

NECESSARY FOR SOME, AND HELPFUL FOR ALL: Preparing Music Educators to Reach Every Student

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Abstract

The percentage of students in U.S. public schools who are classified as students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has been steadily increasing in recent years, and continues to grow. Unfortunately, music educators are not adequately prepared to teach disabled students. Pre-service music teacher education programs do not provide course content in the pedagogy of accessible music education. Any coursework related to students with disabilities that is provided by these programs is limited to general studies of the historical and legal aspects of special education. As a result, music teachers end up feeling frustrated and discouraged when they cannot effectively teach disabled students, and the disabled students are deprived of meaningful music learning and musical experiences. The newly emerging field of accessible music education holds promise for music teacher education. The teaching strategies, approaches, and frameworks of accessible music education help educators to better reach all students – not just students with disabilities. This paper examines accessible music education as it takes place at the graduate level at one institution in the U.S. It concludes with recommendations for including two evidence-based, long standing frameworks for accessible music education in undergraduate music teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: Accessible music education. Pre-service music education. Universal Design for Learning, Differentiated Instruction.

Resumo

A porcentagem de alunos em escolas públicas dos EUA, que são classificados como alunos com deficiência de acordo com a Lei de Educação de Indivíduos com Deficiência (IDEA) tem aumentado constantemente nos últimos anos e continua a crescer. Infelizmente, os educadores musicais não estão preparados adequadamente para ensinar alunos com deficiência. Os programas de formação inicial de professores de música não fornecem no curso, conteúdos na área da pedagogia da educação musical acessível. Os conteúdos fornecidos por estes programas limitam-se aos estudos gerais dos aspectos históricos e legais da educação especial. Como resultado, os professores de música acabam se sentindo frustrados e desanimados quando não conseguem ensinar efetivamente os alunos com deficiência, e os alunos com deficiência são privados de uma aprendizagem musical significativa e de experiências musicais. O campo emergente da educação musical acessível é promissor na área de formação de professores de música. As estratégias pedagógicas, abordagens e estruturas do ensino da educação musical acessível ajudam os educadores a alcançarem todos os alunos – não apenas os alunos com deficiência. Este artigo investiga a educação musical acessível conforme ocorre no nível de graduação em uma instituição nos EUA. Conclui-se com a recomendação de incluir duas ferramentas já conhecidas e baseadas em evidências, de educação musical acessível em programas de preparação de professores de música.

Palavras-chave: Educação musical acessível. Formação inicial em música. Desenho Universal para Aprendizagem. Diferenciação pedagógica.

Introduction

The population of music students in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of their learning profiles -- the ways that they learn best. Today's music teachers need a wider range of tools, strategies, and approaches than ever before if they are to reach every student in their lessons, classes, and ensembles. Unfortunately, U.S. pre-service music teacher education programs do not include sufficient coursework to prepare music educators to teach students with disabilities² (BERNARD, 2016; COLWELL; THAMPSON, 2000; HELLER, 1994). This leaves many, if not most, music educators struggling to provide meaningful music education experiences for all of their students (BERNARD, 2016; 2019; 2020).

This situation poses a tremendous problem for both music teacher education and music education in the United States. Because their curricula do not include sufficient coursework in teaching music to students with disabilities, colleges and universities are not equipping their students with the necessary tools to be effective music educators in today's classrooms. Because music educators enter their positions without sufficient preparation in this area, disabled students often do not receive a meaningful music education. It is not an exaggeration to state that the music education profession is failing many of today's young students (BERNARD, 2016; 2020).

The fact of the matter is that preparing music educators to teach students with disabilities would prepare them to teach every student more effectively. Put slightly differently, the strategies that a music educator can use to help disabled students to learn better actually help every student to learn better, regardless of whether the student has a disability or a diagnosis. To adopt a phrase that is employed by the special education community, the tools that an educator utilizes in order to reach students with disabilities are "necessary for some, and helpful for all." While some students may require the particular strategies, *all students* will benefit from them. Therefore, if pre-service music teachers were to learn the pedagogy of teaching music to disabled students as part of their collegiate education, they would grow to become more effective educators for all of their students.

