

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Understanding the impact of an after-school music program with engaged underserved youth

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/28g6w65b>

Journal

Journal of Community Psychology, 47(6)

ISSN

0090-4392

Authors

Sheltzer, Joshua M
Consoli, Andrés J

Publication Date

2019-07-01

DOI

10.1002/jcop.22193

Peer reviewed

Understanding the impact of an after-school music program with engaged underserved youth

Joshua M. Sheltzer MA, PhD Cand  | Andrés J. Consoli PhD

Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology (CCSP), Gevirtz Graduate School of Education (GGSE), University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), Santa Barbara, California

Correspondence

Joshua M. Sheltzer, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.
Email: jsheltzer@ucsb.edu

Abstract

Aims: This study aims to document and understand the benefits of underserved youths' successful involvement in an after-school music program (ASMP).

Methods: The contents of semi-structured, individual interviews with 11 alumni and five staff members of an ASMP were coded and analyzed using inductive Thematic Analysis.

Results: Alumni identified several positive program characteristics as most influential (e.g., consistency, opportunity, exposure), and described the program's favorable impact at a personal (e.g., identity development), relational (e.g., improving social skills), and musical level (e.g., acquiring performance skills). Staff members identified similar program characteristics as crucial for the success of the program and singled out their personal, relational, and social motivations as important dimensions that bring about the program's impact.

Conclusions: The study highlights the value of musical experiences and after-school resources for a group of underserved youth who would otherwise not be exposed to them due to socioeconomic barriers and inequities in opportunities.

KEYWORDS

after-school programs, community engagement, music, social-justice, thematic analysis, underserved, youth

Informative: This study contributes to the understanding of how underserved youth benefit from a music-based, after-school program and documents the value of musical experiences and resources for this population. The article provides social justice-oriented recommendations for other community-based after-school programs.

The authors would like to acknowledge the staff and alumni of Notes for Notes for their time, effort, and commitment to participate in this research project. Partial funding for this project was provided by GGSE in the form of start-up funds granted to the second author and used to cover research incentives.

INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 15–25 hr per week that children are out of school while most parents or custodians are at work, creating an “after-school gap” (Catalyst, 2006, p. 45). After school programs (ASPs) can help address that gap, creating opportunities to reduce incidences of after-school youth crime rates, which have been shown to peak at times coinciding with the end of school hours (National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, 2009, 2010). ASPs are programs designed to serve the youth of all ages by providing a wide range of focus areas and activities including academic support, mentoring, youth development, arts, and sports and recreation, usually taking place between 3 and 6 p.m. (Youth.gov, 2019). The benefits of ASPs have been widely studied, and evidence suggests that high-quality programs can produce meaningful outcomes (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Among a general trend of positive effects of ASPs, Vandell, Reisner, and Pierce (2007) found that involvement in ASPs resulted in higher standardized test scores, improved school attendance, and reductions in behavioral problems. A meta-analysis provided evidence of the positive impacts of ASPs on adolescents' self-perceptions and bonding to school, positive social behaviors, levels of academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors, especially when programs fostered personal and social skills (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have found that youth who regularly attend an ASP demonstrate significantly better concentration and regulation skills than those who do not regularly attend (Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010). However, despite the promising results of these studies, it is important to underscore the correlational nature of the findings and therefore, their corresponding limitations.

Although evaluations have indicated that ASPs are producing positive outcomes, several aspects of research and program implementation have been critiqued. For example, Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, and Parente (2010) observed that research findings have been inconsistent, often fail to account for controlling factors, such as youth participation in multiple after-school environments, and are not based on agreed-upon program features that can affect outcomes. To say conclusively that ASPs are contributing directly to certain outcomes is not possible at this time, and the most consistent assertion in the literature is that more rigorous evaluations of ASPs are needed (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015). In light of the current state of affairs with respect to research on ASPs, qualitative research designs, like the one in this study, can help explore how ASPs are positively impacting participants who have had successful program experiences, generating more informed future research questions that could, in turn, be used to construct more rigorous, pertinent evaluations.

In addition to the correlational positive relationship between ASP participation and desirable outcomes, it is important to consider the issue of program quality, aside from quantity and attendance. A substantial amount of the research and program evaluations available indicates that ASPs can improve important developmental and learning outcomes, yet not all programs are designed and executed in a way that achieves these results (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). Specifically, results from ASP studies suggest that there are important aspects to consider when attempting to define success in programs, such as quality of the program, participant engagement, program characteristics, and staff qualities and training, rather than simply program attendance (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010; Shernoff, 2010). Springer and Diffily (2012) provide further evidence of the significance of program engagement in ASPs. In their short-term longitudinal study that involved repeated measurements of the same participants over a year, they found a positive correlation between the intensity and breadth of ASP participation and academic achievement, especially for elementary students.

Another important component of ASPs to consider is the populations they serve. While examining the potential of community-based ASPs for Latinx youth, Riggs et al. (2010) asserted the value of assessing youth perceptions of the programs in which they are participating and to study the participants themselves who access and utilize ASPs. Much of the available literature has evaluated the effects of participation in ASPs in general, often overlooking demographics and other characteristics, such as the diversity of program participants as well as issues related to program accessibility. Some of the literature has focused on program

effects for at-risk youth (e.g., Kremer et al., 2015; Lauer et al., 2006) while others concentrate on low-income youth (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). However, a paucity of research on ASPs serving marginalized populations (e.g., underserved, at-risk, low-income) remains.

With respect to ASPs focused on music, researchers have linked music participation among the youth to higher rates of college enrollment and achievement, improved grades, and increased school and civic engagement, when compared with those not involved in music (Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012). Saarikallio and Erkkila (2007) found that music can promote emotional self-regulation and offer adolescents resources for increasing and restoring well-being. In addition, music has even been shown to reduce pain and anxiety in children during medical procedures (Klassen, Liang, Tjosvold, Klassen, & Hartling, 2008). Furthermore, a study by Rowe and Guerin (2018) found that youth have used their musical identity to help survive the stress of challenging environments, build strong and sustained identities and communities, and cope with mental health issues. Overall, evidence suggests that involvement in music can be beneficial for many youth, though the precise mechanisms of how those benefits come about are not fully understood.

