways (Bradley, 2017). Arostegui (2016) echoes Bradley by stating "music teachers are often set in their ways, skeptical to move past 'tradition', shying away from technology, popular music, non-western music, and jazz." (Arostegui, 2016) Bucura (2019) agrees students' feelings about themselves and their abilities strongly impact their learning. Bucura urges educators to encourage students to personally identify their musical abilities and be aware that encouraging musical risk taking may actually create more anxiety in students and if students are seemingly "checking out", it may be a safety measure or coping mechanism (Bucura, 2019).

### *Attitudes Towards Music Education and Singing*

Pitts' (2017) article and research where she conducted a questionnaire to students and parents centered around the importance of music and how it can shape lives. Pitts asked the following questions in her survey; "what kind of music went on in your home as a child? What memories do you have of school music? What or who had influences on your musical behavior? What are the highlights of your musical life? Do you have any regrets of missed musical

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opportunities? How are musical skills/acquired and nourished? Where does musical confidence come from? What role in engagement does music education play? How can these ideas be supported or enhanced?” (Pitts, 2017). Pitts found that home attitudes set up their musical mindset, and if they are more positive, they encourage students to be more open to musical challenges and more aware of the effort that success in music truly requires (Pitts, 2017). Likewise, Abrami, Brook, King, and Upitis (2017) found abundant evidence in their study that parents influence musical outcomes, engagement, and attitudes. Parents who directly assisted their children in music making bring positive outcomes. Parents who themselves have college educations, play or played an instrument expect longevity of their students’ participation in music. The values, environments, and backgrounds of students affect their musical achievement (Abrami, Brook, King, & Upitis, 2017).

Pitts co-conducted a study with Alice Orton along the same lines. This study focused on adolescent reluctance to sing, particularly in boys. The sampling in the study was 192 year seven through nine students with a fairly even mixture of males and females at a British International school in Bangkok, Thailand. The study used a questionnaire with survey questions where students were instructed to rate various musical activities on a scale from one to six, followed by an open-ended set of questions to explain why they did or did not find certain activities enjoyable. Using results from the questionnaire, students were then sorted into groups for interviews that highlighted various questions and situations regarding students’ attitudes towards singing and music. Orton and Pitts (2019) found that most adolescents they surveyed and interviewed find music activities enjoyable. Some even cited going to karaoke outside of school and singing in the shower. However, many students also admitted to struggling with certain aspects of singing, which made them more reluctant to participate (Orton & Pitts, 2019). Even

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young musicians in the elementary level are capable of expressing their perceptions of music. As I spoke of above, Cosaitis and Southcott (2015) conducted a visual analysis survey in which they asked young students to draw the topic “Music and Me”. They found students really like music, both in school and out (Cosaitis & Southcott, 2015).

Clauhs and Culp (2020) observed that many students, following their required time in music class at the elementary level, choose not to enroll in elective music classes at the secondary level. The researchers decided to do some more digging to find out why. Looking into reports made by music educators they concluded that economic access, parent/guardian influence, the presentation of repertoire, scheduling, community involvement, and the way students feel welcomed into music are all barriers that act against students’ willingness to participate at the secondary level (Clauhs & Culp, 2020).

### ***Suggestions and Ideas for Increasing Engagement and Participation in Music and Singing***

The authors and curators of the research offered numerous suggestions and ideas for increasing engagement and participation in music, along with encourage positive attitudes towards music education and singing.

Clauhs and Culp (2020) dove deeper into the attitudes of students, families, and community members, and then offered direct suggestions for improving the problems related to these attitudes. They suggest teachers find ways to alleviate financial stress for families through fundraising opportunities, they suggest inviting parents and community members to open house and performances so they can learn more about the music lessons and programs their students are a part of, and they also suggest teachers seek repertoire and activities from composers and

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creators of all backgrounds to cultivate interest across all diverse learners and backgrounds (Clauhs & Culp, 2020).

Sometimes the solution to increasing engagement and participation is as easy as choosing a variety of activities for students to experience music. Davis, Singletary, and VanWeelden (2018) offer activities such as games including the creation of games as suggested by Jimenez and Patricia (Jimenez & Patricia, 2018), use of instruments from guitars to BoomWhackers, composing and creating, and dancing and movement as activities in the music room. They also stress the importance of clarity in listening activities. Students need to understand why they are listening or what they should be listening for, or they will shut out what they are listening to. In regards to singing, the authors state that it can be difficult to hook students with singing and implore teachers to attempt to work of the stigma of singing in school and also suggest using popular music that may hook the students more easily (Davis, Singletary, & VanWeelden, 2019). Bolden and Nahachewsky (2015) studied the use of podcasts in music instruction and found that students have a very positive response to this activity or form of learning and assessment. Based on the Transformative Music Engagement philosophy which is rooted in the constructivist theory, learning by creating podcasts teaches based on student knowledge, builds skills, knowledge, and voices, and creates both collaborative and individual experiences, and encourages learning in the digital age. Students created podcasts to talk about their experiences in music class, but students could also find podcasts to listen to regarding different musical subjects. In the researcher's own classroom, podcasts created by NAXOS (a music database) are sometimes used to learn about different composers. Bolden and Nahachewsky (2015) found that learning through podcasts created a more personal and expression-based experience for students, which improved their levels of engagement (Bolden & Nahachewsky, 2015).