This paper will explore the notion of "necessary for some, and helpful for all" and its implications for pre-service music teacher education. It will begin by setting the context for accessible music education in U.S. pre-service music teacher education. It will continue with a description of one approach to providing music teacher education that includes accessible music education through two specialized graduate programs, and will highlight the ways that pre-service and in-service music educators learn about and gain direct experience using pedagogical tools, teaching strategies, and educational frameworks for accessible music education. The paper will conclude with implications and recommendations for the field.

² In this paper, the author deliberately alternates between using person-first language ("students with disabilities") and identity-first language ("disabled students"), for three main reasons. First, both forms of language are present in today's society. Second, there are advantages and drawbacks to both linguistic forms and their underlying philosophies. Finally, and most importantly, the author believes that people with disabilities themselves should determine the form of language that is used about them, not some author. By using both linguistic forms, the author is underscoring that it is not their role to choose one way to describe a disabled person.

Setting the Context

Demographics

The population of students with disabilities in U.S. public schools has been increasing in recent years. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) reports that, between 2009 and 2021, the percentage of U.S. public school students who received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) increased from 13 percent to 15 percent (NCES, 2021, Chapter Two, p. 1). According to the New America Foundation (2014), the population of disabled students in public schools has increased at nearly twice the rate of growth of the general student population. The growing numbers of students with disabilities in U.S. public schools can be attributed to several factors, including greater awareness of disabilities due to more information about and representation of disability in the media and popular culture, increased rates of diagnosis, and changes that have expanded federal definitions of “disabled” under IDEA (BERNARD, 2016; NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION, 2014; SMITH, 2008).

Music Teacher Preparation in the United States

U.S. public school music educators engage in their professional activities in this demographic context. They are therefore required to reach more and more students with disabilities and diagnoses in their classrooms, rehearsal halls, and studios. Unfortunately, however, the field of music teacher education has not kept pace with these demographic changes, leaving most U.S. public school music educators unprepared to reach every student (BERNARD, 2016; 2019; 2020).

Specifically, pre-service music teacher education programs in the U.S. do not provide sufficient coursework in or practical experience with the pedagogical tools, strategies, and frameworks for teaching music to disabled students. Rather, if any courses about teaching students with disabilities are offered by a university, the courses provide foundational instruction in the legal requirements of special education in the U.S., and they include only historical and legal information (BERNARD, 2016; 2019; 2020; COLWELL; THOMPSON, 2000; HAALAND, 2011; HAHN, 2010; HELLER, 1994; HAMMEL, 2001; HOURIGAN, 2007a; LINSENMEIER, 2004; VINCIGUERRA, 2016). Pedagogy is not included in these courses. Without the necessary pedagogical skills to teach students with disabilities effectively, U.S. music educators leave their university teacher preparation programs ill prepared for their positions, and unable to teach the students of today and tomorrow effectively.

Necessary for Some, and Helpful for All

Teaching disabled students requires engaging evidence-based frameworks and strategies in special education and general education that transfer effectively to music education, such as Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction. While

these frameworks and strategies were initially conceived for general education contexts, they have been adopted by special educators because they acknowledge and celebrate learner variability, and because they provide educators with helpful tools to make their curricula and activities accessible for all students (CAST, n.d.; TOMLINSON, 2016).

Teaching disabled students also requires developing new habits of mind as an educator, including seeking and anticipating barriers that might interfere with student learning, designing pathways to minimize those barriers, conceiving of engagement and learning in broad terms, and supporting student engagement and learning no matter how it takes place.