The paucity of research on ASPs serving marginalized populations discussed previously is even more noticeable among ASPs focused on music. In fact, a PsycINFO electronic database search including the keywords "after-school program" and "music" and (underserved OR low-income OR at-risk) yielded only one relevant result that examined student's musical preferences and preservice teacher reflections related to an after-school music program for at-risk children (Ward-Steinman, 2006). Findings from this study indicated that preservice teachers, who were undergraduate education majors, considered themselves not only a positive force as musical mentors, but also successful in making the experience enjoyable, challenging, and even extraordinary for the at-risk children involved in a 6-week after-school music program. In addition, Ward-Steinmann (2006) found that the children involved in the program seemed to prefer music that reflected their ethnic background. Beyond this single study, the gap in the literature underscores a need for further studies addressing marginalized participants in after-school music programs, as they are underserved not only on their most basic needs but also on all other needs, including access to artistic expression and research.

Considering the limited research on ASPs focused on music and underserved youth, this study sought to contribute answers to two main research questions: (a) how did an after-school music program successfully impact alumni who were deemed engaged by staff? and (b) what processes were involved in bringing about these impacts, and how did they come about?

1 | METHOD

1.1 | After-School music program description

The nonprofit organization, Notes for Notes, runs an after-school program that provides free music resources for youth, including music lessons, workshops, the opportunity to sing songs into a microphone over prerecorded backing tracks (i.e., karaoke), recording and musical engineering instruction, access to musical and recording equipment, and more. The program's mission is focused on creating collaborative relationships through music and promoting freedom of expression and respect for creativity.

Notes for Notes has partnered with the Boys & Girls Club organization, where the programming takes place. The Boys & Girls Clubs describe the demographic of club members as underserved, with 60% of their members qualifying for free or reduced lunch prices (Boys & Girls Club, 2016), compared with the 2015 U.S. national average of 51.8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Originally started in Santa Barbara, CA, Notes for Notes has now grown to 16 locations nationwide. However, since its creation in 2007, the organization has not had a chance to examine formally the positive impact it has had on its members and has relied on anecdotal evidence to gauge such impact.

1.2 | Procedure

Data were gathered through semistructured interviews of alumni (i.e., former members of the program), as well as current staff members. Interviews were guided by questions designed to help participants explore and reflect upon their experiences in the program (the semistructured interview protocol is available from the first author upon request). Consistent with recommended qualitative sampling methods (Patton, 2002), a purposeful sample was utilized to identify program alumni who could speak to their high-quality, successful, and engaging experiences in the program. Because the focus of the study was on strengths of the program and what was working well, rather than focusing on the deficits or outcomes for alumni who were not engaged in the program, this sample method was suitable. Again, the intent in using purposeful sampling was to interview alumni who were deemed engaged by staff while they participated in the program and who could reflect on how the program impacted them, directly addressing the study's research questions. To facilitate the intentional selection of research participants, the researchers met with program staff members and invited them to select alumni who they believed would be able to reflect on their consistent engagement in the program.

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (approval number 2-17-0582), community contacts to the program (i.e., Notes for Notes staff) identified and recruited potential study participants defined as those who had consistently engaged (i.e., participated regularly for at least 2 years) in Notes for Notes and were no longer active members of the program (i.e., alumni). At the time of the interviews, some alumni were involved only as program volunteers, whereas others were pursuing college education or working in the community. For the purpose of gaining a more complex understanding of how the program benefits come about, it was particularly relevant to also interview program staff. Therefore, an open invitation was extended to them as well.

In total, 16 participants were interviewed (11 alumni and 5 staff). Length of program involvement among alumni participants ranged from 2 to 8 years, and the length of time since ceasing formal participation in the program ranged from 1 to 7 years. Alumni participants included two females and nine males, with a median age of 20. Eight of the alumni participants identified as Latinx, one as Caucasian, one as Middle Eastern, and one as Asian/Caucasian. Staff participants included two females and three males, with a median age of 29. Three staff identified as Caucasian, one as Western European/Hispanic, and one as Latino/African. Length of employment ranged from 1 to 6 years. Each alumni participant received a research incentive of \$20 for their involvement, whereas staff members volunteered their time. Once the interviews were completed, interviewees' audio recorded responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using an inductive form of thematic analysis, a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). QSR International's NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software (NVivo, 2012) was used to organize the coding, which was further refined and analyzed as a team.

1.3 | Positionality of the researchers

Emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness and self-reflection in qualitative research, Fassinger and Morrow (2013) call for researchers to examine their assumptions and biases, as well as make their statuses and standpoints explicit. Consistent with this stance, throughout the process of analysis, both researchers engaged in dialogue about their potential biases, expectations, beliefs, and values surrounding the study. The lead researcher of this study is a Caucasian male counseling psychology doctoral student, who is also a musician and participated in ASPs throughout elementary school. The senior researcher is a Latino male faculty member in counseling psychology, and although not a musician, he is identified as a music lover, and is passionate about community-based research with underserved populations. To address some of the potential impacts of our background and stance, and consistent with Fassinger and Morrow's suggestions (2013, p. 79), we met with staff members several times throughout the research project to gain different perspectives about the questions, protocol items, and interpretation of results. Their perspectives and suggestions have been integrated into the interview protocol and final analysis. For example, the staff expressed an interest in exploring if and how alumni were considering future involvement with Notes for Notes. This led to the inclusion of pertinent questions in the protocol that resulted in the theme of

gratitude in the analysis, with many alumni reflecting on how they hope to “pay it forward” to future generations of youth through mentorship, volunteering, and for some, pursuing staff positions in this or other ASMPs.