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Alekena and Kang (2020) conducted a study at their college where they created a creative place for music making, known as creative place-making. In the parking lot of their school, they created an open environment for music making and encouraged random passersby to join in. The goal of their experiment was to bring to mind what music and music making include and why. This idea of creative place-making in music brings students more agency and freedom and gives them a place to feel more comfortable sharing music in a meaningful way (Alekena & Kang, 2020). In terms of space, Anderson, Graham, Simmons, Thomas, and Truscott (2018) claim that participation in music happens in three places; the classroom, extra-curricular activities, and informal spaces. They echo the sentiment of many of these authors and researchers that giving students choice and say in their music education track will make learning more meaningful and encourage them to be engaged through voice, influence, choice, and working together (Anderson, Graham, Simmons, Thomas, & Truscott, 2018). Similarly, McLeod (2020) says giving students the opportunity to freely observe their own singing and make statements on things noticed or improvements that need to be made helps them achieve an increased understanding of singing (McLeod, 2020).

Martin (2020) created an article of suggestions for keeping students engaged in music over the summer. Martin suggests using things like listening lists, which give students flexibility in their listening, encouraging attendance at local music events like concerts and performances, and looking for assignments that are on websites which cater to a more technological generation of learners. Her goal in writing this article was to encourage students to close the loop between spring and fall (Martin, 2020).

Szucs (2018) studied the correlation between music participation and school achievement. In her study and conclusions, she asked students to identify what draws them to

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music study and the top cited reasons were “the ability to play an instrument, for the experiences and company, for an opportunity of self-expression, for teacher personality, for beautiful melodies, for interesting knowledge, and for developing other skills” (Szucs, 2018). Teachers can and should reflect on this information and increase the access to those reasons in the classroom, even on an elementary level.

Bucura (2019) cited some reasons teachers might be accidentally disengaging their students from learning. She offers a solution in the form of differentiated learning, which she claims can help students find a more mastery of experiences because they can guide the path their learning takes. She also stresses that praise on progress and teachers themselves admitting mistakes (modeling musicianship) can have a strong impact on students’ self-efficacy (Bucura, 2019).

Barlow (2018) reminds us that often times engagement or participation is required of our students but it also improves their musical skills. Barlow also claims there are four forms of engagement; engagement in learning, engagement with peers, engagement with community members, and encouragement with the community as a whole (Barlow, 2018). Barlow’s (2018) research suggests a new perspective that our engagement in those four groups can affect the attitudes of community and families.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class?
2. In what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner?

## **Conclusions**

This chapter reviewed literature that supported this study in determining how attitudes towards singing and participation and engagement in elementary music class and how the material can be better presented to engage the older learner. Forms of research, the importance of music education, some reasons there might be a loss of engagement in programs across the world, attitudes towards music and singing, and suggestions for improving engagement were discussed in this chapter. Most of the studies reviewed were done on secondary and post-secondary samplings, perhaps calling for an increase on the elementary level. The researcher hoped to obtain data from her students on their attitudes and their families' attitudes towards music as well as their preferred forms of music education and instruction. In the next chapter, we will be looking at how data was collected, interpreted, analyzed, and utilized in the research study.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Introduction

The researcher has been an elementary music teacher for three years now in two different districts. During those three years in both districts, she has observed a decline in students' willingness to participate or engage in music lessons, particularly those lessons that involve forms of singing. This decline seems to begin to happen in the fourth grade and becomes more noticeable in fifth and sixth grade. Music at both the elementary and secondary levels are largely assessed and graded based on engagement and participation. Instruction and learning in music happen primarily through experiences, so when students choose not to participate or engage, they are losing music experience. In conducting this research, the researcher was hoping to discover her students' background when it comes to music, reasons music participation and engagement may be declining, and in what ways teachers can change and adapt their instruction to encourage participation and engagement through the older elementary grades.

### Research Question(s)

1. How do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class?
2. In what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner?