Furthermore, teaching disabled students requires engaging evidence-based strategies and tools from special education in the music classroom. These include big-picture strategies, such as changing the way that classes are structured, and using social stories and previews to help to prepare students for new experiences, material, and activities. Other strategies are rooted in behavioral teaching approaches and include task analysis to assist with the components of a complex activity, the hierarchy of prompting to facilitate student independence, and analyzing the function of student behavior to better understand what a student might be trying to communicate through a specific classroom behavior.

By helping teachers to increase the accessibility of their curricula and activities, all of the above frameworks, habits of mind, and strategies increase the effectiveness of teachers in reaching all of their students, disabled and non-disabled alike. Put slightly differently, they can help all students to learn better. The frameworks and habits of mind --- and the strategies and approaches that stem from them -- are necessary for some, and helpful for all. They are necessary for those students who otherwise would not be able to access the curriculum and the activities. At the same time, they are helpful for all students because they increase that access for everyone.

Given that music teachers currently work in a context where students' learning schemes are more diverse than ever before, coupled with the fact that the frameworks, habits of mind, and strategies of accessible music education can help all students to learn better, and can help teachers to become more effective in their teaching with all students, it is the author's belief that pre-service music teacher education is doing the field, the music educators, and the young students in the U.S. a significant disservice by not preparing music teachers in accessible music education pedagogy.

One Approach: Graduate Programs at Berklee College of Music, in Boston, MA USA

Unfortunately, there is not much flexibility in the curriculum of teacher education programs in the U.S. that provide educator licensure. These programs must be accredited regularly by multiple organizations, including regional bodies and State Departments of Education, and the accrediting organizations require very specific coursework. In most states, music teacher licensure is extremely broad, comprising vocal music, instrumental music, and general music in all grades from Kindergarten (age 5 years) to grade 12 (age 18

years) (May; Willie, 2017). As a result, students in music teacher education programs take a large number of courses every semester, with very little flexibility in their curriculum and virtually no room for additional courses.

One way to include coursework in the pedagogy of accessible music education in collegiate programs of study is to focus on non-licensure programs at the graduate level. Berklee College of Music offers two such programs, a Master's Degree and a Graduate Certificate, with a concentration in Music Education for students with autism spectrum disorder. The programs began at Boston Conservatory in 2014 and migrated to Berklee College of Music after the two institutions legally merged in 2016.

These two features – (a) that the programs are not teacher licensure programs, and (b) that the programs are graduate programs – are critical for the programs' success and effectiveness. Because the programs do not lead to teacher licensure, they are not subject to State requirements in terms of their curricula. Their course offerings, therefore, can be much more creative and flexible than those of teacher licensure programs. In addition, because the programs are graduate programs, they serve a more varied student population that includes both pre-service and in-service music educators with a wide range of teaching experience. Some individuals enroll in these programs immediately after completing their undergraduate music education, with relatively little, or limited, professional teaching experience. Other students enter the programs after they have taught for a year or two, having discovered that they require additional education and support for teaching students with disabilities. Still others enroll in the programs later in their careers, having developed some teaching strategies on their own, through trial and error, and they want to learn more, fill in the gaps in their education and understanding, and join a community of musician/teacher/scholars so that they can help their colleagues and others.

Fieldwork is at the center of these graduate programs. Hands-on experience working with disabled students in music education settings is third aspect of the programs that is critical for their success and effectiveness. Graduate students have the opportunity to observe, assist, co-teach, and teach in the Arts Education Programs at the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education. These community-based, Saturday programs include (at present) 13 music programs, two adaptive dance programs, and one adaptive theater program, all for disabled students, ages three to 93. Instruction takes place in person on the Berklee campus on Saturdays, as well as online throughout the week. The Arts Education Programs provide graduate students with invaluable opportunities to gain hands-on experience with accessible arts education and to learn from highly experienced instructors and consultants. In addition, graduate students also regularly observe, assist, and co-teach in the classrooms and ensemble rehearsal halls of educators in numerous public and private school partners throughout the Boston metropolitan area. The public and private school classes and ensembles take place during school hours on weekdays.