1.4 | Research paradigm

The analyses of the data are based on a social constructivist approach, which holds that reality is socially constructed, subjective, and built through consensus and interaction (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This approach acknowledges that the researcher is a coproducer of data, along with the participants and others involved, further highlighting the importance of articulating a researcher’s positionality. Rather than searching for an absolute truth grounded in a single reality, a social constructivist approach recognizes that knowledge can be subjective. It does not deny that there is a fundamental reality, yet it places emphasis on the process of socially constructed understanding. Within this framework, and through an iterative process, the researchers worked together to examine the data and develop the themes. In addition, the researchers met with program staff members to seek their input on the initial thematic maps, and their feedback was considered as themes were established.

2 | RESULTS

Analysis of the alumni data led to the identification of two main themes: Recognition of positive program characteristics and impact of the program (see Figure 1 and Appendix A).

2.1 | Alumni: Positive program characteristics

Alumni underscored the importance of regular availability and dependability of staff and a reliable, safe space to gather after school where they could explore new musical instruments and interact with knowledgeable staff and eager peers. For example, Jonathan (this and all names have been altered for anonymity) reflected on his positive, consistent interactions with the staff: “Danny has always been like the older brother that I never had. He was just always there, listening to all my problems, guiding me through a lot of stuff.” According to alumni, Notes for Notes provided this consistency by holding regular open hours after school and during the summer, as well as hiring staff who reinforced guidance roles found at home or fulfilled that role when not found in other areas of members’ lives.

The locations of Notes for Notes also appeared to play an important role in providing a consistent, accessible experience for alumni, who often lived in the same neighborhoods: “Because I lived so close, I could just walk there.” Another alumnus, Joel, commented on the improved access as the program expanded:

“I’d say for about 2–3 years I was going there every day after school. Like, as soon as that bell rang, I was meeting up with my friend and we were walking even in the rain! We’d go every day, and then they opened up a second location, I think at the Eastside Boys and Girls Club, and that was closer to us so we decided to go there.”

In addition, alumni reflected on the memorable opportunities to perform on stage, run their own show or meet inspiring, famous musicians who support the program. They expressed that performance opportunities, in particular, played an important role in shaping their experience in the program by offering the chance to share their musical abilities in front of others and conquer stage fright, practice and prepare for shows, and learn about live stage procedures. Some alumni had the chance to exhibit their talents at annual fundraiser concerts, and others even formed bands that performed professionally at local venues:

“So that was cool, we were all playing each other’s songs, opening up for [name of world renown musician] at [name of large local theatre]. The fact that we were able to do that was really cool... With Notes for Notes there’s a ton of other local Santa Barbara connections... and I now have the opportunity to get my song on the radio...”

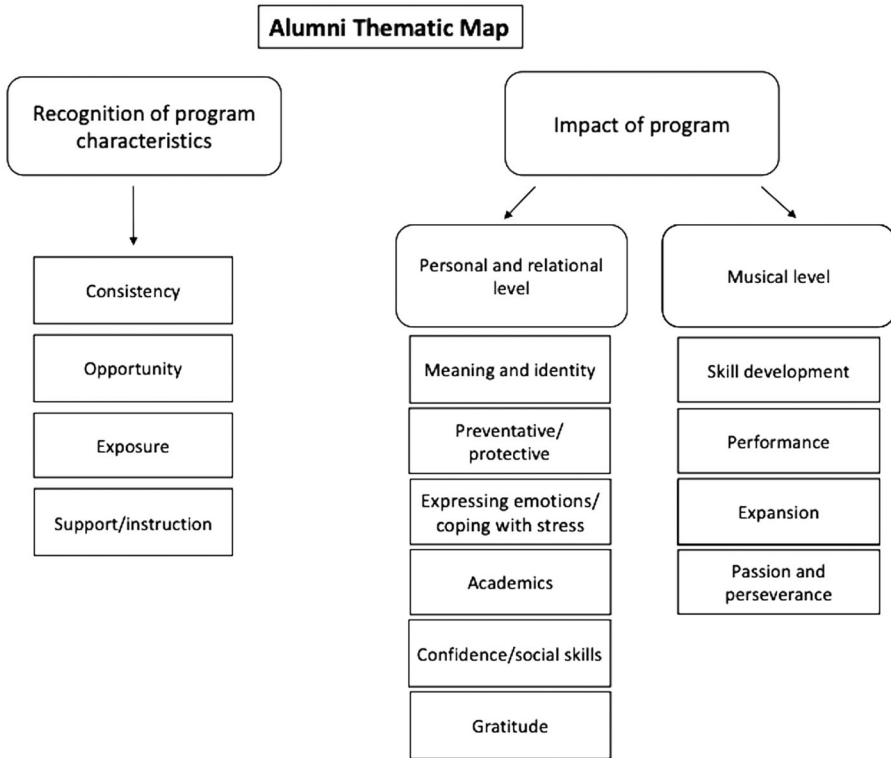


FIGURE 1 Alumni Thematic Map

Many alumni commented on the importance of providing the space and musical equipment that would have otherwise been difficult and expensive to acquire: "I always wanted to play drums as a kid, and I couldn't make that happen until [Notes for Notes]." "I dabbled in music when I could here and there, but all the school funding, the cuts, made it really hard to play music." "I wanted to play; I just didn't have all the stuff."

Alumni also reflected how staff played an important role in the program by providing musical instruction, exposure to new types of music and instruments, and by forming genuine relationships with members and serving as positive role models. As an example, Juliana discussed her learning experience in the program:

"I just got in, and I was like, 'I want to try to test out this thing right here. I've never done that before. Can I try it?' 'No problem. Let me know if you want some help. I'll teach you.' It's awesome. I never knew how to set up a mic before; I learned how to do that here. I never learned how to set up a computer before; I learned how to do that here."