### Research Design

For this research, a cross-sectional survey was used. Students were only surveyed one time and in general, the questions were kept close ended so they were easier to collect and analyze. The researcher used paper and pencil (see Appendix C for the complete survey) to



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collect survey results. There was not much of an issue with nonresponse, because the survey was proctored during a required class with the students and the researcher gave students the opportunity to give an “other” or “unknown” response.

The internal threats to validity generally cited with survey-based research are mortality (participants being unable to complete the study for some reason), location, instrumentation (accessibility to the instrument), and instrument decay (researchers being unable to accurately analyze the results). Since my study is not longitudinal, meaning the survey was given only one time, mortality is not a concern. All the participants, being the researcher’s students, participated in the survey research from school, in the same classroom, so the threat to validity in regards to location was decreased. All students received the survey on paper, but could request assistance from the proctor, avoiding instrumentation issues. The researcher did not anticipate instrument decay being an issue, because she was able to give some flexibility to the amount of time needed to complete the survey.

### **Setting**

The setting of the study was a public elementary school in a rural Minnesota community approximately 25 miles southeast of the Fargo-Moorhead are. There are 854 students enrolled in the school district, with 462 of those students attending the elementary school (Public School Review, 2020). In 2018, the United States Census Bureau reported a population of 2,603 residents for this community, which is known for hosting the county fair, an annual summer festival, and is home to a winning sports program at the high school level, particularly a football program that boasts annual wins at the sub-section and section levels (United States Census Bureau, 2018). According to Data USA, the median annual household income in the city is \$72,500, which is considered middle class in Minnesota (Data USA, 2020).

## **Participants**

The participants in my study were the researcher's fourth and fifth grade students. According to the files, there are 19 students in those grades total who have IEPs. In the school district, 94% of students are white, and black and Hispanic students make up the other 6%. In the fourth and fifth grades, there are no black students, three Hispanic students, and the rest are white.

## ***Sampling***

This is a convenience sample, because the participants in the study were the researcher's fourth and fifth grade music students. The reason these students were selected for this survey and research was that they were her students.

## **Instrumentation**

The instrument for data collection was a survey conducted to fourth and fifth graders via paper and pencil under the researcher's supervision. She worked to develop the survey instrument herself. Since she was interested in finding out more about attitudes and music related activities students and their families have interest in, the questions were based on that. The majority of the questions in the survey are based on a rating system (having students rate and activity on a scale from one to five). The survey took around 20 minutes to complete, but more time was offered if necessary.

## ***Data Collection***

Data was collected through a survey given to participants. The researcher also observed students over the course of two weeks and kept notes of the number of times she noticed them

## Engagement in Music Education

engaged and actively participating in music class, particularly when singing. A copy of the survey can be found in the Appendix (Appendix C).

### *Data Analysis*

Since a rating scale was used in the survey, the researcher came up with ranges of scores that suggest various outcomes of the survey. For example, a very low score on the survey would suggest that high levels of participation in music and music related activities are not encouraged or emphasized at home, whereas a higher score may mean a student is more motivated to participate in music related activities both inside and out of school. The survey also included a component asking students in which ways they prefer to learn music. This data is presented in the graphs in chapter four.

The researcher also observed students and gave them a participation score based on tallies during singing based lessons. She compared and contrasted their participation scores with their survey scores to try to draw a correlation between the two.

### **Research Question(s) and System Alignment**

The table below (i.e., Table 3.1.) provides a description of the alignment between the study Research Question(s) and the methods used in this study to ensure that all variables of study have been accounted for adequately.

**Table 3.1.**

Research Question(s) Alignment

Research Paradigm	Research Design	Research Question	Variables	Instrument(s)	Source(s) and expected Sample Size	Data Analysis
Quantitative	Survey-based	How do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class?	DV: Participation in singing in elementary music class  IV: Student/Family attitudes and dynamics  Family Dynamic	Survey and interview questions taken and adapted from Orton and Pitts' survey.	4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade participants  Sample Size Expected: I am anticipating that most of my 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade students will participate, so that is about 130 students	Scores of the surveys will be analyzed and sorted into means, median, standard deviation, percentages, and ranges.
Quantitative	Survey-based	In what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner?	DV: Engagement  IV: Presentation of singing in instruction	Survey and interview questions taken and adapted from Orton and Pitts' survey.	4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade participants  Sample Size Expected: I am anticipating that most of my 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> grade students will participate, so that is about 130 students	Scores of the surveys will be analyzed and sorted into means, median, standard deviation, percentages, and ranges.