Placing fieldwork at the center of these graduate programs is grounded in lessons that have been learned from research in the field. Several studies have shown that first-hand experience observing, interacting with, and teaching disabled students as a particularly impactful way to prepare pre-service music educators to teach stu-

dents with disabilities (KAISER; JOHNSON, 2000; HOURIGAN, 2007a; HOURIGAN, 2007b; HOURIGAN, 2009; VANWEELDEN; WHIPPLE, 2005). Our experience in the Graduate Programs in Music Education and Autism resonates with these studies. Graduate students in these programs report that their field experiences are invaluable opportunities to apply what they have learned in real world settings, to bring the pedagogical approaches, strategies, and frameworks that they have been learning about in their courses to life through first-hand experiences, and to make personal meaning of their studies in new ways.

Another connection to the real world that is a unique aspect of these graduate programs is that the faculty members who teach the core courses in accessible music education are all active practitioners. All of them teach disabled students in arts education settings alongside their roles as faculty in the graduate programs. The dual roles of the faculty ensure that the curriculum and activities of the graduate courses remain relevant to the educational practices and contexts of today, and are oriented towards the students of today and tomorrow.

These final two aspects of Berklee's graduate programs in Music Education and Autism – (a) the central role that fieldwork plays in the programs; and (b) the fact that the faculty who teach the core courses are both professors and practitioners – provide students with unique opportunities to develop their pedagogical skills and to grow to become more effective teachers for students with disabilities, and for all students. By combining rigorous coursework that includes extensive reading, research, discussion, and writing with pedagogical training and hands-on experience using elements of the pedagogy in real-world settings, these programs ensure that students receive a well-rounded, meaningful, practical, and relevant education.

Five graduate seminars form the accessible music education core of these two programs. These courses meet for 45 contact hours – in 15 sessions that meet for three hours each. In these courses, through readings, discussions, micro teaching assignments, presentations papers, projects, reflective journals, and fieldwork, students gain a multifaceted understanding, set of experiences, and array of pedagogical skills in accessible music education that is grounded in cutting-edge research and evidence-based practice.

The Graduate Certificate in Music Education and Autism is designed for individuals who already possess a Master's degree, and who wish to engage in intensive study of accessible music education and earn a credential. The Graduate Certificate is a 15-credit program that consists of just these five core courses. These five courses can be taken over the course of twelve months. Two of the courses are offered in the summer semester, one takes place in the fall semester, and two are scheduled in the spring semester. The Master of Music in Music Education with a Concentration in Music and Autism is a 33-credit program that requires the 15 credits of the accessible music education core, along with other foundational courses in music education and music, as well as a culminating Master's Thesis or Research/Teaching Project. Both of the culminating projects are independent research projects conducted over two semesters with the guidance of an advisor and a committee. The distinction between them has to do with the final deliverable: in the case of the former, it is a formal research paper; in the case of the latter, it is a practice-based resource.

We are fortunate to have a team of extraordinary faculty teaching the core seminars. They originally developed the courses and have been updating and revising them on a regular basis. All of these faculty members have highly developed expertise in special education, music education, and disability studies; bring decades of experience teaching the arts to disabled students; and engage actively in various communities of research and practice in the field of accessible arts education.

The course titles and brief descriptions are listed below.

- Special Education Foundations and Practices – A comprehensive, practical examination of the field of Special Education with the study, application, and critical examination of evidence-based practices and pedagogy;
- Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders – A wide ranging, hands-on exploration of autism from historical, biological, physical, sociological, political, critical, and pedagogical perspectives;
- Autism, Music, and Behavioral Teaching Methods – An innovative, real-world investigation of pedagogical practices in accessible arts education through research, practice, observation, and critique; and
- Research to Practice in Music Education and Autism I, and Research to Practice in Music Education and Autism II – A two-semester deep dive into the research base for accessible arts education and its application and implementation in music teaching practice.