Alumni were also often introduced to new music styles during their time in the program, expanding their breadth of musical knowledge beyond that of their friends' and families' musical tastes. For example, Carlos commented on his experience with this process in relation to his own identity and previous musical exposure:

"I come from a pretty Mexican family. It was just like traditional Mexican music, like hip hop, rap, stuff I don't like. So once I started coming here I started learning different things, listening to different music, playing different music. So it really expanded my knowledge and interests towards other music styles."

2.2 | Alumni: Impact on personal and relational level

Alumni indicated that Notes for Notes helped them develop a sense of identity, keep them “off the streets” and out of trouble after school, and improve their academics and social skills. For example, José reflected on Notes for Notes being a good “outlet” for him:

“The simple fact that it takes up a lot of my time, so I'm not out there... when I was growing up I could have easily slipped into a lot of bad things with a lot of bad people. What music did was give me that outlet where I could still be from the streets, do my thing, but people are going to respect you because you're not just a wanna-be. You're doing something. You're actually progressing, you know, mentally doing music, creating.”

Furthermore, many alumni reflected on the process of their experience and how the program was facilitative of their emotional expression, “unleashing” of energy, and reduction of stress. For example, Daniel commented:

“It was a place of comfort for me. It was a place that I was able to do what I was feeling. So I was able to take emotion and put it into action in a way that I didn't even understand at first. There would be days where I would come in and be on the drum set for a certain amount of time to the point where my knuckles are bleeding because I'm playing so hard and I'm not stopping because of the energy that I was feeling that day, you know, it would just unleash sometimes.”

Various alumni also highlighted the feeling of community, support, and friendship: “We get to come together as one big musical family.” “We are all a team... we super support each other.” One member, Julian, passionately expressed:

“I gained great respect for everybody; much love, much unity. Basically, I became a lot of things, growing with Notes for Notes. I grew with it, so it's like a home to me. I gained respect for myself; I gained respect for the love and passion of music... If I'm upset about something, I'm going to Notes for Notes to just chill. I'm going to have a good time and just relax... These are the happiest moments in my life.”

In addition, alumni commented on how social skills were fostered at Notes for Notes. For example, Mariana stated: “my social skills that I developed at Notes for Notes; I took them to school and started making more friends... because I started gaining that confidence.” Jonathan also reflected:

“I was a really awkward kid, and I had a really hard time talking to people and expressing myself. So I learned to express myself through my music... I was so nervous I couldn't get a word out. One of the people who worked at Notes for Notes practiced with me... Eventually I started building that confidence.”

Alumni also expressed appreciation and gratitude toward the program and its staff. As a result, they voiced a desire to continue their involvement and “pay it forward” to future generations of Notes for Notes participants:

“I want to participate in more stuff [at Notes for Notes]. I want to get involved with helping more people... I'm ready for it more now than ever because I finally grew into a young man, and I'm handling my stuff on my own and taking everything that Notes for Notes taught me, and it's getting me somewhere.”

Alumni also described how their participation in Notes for Notes affected them in other areas of their life, such as school. For example, Alex observed that he picked up certain skills at Notes for Notes that were transferrable to

a school setting: "I think of all the things [I took from Notes for Notes], it was listening. You know, like learning to just be patient and listen. It really made me calm down as opposed to yelling out and being a know-it-all in class." Alexandra described how involvement in Notes for Notes became an academic motivator:

"[My school life] definitely improved because I was kind of at a low point when I started playing, and I was like "Wow, this is great," and I felt great all the time... I would try to get all my classwork done, so I could play music at lunch or after school. I would try to get my homework done during class so I could go play guitar during lunch or right after class, and I wouldn't have to worry about starting my homework super late."

In addition to treating music as a reward for school participation, alumni noticed some skills they were learning at Notes for Notes, such as thinking critically and speaking in front of others. Juliana stated: "I had never gotten a 4.0 in high school. I think music really gave me the confidence to express myself and really say what I felt. It really just opened my brain to really thinking... to critical thinking." A further example is described by Daniel, related to his improved performance skills transferring to his presentation skills in class:

"It did [help with academics], presentation-wise, since it took away my fear of being in front of a lot of people. You just get used to it, so when it comes to performing presentations and such, I don't show any fear. That was one thing one of my English teachers told me here: that I look so comfortable in front of a podium talking to people."

2.3 | Alumni: Impact on musical level

On a musical level, alumni described an improvement on their musical and performance skills, an expansion of musical and cultural knowledge, and an increase in passion and perseverance in the form of practicing and focusing diligently on recording projects. For instance, Alex explained how he learned "everything" about musical performance at Notes for Notes:

"Yeah, I learned how to perform here. I learned how to play music, how to actually write a structured song, everything you can possibly think of musically, I learned here, including playing live in front of the audience; all the things that go into putting on the show..."

José described how his learning experience was analogous to acquiring a new language: "At first I didn't know anything. You could tell me to bring something, and I would look at you like, "What did you just say to me in Greek?" and now I'm speaking Greek, you know?"

Alumni also developed a passion for music. For instance, Jonathan enthusiastically expressed that "music is the best thing; without music, what can you have? I don't think I would be here without music. I was born music. I breath music, I eat music, I sleep music." Juliana described how music became more than just a hobby:

"I just kinda got sucked into it, into what became really a passion! Not even a hobby anymore, you know? Or something to do after school for fun. It became a passion. I kinda really started taking it serious. "Oh shoot, maybe this can really be something," you know?... and now I get paid for doing it, so that's cool!"