## **Procedures**

In March 2021, this survey was conducted to students via paper and pencil. Responses were collected and analyzed using the scores students presented in their survey responses. April 2021 was used to observe participation and compare and contrast those results with the results of the survey.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Since the research was survey based, there was little to no risk involved for participants. Parent permission was obtained on behalf of the students, and the students and their guardians had the option to opt out at any time (refer to Appendix D for the letter of consent sent to students' guardians).

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, the aspects of the methodology and research has been broken down. The introduction was once again stated to provide some background on the importance of the research, the research questions were restated, the design of research was discussed, along with the setting, participants, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, alignment, procedures, and ethical considerations. In the next chapter, the results of the survey will be presented.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **Description of Data**

The purpose of the research was to try to determine a correlation between students' willingness to participate in elementary music class with their personal attitudes and family attitudes towards music education and other aspects of music. The researcher also wanted to dig a little deeper into the ways students prefer to learn music in order to try to create lesson plans that better engage students. In total, 97 students participated in the research. The sample was fourth and fifth grade students who are members of the researcher's elementary music classes. Fourth and fifth grade were chosen because the decline in engagement seems to happen in the upper elementary grades and that age group could more accurately communicate perceptions of attitudes at home. Data was collected both through a paper and pencil survey and through observation.

In total, it took about two weeks to obtain permission from parents to complete research. The researcher was able to give the surveys to students in one day and it took a few days to really sort through the results. About two weeks' time was spent making observations based on the students' varying levels of participation, although this is a fairly normal aspect to the classroom's instruction and assessment, so it was nothing out of the ordinary in classroom routines. In the year of the pandemic, it has been a struggle to get even some of the previously best engaged students to be engaged and actively participating in instruction and lessons. The observations made largely mirrored this sentiment.

### **Results**

#### ***Research Question 1***

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The first research question was “how do family and student attitudes and dynamics towards singing affect student participation in singing in elementary music class?” A combination of a number of questions asked to the students on the survey with the results of observing levels of participation were used. The questions on the survey applied to various ways music may be a part of a home or family dynamic. The questions addressed the following out of school music activities; listening to music alone, listening to music with friends, music lessons outside of school, playing and making music with friends, going to concerts, and creating music. The survey also had a section focused on music activities in the home as follows; listening to music in the car, listening to music in the home, an adult playing an instrument, a minor in the house attends a music lesson, and an adult in the house sings. The final question on the survey was “has a parent or guardian in your home ever encouraged you to pursue a music related activity?”

When observing students for levels of engagement and willingness to participate in music activities in school, the researcher observed where their attention seemed to be (since she is teaching on a cart in grade level classrooms this year, it is common for her to catch a student preoccupied on an iPad or with a book), she observed their willingness to sing, move, or play instruments, and she also looked for their willingness to answer questions or actively be part of discussions.

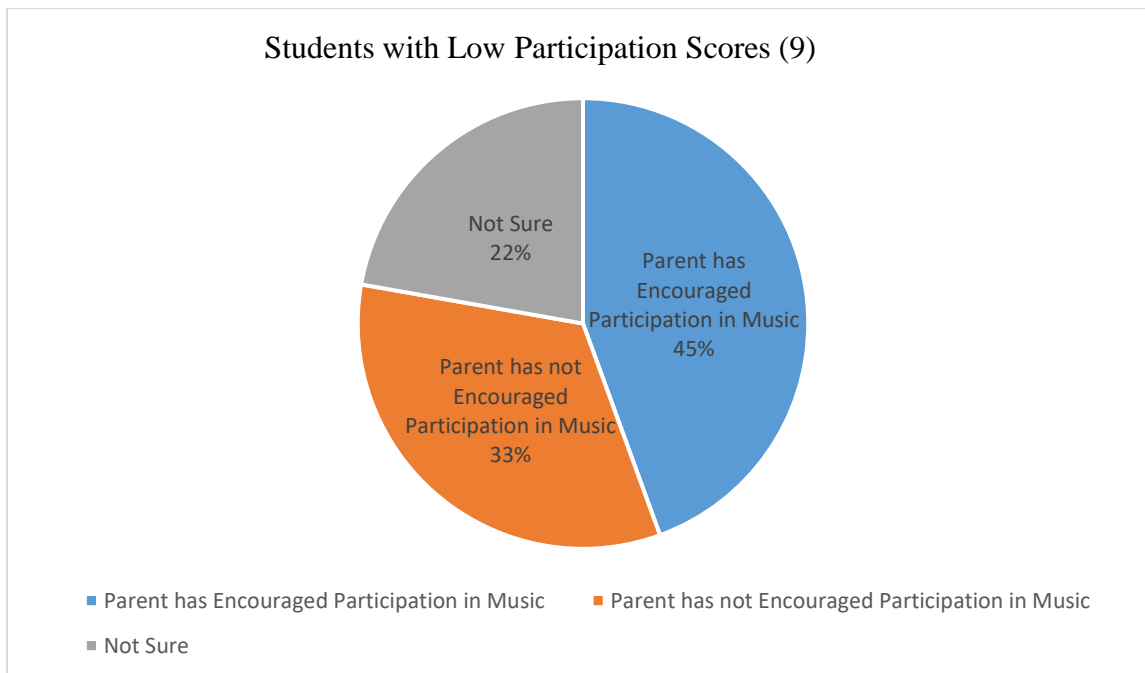
80% of students said they really enjoy listening to music alone, while only 16% said they enjoy listening to music with friends. Likewise, only 32% of fourth and fifth grade students enjoy playing or making music with friends. About 25% of students say they enjoy music lessons outside of school; however, this does not take into account how many fourth and fifth graders actually take any type of music lesson outside of school. 34% of students enjoy going to