From the Perspective of Graduate Program Students and Alumni

As part of our ongoing program evaluation to support the continuous improvement of the graduate programs in Music Education and Autism, an external evaluator conducted 45-minute, semi-structured interviews with a randomly selected group of 30 current students and alumni.

While the participants were randomly selected from a list of all current students and alumni, a range of ages, genders, and teaching experience were represented in the sample. The individuals ranged in age from 23 to 58 years. In terms of gender, 23 respondents identified as female, five identified as male, and two chose not to specify their gender. The sample included individuals with less than one year of professional teaching experience, all the way to people who have been teaching for more than two decades.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences in the program and the ways that their graduate studies contribute to their teaching practice as music educators.³ The interviews were transcribed in full, and the transcripts were analyzed with a grounded theory approach, with the aim of identifying emergent themes. The independent evaluator produced a report based on the four most resonant themes that emerged from the data:

A. Finding a like-minded community

³ The interview questions can be found as Appendix A.

- B. Validating teaching practices that they had developed informally
- C. Increased awareness of others' attitudes about disability
- D. Improvements in their teaching with all students

This paper will focus on the last of these themes: Improvements in their teaching with all students. In the words of one alumnus,

This program has made all of my teaching better. It's not just with the students with disabilities – it's with all of my students. What I have learned here has made me a better teacher, period. For everyone.

Other interviewees echo these sentiments. A current student who has been teaching music for more than ten years states: "My teaching today is so much better than it was before I started this program. I almost want to apologize to my students from before. I was a good teacher, but I didn't know what I didn't know." An alumna concurs, saying that "accessible music education is for everyone. It means making sure that everyone in every class can learn everything I teach and can participate in every activity that we do." Another of her colleagues puts it succinctly: "Now that I know how to teach students with disabilities, I know how to teach anyone. Whether or not they have a disability, it doesn't matter."

More specifically, participants spoke about how their studies in the program have altered and expanded their understanding of student learning. A current graduate student notes, "I feel like I understand my students better. I can see the different ways they learn and make tweaks as I go." Another agrees, stating that her understanding of what learning looks like has changed:

The biggest difference that it [the program] has made in my teaching is that I can see more ways of learning. I used to think that, when I gave a lesson, all of the kids would do the same thing when they're learning. That they should do the same thing. Now I can see the differences in what the kids do and how they learn as positives, not negatives.

In the words of an alumnus, "Before the [graduate] program, students were learning, but I couldn't see it. I didn't know how to look for it or how to help students show it. Now I have new tools to see and understand how my students are learning." One of her colleagues agrees, and expands on this idea, as she says, "It's all about a wide angle lens sort of view of teaching and learning. Not just one way. Everybody learns differently, and I have to teach everybody well."

Respondents also point to their undergraduate training in music education and their lack of preparation in teaching students with disabilities. A current graduate student says that she is "surprised we never talked about any of this [accessible music education] when I was in college [studying in an undergraduate music teacher preparation program]." An alumnus who has been teaching music for three years notes:

All I learned about students with disabilities before I came here [to the graduate program] was in one Special Learners class in college where we studied the laws and their history. There was nothing about how to teach. Nothing at all.

Current graduate students and alumni from the Graduate Programs in Music Education and Autism describe that their overall teaching, with all of their students, is greatly improved as a result of their studies. They highlight that they conceive of student learning more broadly and that they engage in teaching and assessment practices that seek to uncover student learning in meaningful ways. As they describe it, the teaching strategies and pedagogical tools that they gain in their graduate studies are necessary for some students, and helpful for all students. Furthermore, the interviewees underscore their lack of preparation in how to teach students with disabilities in their undergraduate music teacher education programs, further bolstering the three main arguments of this paper thus far – (a) that there is a significant gap in U.S. pre-service music teacher education when it comes to teaching students with disabilities, (b) that the pedagogical tools, frameworks, and strategies used to teach students with disabilities can be employed in all teaching with disabled and non-disabled students -- and setting up the third, that pre-service music teacher education that does not include these tools, frameworks, and strategies does a disservice to current and future music educators, as well as their students. This last argument will be discussed further in the following section.