The realization that music "can really be something" for Juliana provides an example of how Notes for Notes fostered passion and perseverance within alumni, which, in her case, created an employment opportunity and a potential focus for a future career. For other alumni, the passion developed at Notes for Notes resulted in

Staff Thematic Map

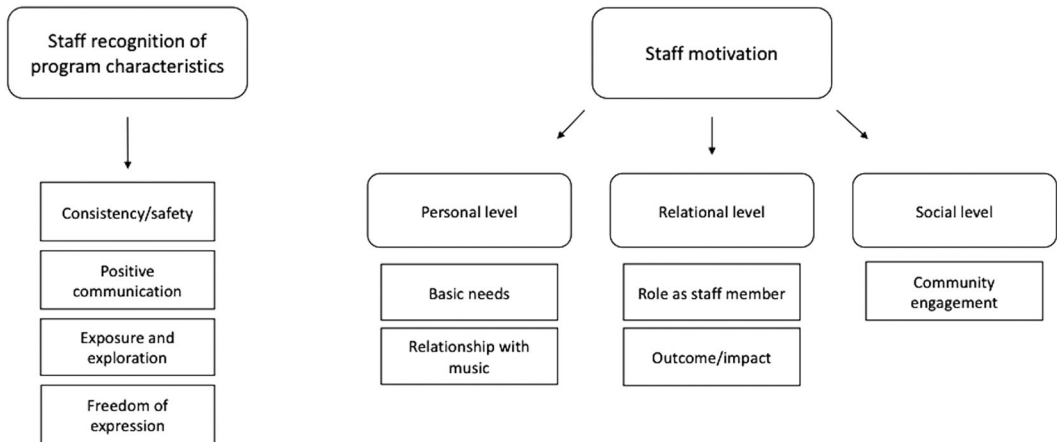


FIGURE 2 Staff Thematic Map

immersive experiences of practicing and deep focus. For example, Mariana stated: “After school I would go straight there and I'd be there for hours on end. Like, I'd forget that there's a sun outside.”

2.4 | Staff: Positive program characteristics

Analysis of the staff data led to the identification of two main themes that are similar to those from the alumni data, indicating a consistent view among staff and members alike (see Figure 2 and Appendix B). Regarding program characteristics, one staff member, Jessica, commented: “The best thing about Notes for Notes? That it is safe. It's a safe spot for them; we are very consistent. We are always open at 3 o'clock, Monday through Friday. I think that's kind of the big thing...”

Staff emphasized what they experienced as a positive workplace climate. For example, Justin reflected on positive interactions and communication with other co-workers and management:

“[The most important thing the program offers for staff is]... affirmation from your co-workers. I think the organization does a really good job doing that for each other. And communication with everybody; we have meetings every 2 weeks where we talk about the good, bad, and ugly. But in that meeting it is always very positive and everyone is always just pushing each other in a really cool way.”

Staff also reflected on their favorable views of the program's capacity to provide a free space for musical exploration, exposure, and expression. This sentiment was widely shared among alumni and staff, and it appears to be a crucial element in seeking an understanding of the success of the program: freedom of expression and a rich, supportive environment in which participants can and are encouraged to explore. This is expressed in a quote from Melissa: “Kids just want to explore music... and they come and want to be part of this atmosphere, being able to express themselves in this space where they can do pretty much anything they want: karaoke, piano, guitar, or whatever.” Similarly, Alejandro stated:

“I think it's really nice how we have this no censorship policy... it's more regarding what they come in with, their own ideas, and then being able to express themselves, and I think that's something that allows our

members to feel really at home here. 'Cause it's a place where their voices are heard and they're able to make and create real bonds with all of us.'

2.5 | Staff motivation

On the personal and relational levels, staff noted that the program provided them with basic needs like a paycheck while simultaneously allowing them to fulfill other ambitions such as working with underserved youth, being a positive role model, working with music, and seeing the growth and impact on members. Staff discussed the components of their job at Notes for Notes that create drive and meaning for their work beyond monetary motivation, including being a part of a meaningful discovery process with members: "To watch those kids get that excited to be able to discover. You know, all these kids are discovering these things for the first time, and you know, I get to be a part of that."

Staff reflected on their role not only as music guides but also as empathic listeners: "I just engage with [members] and there's only so much that I can do except mainly just listen and have empathy and compassion for that person and then to see if there is a way to at least make it better." This comment complements data from alumni interviews where they reported valuing the support they received throughout their participation. Staff appears to be fostering an environment where members can come to learn music and also come to spend time with a trusted adult role model. Robert's reflection on his experience filling this role articulates this theme further:

"I like feeling like I'm being a good role model, someone who is consistent and who is going to be a solid guide for a lot of kids that don't have that at home... I feel like if I am predictable then they will always know that I am going to be here... I think that is what really pushes me to be a part of an organization like this because it gives me an opportunity to do that and really help turn some lives around..."

Staff conceptualized Notes for Notes not only as an opportunity for youth to learn and play music, but also to develop meaningful relationships where adult role models care holistically about the members and can provide consistency and predictability where members may not have it in other areas of their lives. The quote above also shows how staff understand and can articulate the broader mission of the program, as well as how they experience this mission being operationalized through their involvement. Furthermore, staff seem to appreciate filling these roles, which increases motivation to be a part of Notes for Notes.

Results also indicate that staff generally have a passion for music, which helps them bring enthusiasm and specific skills to their job. Similar to comments made by alumni, staff reported that music functions as a form of expressive therapy, and while working at Notes for Notes, they have the opportunity to surround themselves with music and share it with members. Robert remarked, "It's just the best way for me to express myself. I really connect with songwriting; it's like my form of therapy." The staffs' relationship with music seems to help generate a personal motivation to work at Notes for Notes.

On a social level, staff reported that the job fulfilled a desire for community engagement; specifically, some of the staff discussed the importance of feeling like a part of the community, whereas others, like Alejandro, expressed a desire to give back to the community that provided for them when they were younger.

"Why do I work at Notes for Notes? I guess because there is a big feeling of a want to give back to the community that I grew up in and kind of seeing how it was when I was younger and what it didn't have to offer then. I like the fact that I am part of something that wasn't there before in the specific community and town that I grew up in."