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concerts, and a somewhat surprising 43% of students claim they enjoy creating music outside of school.

Almost every single fourth and fifth grader who was a part of the research listens to music in the car often. 69% also claim they often listen to music in their house. Only nine percent of students have an adult in their home who regularly plays an instrument, while about 44% of students have an adult in their home who regularly sings. 12% of students attend a music lesson regularly or have a sibling who attends a regular music lesson. 38% of students recall being encouraged to pursue a music related activity, 33% do not, and 29% cannot remember if they have had a conversation about music activities with an adult in their home (see tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3). In the following graphics, I have compiled results from the survey alongside results from the observations.

**Table 4.1**

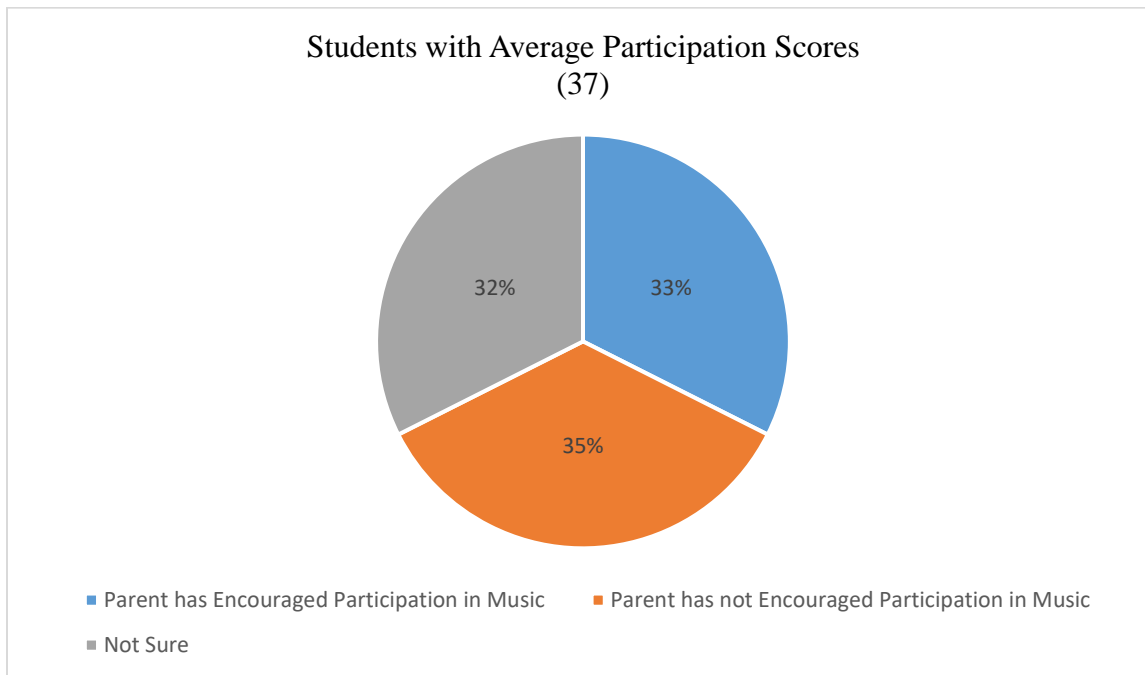




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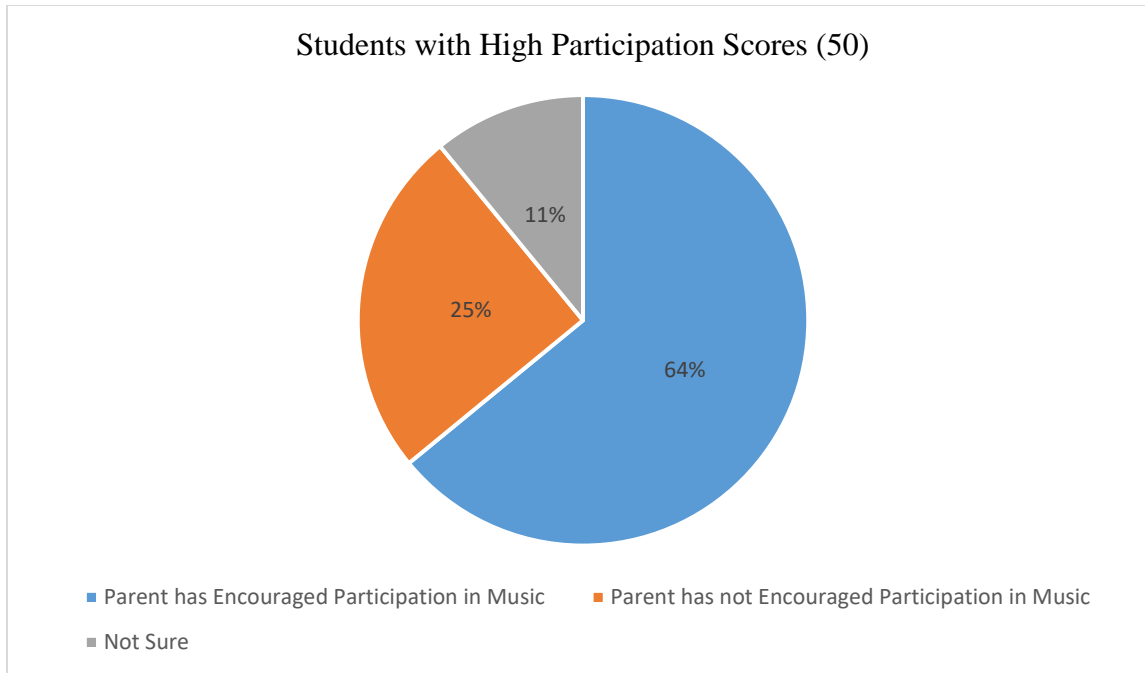
Nine students received low participation scores. This means that these students rarely if ever engage themselves in music. They often create disruptions or attempt to do an unrelated activity in their desk or space. Of those nine, 33% have never had a conversation with an adult in their home about pursuing a music activity, 45% have, and 22% were not sure.

**Table 4.2**



37 students received average participation scores. This means that students are engaged in lessons and activities in music class some of the time. Of the 37, 35% have never had a conversation with an adult in their home about their participation in music, 33% have, and 32% were not sure.