Implications for the Field

In order for pre-service music teacher education in the U.S. to be effective, it must be relevant to the students of today and tomorrow, and it must incorporate new pedagogical approaches. Regarding the former, pre-service music education must address the changing demographics of the U.S. public school population, which demand that music educators learn how to reach students with disabilities and diagnoses. As the learning schemes of public school students continue to become increasingly diverse, music educators must be effectively prepared to reach students who learn in a wide variety of ways, with a range of skills, experiences, and challenges. In terms of the latter, pre-service music education must remain current by expanding its battery of approaches to include recent developments in pedagogy and practice. One such development is the emergence of accessible music education – pedagogical frameworks, tools, and strategies to make music education curricula and activities accessible to all students.

This is not a difficult leap for the profession to make. As has been discussed above, the frameworks, strategies, and tools of accessible music education are widely applicable – to every student. They are necessary for some students, and helpful for all students. Because they are helpful for all students, I would argue that at least some of these strategies belong in the curriculum of university pre-service music education programs.

I propose that, as a place to begin to address these issues, undergraduate courses in elementary and secondary teaching methods incorporate the two best-known, evidence-based frameworks of accessible music education (both of which originate from general education): Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction. Many university faculty are already well versed in these approaches. Those who teach elementary and secondary teaching methods courses might be able to teach modules in each of these areas. If that is not possible, it would not be difficult to locate guest

instructors for the modules, as there are a number of educators in a range of fields who have expertise in these two frameworks.

This proposal takes into account the practical realities of undergraduate music teacher education in the U.S., whose curriculum is quite large, and whose content is mandated by state licensure requirements and regional accrediting organizations. While accessible music education extends far beyond Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction to include other frameworks, strategies, and approaches, starting with these two approaches is a manageable way for the field to begin to address the issues discussed in this paper. Students who are interested in additional studies in accessible music education can engage in them at the graduate level, in programs like the ones described here⁴.

All of us in the field of music education are united by a passion to engage people of all ages in music making and music learning. Providing pre-service music educators with tools, strategies, and frameworks that are necessary for some, and helpful for all will help to ensure that they can be effective teachers for the students of today and tomorrow. With this preparation, the next generation of music educators will reach more students in their classrooms, ensemble rehearsal halls, and studios, making music a meaningful part of more people's lives.

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⁴ In addition to the programs described here, Wichita State University offers a Master's degree with a concentration in Music in Special Education, and the University of Arkansas offers a Graduate Certificate in Music Education for Special Needs Students. Vander Cook College of Music offers a graduate course in this area, as well.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The following interview questions were used for the semi-structured interviews with current students and alumni from the Graduate Programs in Music Education and Autism.

What is your name?

Are you a current student, or an alumnus/a?

Are you affiliated with the Master of Music in Music Education with an Autism Concentration or the Graduate Certificate in Music Education and Autism?

If you are a current student, when did you begin the Graduate Program?

If you are an alumnus/a, when did you complete the Graduate Program?

What is your occupation?

If you are teaching – describe your teaching position. What are you teaching? Where? Describe your student population. Does it include students with disabilities, and if so, how many/what percentage of your students have disabilities?

Tell me about your experience in the Graduate Program.

What were some of the most important and meaningful things that you learned?

What would you say are the strengths of the program?

What were the highlights of your experience in the program?

How do you think that the program could be improved?

What would you change about the program, and why?

Do you feel that your studies in the Graduate Program contributed to your teaching practice as a music educator? If so, how did it do so?

How, if at all, has your teaching changed as a result of your studies in the program?

How, if at all, has your thinking about your career changed as a result of your studies in the program?

What else would you like to tell me about the program that I haven't asked you about?