3 | DISCUSSION

This study sought to document and understand how an after-school music program successfully impacted alumni, as well as how these impacts came about for those who were consistently engaged with the program. Using thematic analysis, the content of 16 semistructured interviews was arranged into themes capturing the experiences of 11 alumni and 5 staff members. According to alumni, the program's multiple positive characteristics (e.g., consistency, opportunity) had an impact on a personal, relational, and musical level that helped explain its overall value (see Figure 1 and Appendix A). Similarly, staff recognized certain program characteristics (e.g., consistency, freedom of expression) and their own motivation for working at Notes for Notes to have much explanatory value (see Figure 2 and Appendix B). Considerable overlap of positive program characteristics was expressed through the accounts of staff and alumni, including consistency, freedom of expression, increased exposure, and expansive opportunities. According to alumni, the program impacted various domains involving academic improvement, social skills, emotional coping, prevention of unsafe activity, and identity development. In addition, alumni identified how the program favorably impacted their musical knowledge and skills and fostered a passion for music. Staff interviews not only echoed alumni recognition of program characteristics but also provided insight into their motivation for working at Notes for Notes. Staff appreciated the program meeting their basic employment needs, yet even more important to their motivation were the specific meaningful qualities of the job, such as working in a musical environment, being a positive role model, witnessing the outcome and impact of the program on participants, and being involved in the community.

A unique advantage of this study is that both staff and alumni perspectives were enlisted to capture how this ASP is making a difference in personal, relational, and music domains. A more complex picture can be formed from these dual viewpoints, allowing for a richer understanding of the processes at play throughout the program. Furthermore, the congruence between staff and alumni accounts of positive program characteristics reinforces which elements of this ASP seem to be having the most impact, such as consistency and exposure to new music, equipment, and performance opportunities.

Another advantage regarding the sample of alumni participants in this study is the inclusion of youth as part of the research process. Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner (2013) affirm that youth engagement in community-based participatory research can benefit research quality and increase youth empowerment; this is especially relevant given the diverse sample interviewed in this study who likely lack frequent opportunities to have their voices represented through research. During the semi-structured interviews, alumni had the chance to ask questions, omit responses if desired, and add any closing thoughts, which provided an opportunity to focus on what they found most significant about their experiences.

Utilizing these advantages, this study contributes to the existing literature on what makes ASPs function successfully by examining some of the components and processes involved from the perspectives of alumni and staff alike. In 2002, National Research Council released a consensus report about community programs, identifying eight program features important in supporting positive youth development: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

In light of research suggesting that program attendance is not enough to produce positive results, it is important to consider what program components constitute program quality (Hirsch et al., 2010; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). The list compiled by the National Research Council provides a useful resource for this purpose, especially in relation to the findings of this study. Two such program features, opportunities for skill building and integration of community efforts, stand out in the results of this study through the themes of opportunity, exposure, and skill development. One important lens to consider is the underserved characteristics of the population that Notes for Notes and Boys & Girls Clubs serve. Alumni and staff both reflected on the impact of the program providing equipment, opportunities, and instruction that would otherwise be unavailable or unaffordable to many members, creating an environment conducive to skill building. With these resources, alumni reflected that they were able to

enhance their technical abilities, describing immersive experiences of practicing and deep focus, qualities that promote musical improvement. In addition, offering performance opportunities allowed alumni to showcase their newly acquired musical skills in real-world settings. The connections the program has with well-known musicians and music companies also increase the opportunities for members to interact with the music community and be exposed to inspiring role models that would otherwise likely be inaccessible. By partnering with the community, this ASMP is able to increase program quality for participants and provide them with access to unique opportunities where underserved youth are appreciated for their talents, contributions, and accomplishments.

Many other themes established in this study align with the list of program features compiled by the National Research Council. The importance of one feature, in particular, is underscored by participants in this study, as well as other research: supportive relationships. Rhodes (2004) highlights the unique advantages of ASP staff who are afforded opportunities to engage with youth in a less formal and constrained way than teachers and parents, allowing for close bonds to form. In addition, because ASP staff are often relatively young and from the same community that they serve, they are well positioned to connect with members (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). Furthermore, Hirsch, Roffman, Deutsch, Flynn, and Pagano (2000) analyzed youths' relationships with staff in several Boys & Girls Clubs and found that staff were able to offer a unique form of support that resembled a balance between the caring and love received from extended family and the more specific targeted skills received from teachers. Jarrett, Sullican, and Watkins (2005) also highlight the importance of youth-staff relationships in organized youth programs as a vehicle for youth to prepare for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. They found that the relationships were helpful in providing youth with access to adult resources, such as information, assistance, exposure to adult worlds, support, and encouragement. In addition, Denner, Meyer, and Bean (2005) underscore how youth-adult partnerships can be empowering for young women by providing guidance, rather than instruction, and by creating a space where girls can "know and speak their minds" (p. 87).

In light of the considerable amount of research highlighting the role of participant-staff relationships, it is important to pay close attention to this dynamic when understanding the impact of an ASP. In fact, in a study evaluating implementation quality and positive experiences in after-school programs, Cross et al. (2010) concluded that staff quality might be the single most important characteristic of program success. Accounts from staff and alumni participants in this ASP echoed the importance of supportive staff relationships, as well as the strong connections formed throughout their experience, illustrated through the themes of consistency/safety, support/instruction, and role as a staff member. Staff appears to be successfully connecting with members, while providing an environment that feels safe, allowing for the gains reported by members to materialize. In addition, the theme of positive communication, as a staff-recognized program characteristic, helps explain how this ASP is creating an environment that feels safe and consistent for members. In the presence of positive communication and encouragement, the staff is able to focus on improving their work skills and being available for members.