**Table 4.3**

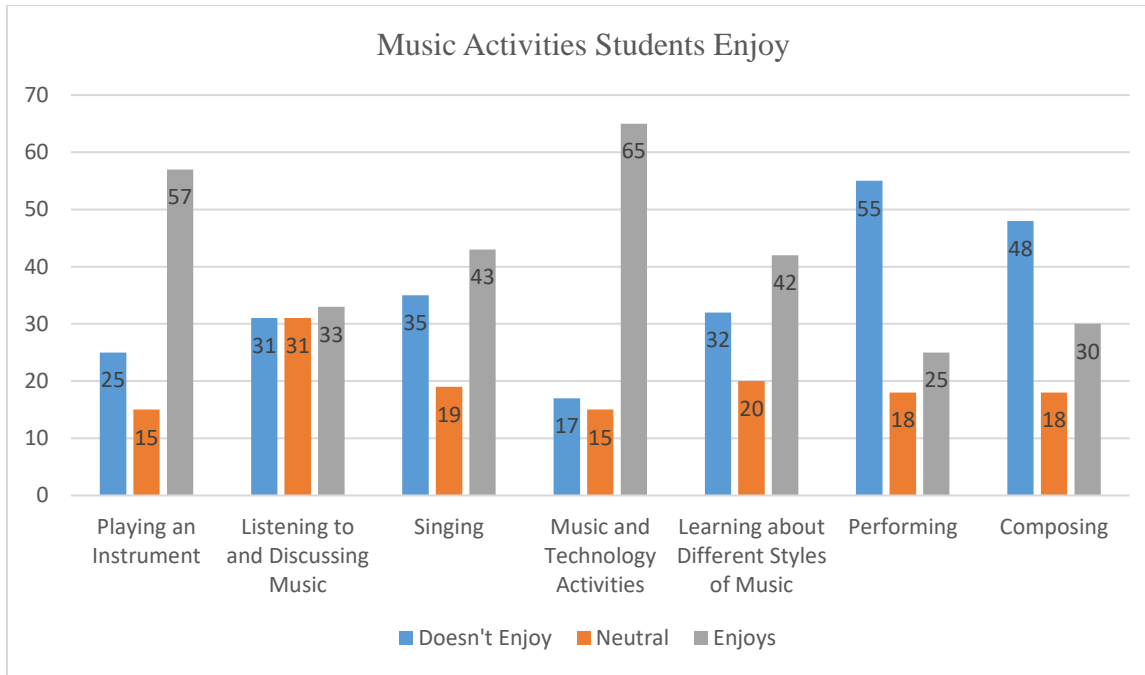


50 students received high participation scores, which means throughout a 25-minute class, they are actively engaged in learning, singing, playing instruments, moving, and participating in discussions. Of these 50, 64% say they have had an adult at home encourage participation in music, 25% have not, and 11% say they are not sure.

***Research Question 2***

The second research question was, in what ways could singing be presented and included in instruction to better engage the older elementary learner? The researcher felt the best way for me to gather this information would be to simply ask students how they prefer to learn (see Table 4.4). Below are the results of the survey questions asking specifically about the ways students prefer to learn various music concepts in music class.

**Table 4.4**



**Conclusion**

Since the researcher began teaching elementary music in 2018, she has seen a decrease in students’ willingness to participate as they move up to upper elementary grades. Her observation of student participation showed that a little more than half of fourth and fifth grade students are actively participating in music class. The researcher goes back and forth on whether or not this is an optimal number. She was surprised it was that many, but as any teacher would, she would prefer for 100% of her students to be actively engaged in learning. In the out of school music activities, students listening to music on their own came in at the top, which was not surprising, since that is probably the most common way music is experienced by all people. The researcher was a little surprised the next highest activity was creating music outside of school, since composing was not popular in school.

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Across the board in regards to participation and family influence, a third or less of students reported no conversation with their parent or adults at home regarding music participation. She would consider the data somewhat inconclusive because there were so many students who stated they did not know if they had had a conversation with an adult in their home about participation in music. She was interested to see that of the 50 students who received high participation scores, 64% (the largest percentage recorded in the data) were encouraged to participate by their adults at home.

As for the in-school music activities, it seems that students most prefer technology-based activities and playing instruments. Since returning to school this fall and following pandemic protocols, students have been asking to return to the recorder we left off in the spring. The researcher has seen students thriving in technology-based and instrument-centered activities. Performing, listening to music, and composing fell to the bottom of the list. These are critical parts of the curriculum and standards, so they cannot be taken out completely, however, one wonders if there are ways to combine them with the more preferred methods of learning.

In the next chapter, the researcher will address the question above, along with a few other reflections. The researcher will also outline how she intends to use and share the information I analyzed from her data with other schools and music programs.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: ACTION PLAN AND PLAN FOR SHARING**

### **Plan for Taking Action**

The largest take away points from the research were in regards to family attitudes and education and ways in which music topics are taught and presented in class. Since there appeared to be some correlation between parents and adults encouraging students' participation in various music activities, and their willingness to participate in music class in school, the researcher believes it would be a valuable decision for herself and other music teachers to look into education programs for families to really talk about music education and the many ways that it can benefit a student. Community outreach, too, could be an effective way to increase positive attitudes towards music in a districts' families.

Since all parts of the in-school music activities included on the survey are vital to music education and its processes, and also part of the national and state standards, they cannot be eliminated from the plans and curriculum. However, incorporating the ways that students prefer to learn could improve their willingness to participate. For example, although composing and performing were low on the list of activities students prefer to do, one could seek out ways to incorporate instruments and technology into composing and performing to help capture students' attention and interest. More apps, websites, and programs exist for incorporating technology into the general music classroom. Instruments fall right in line with both composing and performing.

Ultimately, the best way to teach students is by differentiating instruction to suit the needs and interests of each individual student. This is tricky in elementary music, because often times one teacher is responsible for teaching every elementary school aged student in a school. Getting to know the needs and interests of each individual student can be tricky, but continuing to find activities and materials that fit alongside a variety of learning styles and preferences will

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likely be the best way to capture and hold engagement, not only in the elementary music classroom but in any classroom.

### **Plan for Sharing**

The researcher hopes to share some of this data and knowledge gained from her research with other music teachers in and around the area. She hopes to begin to advocate for community outreach and family education when it comes to music. The researcher has several peers who struggle with the engagement of the older elementary age group as well, but she also has many peers who are already holding family music nights and sending home music newsletters each week. Each of these two things would likely be an easy and effective way to reach out to families and the community to show and remind them the importance of music education to our schools and students.