The consistency/safety theme was also represented in alumni accounts of the accessibility of Notes for Notes. By offering consistent hours during the "after-school gap" (Catalyst, 2006, p. 45) this ASP provides regular access to a supervised environment. In addition, Pelcher and Rajan's (2016) systemic literature review on ASP implementation in urban environments found that one of the most important barriers to adolescent youth engagement in ASPs was accessibility. Having sufficient space and transportation to and from ASPs is a challenge for many programs; however, alumni praised Notes for Notes for the proximity of the locations to their homes and schools, citing it as a safe place they could easily walk to after school. This underscores the importance of placing ASPs within diverse communities to ensure potential access by underserved populations as a social justice matter.

3.1 | Limitations and future directions

The use of thematic analysis, in relation to other qualitative methods, comes with certain disadvantages. For example, unlike narrative or other biographical approaches, the thematic analysis does not allow for a sense of continuity and contradiction through any one individual account, which can be useful information when considering

participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, the small number of people in the research team prevented the utilization of certain processes such as double coding, potentially reducing credibility. Although triangulation was utilized through a collaborative process with staff members who also participated in interviews, increasing confidence in judgments, or synchronic reliability (Kirk & Miller, 1986), this process did not include alumni participants. As supported by Jacquez et al. (2013), future studies would benefit by partnering with youth participants in this triangulation process, further empowering them and improving credibility.

Although the present study points to various positive and meaningful impacts, future studies may include quantitative measures of the multiple impacts identified here, which can contribute to further the understanding of the processes and outcomes involved with participation in an after-school music program. The qualitative study reported here may help establish new questions and goals that may be better understood through mixed methods and through future studies where both strengths and limitations of ASPs can both be assessed systematically.

4 | CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Notes for Notes seems to have made a unique, positive impact on its engaged alumni and staff who expressed much appreciation for the program. Findings from the alumni interviews may be potentially beneficial for other ASPs to incorporate into their own curricula. Findings from the staff interviews provide data and feedback about what motivates employees to work at the program, which is valuable information for similar programs.

Recommendations based on the results of this study include providing a consistent, safe space for participants to explore their musical abilities, and socialize with other peers in their age range. In addition, providing performance experiences for alumni seems to have had a lasting impact that has helped reduce stage fright, increase self-esteem and confidence, and create unique, memorable opportunities. Also important from a social justice perspective that emphasizes inclusion and equity is the ability to provide these musical experiences, resources, and opportunities to youth who would otherwise not be exposed to them due to socioeconomic barriers or limitations and the need to advocate for the availability of such programming within impoverished areas of a given community. A final recommendation is to hire staff who are more likely to find meaning in the work and who can help foster the positive outcomes of the program. The impact made by Notes for Notes as reflected by engaged alumni participants and staff is substantial, and this study highlights some of the most important aspects of a meaningful after-school music program.

In addition to the specific impacts reported by staff and alumni, these findings call attention to the effects of after-school programs like Notes for Notes that extend into young adulthood and likely beyond. The themes that emerged in the analysis highlight the immediate, tangible impacts for staff and alumni, yet many of the findings may have broader implications for the development of long-term skills that can help lead to overall success in life and, in turn, can have a significant impact on societal improvement. For example, some alumni specified how their experience at Notes for Notes led to the development of perseverance, with likely implications for the successful navigation of future educational and career opportunities. Alumni also illustrated how engagement in Notes for Notes kept them out of trouble and directed them toward a healthier life path, potentially reducing social costs on justice systems, welfare, and mental health services. Although the results from this study focus on direct impacts from the program, they also provide support for broader policy and social implications tied to engaged ASP participation. Specifically, many alumni reflected on their evolved roles from active youth members to adult helpers (and for some, eventually becoming staff members), showing a capacity for leadership, mentoring, and substantive youth citizenship.

ORCID

Joshua M. Sheltzer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2025-5329>

REFERENCES

- Berger, P. L., & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Boys and Girls Club. (2016). Measuring the impact of Boys & Girls Clubs: 2016 national outcomes report. Retrieved from www.bgca.org/about-us/club-impact
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Catalyst. (2006). *After-school worries: Tough on parents, bad for business*. Retrieved from www.catalyst.org/system/files/After_School_Worries_Tough_on_Parents_Bad_for_Business.pdf
- Catterall, J. S., Dumais, S. A., & Hampden-Thompson, G. (2012). The arts and achievement in at-risk youth: Findings from four longitudinal studies. *National Endowment for the Arts*, 1–28. Retrieved from www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf
- Cross, A. B., Gottfredson, D. C., Wilson, D. M., Rorie, M., & Connell, N. (2010). Implementation quality and positive experiences in after-school programs. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 370–380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9295-z>
- Denner, J., Meyer, B., & Bean, S. (2005). Young women's leadership alliance: Youth-adult partnerships in an all-female after-school program. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20036>
- Durlak, J. A., Mahoney, J. L., Bohnert, A. M., & Parente, M. E. (2010). Developing and improving after-school programs to enhance youth's personal growth and adjustment: A special issue of AJCP. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3–4), 285–293. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9298-9>
- Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2007). *The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills*. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6>
- Fassinger, R., & Morrow, S. L. (2013). Toward best practices in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research: A social justice perspective. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 5, 69–83.
- Hirsch, B. J., Mekinda, M. A., & Stawicki, J. (2010). More than attendance: The importance of after-school program quality. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 447–452. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9310-4>
- Hirsch, B. J., Mickus, M., & Boerger, R. (2002). Ties to Influential Adults Among Black and White Adolescents: Culture, Social Class, and Family Networks. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1014689129369>
- Hirsch, B. J., Roffman, J. G., Deutsch, N. L., Flynn, C., & Pagano, M. E. (2000). Inner-city youth development programs: Strengthening programs for adolescent girls. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 20(2), 210–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431600020002005>
- Jacquez, F., Vaughn, L. M., & Wagner, E. (2013). Youth as partners, participants or passive recipients: A review of children and adolescents in community-based participatory research (CBPR). *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51, 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9533-7>
- Jarrett, R. L., Sullican, P. J., & Watkins, N. D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20038>
- Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Klassen, J. A., Liang, Y., Tjosvold, L., Klassen, T. P., & Hartling, L. (2008). Music for pain and anxiety in children undergoing medical procedures: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. *Ambulatory Pediatrics*, 8(2), 117–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ambp.2007.12.005>
- Kremer, K. P., Maynard, B. R., Polanin, J. R., Vaughn, M. G., & Sarteschi, C. M. (2015). Effects of after-school programs with at-risk youth on attendance and externalizing behaviors: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 44, 616–636. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0226-4>
- Lauer, P. A., Akiba, M., Wilkerson, S. B., Apthorp, H. S., Snow, D., & Martin-Glenn, M. L. (2006). Out-of-school-time programs: A meta-analysis of effects for at-risk students. *Review of educational research*, 76(2), 275–313. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543076002275>
- National Archive of Criminal Justice Data. *National Incident-Based Reporting System, 2009 and 2010: Extract Files*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Digest of education statistics: Public elementary/secondary school universe survey*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_204.10.asp?current=yes
- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002). *Committee on community-level programs for youth, Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

- NVivo. (2012). Qualitative data analysis software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10. [Computer Software]. Available from www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pelcher, A., & Rajan, S. (2016). After-school program implementation in urban environments: Increasing engagement among adolescent youth. *Journal of School Health, 86*(8), 585–594. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12411>
- Rhodes, J. E. (2004). The critical ingredient: Caring youth-staff relationships in after-school settings. *New Directions for Youth Development, 101*, 145–161.
- Riggs, N. R., Bohnert, A. M., Guzman, M. D., & Davidson, D. (2010). Examining the potential of community-based after-school programs for Latino youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 417–429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9313-1>
- Rowe, P., & Guerin, B. (2018). Contextualizing the mental health of metal youth: A community for social protection, identity, and musical empowerment. *Journal of Community Psychology, 46*, 429–441. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21949>
- Saarikallio, S., & Erkkilä, J. (2007). The role of music in adolescents' mood regulation. *Psychology of Music, 35*, 88–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735607068889>
- Sanderson, R. C., & Richards, M. H. (2010). The after-school needs and resources of a low-income community: Surveying youth and parents for community change. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 430–440. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9309-x>
- Shernoff, D. J. (2010). Engagement in after-school programs as a predictor of social competence and academic performance. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 325–337. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9314-0>
- Springer, K., & Diffily, D. (2012). The relationship between intensity and breadth of after-school program participation and academic achievement: Evidence from a short-term longitudinal study. *Journal of Community Psychology, 40*(7), 785–798. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21478>
- Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., & Pierce, K. M. (2007). *Outcomes linked to high-quality afterschool programs: Longitudinal findings from the study of promising afterschool programs*. Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.
- Ward-Steinman, P. M. (2006). The development of an after-school music program for at-risk children: Student musical preferences and pre-service teacher reflections. *International Journal of Music Education, 24*(1), 85–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761406063111>
- Yohalem, N., & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. (2010). Inside the black box: Assessing and improving quality in youth programs. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 350–357. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9311-3>
- Youth.gov (2019). *Afterschool Programs*. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/afterschool-programs>

How to cite this article: Sheltzer JM, Consoli AJ. Understanding the impact of an after-school music program with engaged underserved youth. *J Community Psychol.* 2019;47:1364–1379.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22193>

Appendix A

Alumni Themes and Definitions

Recognition of Program Characteristics

Consistency: Frequency of participation, regular availability of staff, feelings of security and safety.

Opportunity: The ability of the program to provide equipment, experiences, and connections to its members who might otherwise not have access to them.

Exposure: The introduction to different types of music and styles leading to an expanded view and experience of music.

Support/instruction: Program aspects that led to participants learning various musical skills.

Impact of Program on Personal/Relational Level

Meaning and identity: The development of personal and professional identities fostered through participation in the program.

Preventative and protective: The reported reduction in gang or illegal activity among some members due to their involvement in the program.

Expressing emotions/coping with stress: The healing or therapeutic impacts of participation in the program and playing music.

Academics: The direct and indirect impact of participation in the program on academics.

Confidence/social skills: Improved social skills and increased confidence in public speaking and performance.

Gratitude: Appreciation for the time, effort, resources, and opportunities.

Impact of Program on Musical Level

Skill development: Acquisition and improvement of musical and other technical skills.

Performance: The development of performance skills, including preparation and rehearsal, conquering stage fright, and even managing entire shows.

Expansion: Increased knowledge, interests, and exposure to various music and instruments.

Passion and perseverance: Development of passion for music, recording, and performing, as well as increased determination to practice, finish projects, and learn new instruments.

Appendix B

Staff Themes and Definitions

Recognition of Program Characteristics

Consistency/safety: Regular availability and dependability of staff; a safe space for members to be at after school.

Positive communication: Effective and responsive communication channels between staff.

Exposure and exploration: The program's capacity to provide members with a variety of musical instruments, genres, techniques, equipment, and space to explore their talents.

Freedom of expression: The staff reflection that the program empowers members' voices to be expressed in an authentic and unrestricted way.

Staff Motivation on a Personal/Relational Level

Basic needs: The essentials, like money and a consistent, flexible job that the program provides its staff.

Relationship with music: Staffs' passion for music and creativity fuels motivation to work.

Role as staff member: Appreciating the opportunity to serve as a positive, consistent adult role model.

Outcome/impact: The reward of seeing members "turn around" and watching them grow musically, socially, and emotionally.

Staff Motivation on a Social Level

Community engagement: The satisfaction of being involved and giving back to the community.