Additionally, the researcher would love to give music education peers access to resources that match with students' preferred methods of learning various music topics. There is value to knowing what students want and need from teachers when it comes to teaching them and music is meant to be not just about educating and building knowledge, but also about experiences and building experiences.

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**APPENDIX A**

January 22, 2021

To Whom it May Concern,

This letter is to grant Abigail Jirik permission to conduct an action research study at Atkinson Elementary School in Barnesville, MN during the spring of 2021 as part of her studies at Minnesota State University Moorhead. I understand that the study and research pose no risk to participants involved in the study or members of the faculty, staff, and school board of Barnesville Public Schools. I also understand that parent/guardian consent will be obtained and all data from the research will be kept confidential and used for the purpose of the study only.

Sincerely,

Todd Henrickson

Principal, Atkinson Elementary School

Barnesville, MN

## **APPENDIX B**

### Method of Assent

The researcher will explain to her fourth and fifth grade students, “your parents have given consent for you to participate in a research project that I am conducting for my master’s degree, but you have a choice on whether or not you participate. If you do not wish to participate, there will be no effect on your grade. This is completely by volunteer only. The only effect of this study is to help me learn more about your music experiences and in what ways you like to learn about music. Here is what will happen: You will participate in class as usual and will be asked to fill out a survey on a piece of paper about different music related activities and lessons. I will use the results of the survey and will observe how you participate in music class to collect my results. Are there any questions?”

**APPENDIX C**

Engagement in Music Education Survey

1. What grade are you in?

a) 4th grade

b) 5th grade

2. What is your gender?

a) Male

b) Female

c) Prefer not to answer

3. Rate the following in school music activities on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being least liked, 5 being most liked.

Playing an instrument 1 2 3 4 5

Listening to and discussing music 1 2 3 4 5

Singing 1 2 3 4 5

Music and Technology activities 1 2 3 4 5

Learning about different styles of music 1 2 3 4 5

Performing 1 2 3 4 5

Composing 1 2 3 4 5

4. Rate the following out of school music activities on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being least liked, 5 being most liked.

Listening to music alone 1 2 3 4 5

Listening to music with friends 1 2 3 4 5

Music lessons outside of school 1 2 3 4 5

Playing/making music with friends 1 2 3 4 5

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Going to concerts 1 2 3 4 5

Creating music 1 2 3 4 5

5, How often do the following activities happen in your home? 1 being almost never, 5 being very often.

Music is played in the car 1 2 3 4 5

Music is played in the house 1 2 3 4 5

Parent/guardian plays an instrument 1 2 3 4 5

Self/sibling goes to a music lesson 1 2 3 4 5

Parent/guardian sings 1 2 3 4 5

6. Has a parent or guardian in your home ever encouraged you to pursue a music related activity (summer musical, piano lessons, enrollment in band, etc.)

a) Yes

b) No

c) I'm not sure

**APPENDIX D**

October 18, 2020

310 5<sup>th</sup> Street SE

Barnesville, MN 56514

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Your child has been invited to participate in a survey-based study to learn more about attitudes towards music in families and preferred methods of learning in students.

Your child was selected because he/she is in my 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade music classroom. If you decide to participate please understand that your child will be asked to do the following, which are structured as fairly typical classroom activities that involve no risk to your child.

1. Your child will complete a survey asking them about the music activities both inside and outside of school that they particularly enjoy or not. The survey will also ask questions about the way music is a part of their lives at home. We will be completing this survey during our music times, approximately 8:30-10:10.
2. Students will also be observed by me during teaching to gauge their typical level of participation in music class from day to day.

Although Principal Todd Henrickson has granted me permission to conduct this study, since the results from this survey will be used to help me complete my master's degree at Minnesota State University Moorhead, I need to have parental consent to use the information in my final paper that I am required to do as part of my degree. If I did not need this information to complete my master's degree, I would be conducting the same type of research in my normal everyday lessons and I would not need consent. If you sign this form, you are granting me permission to use the information I gather. All information that is used will be strictly confidential, and no names will be used. Please note, your child can choose not to participate at any time without any consequences.

Please feel free to ask any questions you may have regarding this survey and study. You may contact me here at school at 218-354-2300 or [ajirik@barnesville.k12.mn.us](mailto:ajirik@barnesville.k12.mn.us). You may also contact my advisor at this phone number and this email address.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. You are making a decision whether or not to have your child participate. Your signature confirms you have read the above and will allow your child to participate. Any time after signing this form, you may withdraw your student's participation without any consequences.

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Signature of Parent or Guardian

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Date

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Signature of Investigator

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Date