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SPECIAL LEARNERS IN ELEMENTARY MUSIC CLASSROOMS: A STUDY OF ESSENTIAL TEACHER COMPETENCIES

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The number of special learners in American public school music classrooms is increasing dramatically. The "Condition of Education, 1998" reports, "The number of students who participated in federal programs for children with disabilities increased 51 percent, between 1977 and 1996" (National Council of Educational Statistics, p. 108). According to the *Digest of Educational Statistics* (1997), 5,573,350 of the 44,840,481 students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the fall of 1995, or 12.4 percent of the total public school enrollment, were identified as special learners. "During the 1988–1989 school year, 93.1 percent of students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 received education and related services in school settings with students who were not disabled" (Heller, 1994, p. 3).

Legislation making equal access possible by preventing educators and administrators from excluding special learners has had many effects upon teachers, students, parents, administrators, and teacher educators. While it may not be generally recognized that special learners require instruction from teachers who possess specific competencies regarding inclusion (Heller, 1994), several studies indicate that many students graduating with music teaching certificates, as well as many experienced music teachers, do not feel adequately prepared to include special learners in music classrooms (Cassidy & Sims, 1991; Connard & Dill, 1984; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; Hawkins, 1991; Wilson, 1996). Although "mainstreaming" classes have been in place in undergraduate programs for approximately 25 years, a large segment of the population affected by legislation regarding special learners continues to misinterpret its effects (Atterbury, 1990).

Education students' first teacher education experi-

ences take place at the undergraduate level. Here many teacher competencies are acquired through college classroom and public or private school field experiences. Focus on specific music teacher competencies is needed to meet the needs of increased numbers of special learners in music classrooms (Nocera, 1979). Essential teacher competencies for including special learners have not yet been delineated for music teachers.

Examination and analysis of teacher competencies used by practicing elementary music educators, as well as those teacher competencies taught during elementary music methods courses at the undergraduate level, provided a research base for this study. Research has shown that additional course work, field experiences, and identification of specific teacher competencies increase music educators' teaching competencies for including special learners in their classrooms (Ansuini, 1979; Atterbury, 1993; Dalrymple, 1993; Gfeller, Darrow, & Hedden, 1990; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Heller, 1994; Williams, 1988).

With the intent of improving music teacher preparation, this research sought to identify teacher competencies considered essential when including special learners in elementary music classrooms. The researcher sought to examine whether current methods courses designed to introduce teacher competencies are concurrent with teacher competencies considered essential for use in music classrooms. Additionally, the extent, quality, and variety of field experiences, which are integral in undergraduate music education curricula, appropriate for the acquisition of teacher competencies essential for including special learners in music classrooms (Darrow & Armstrong, 1999). Therefore, the research was designed in accordance with the following objectives:

1. to identify teacher competencies used by practicing elementary music teachers when including special learners in classrooms
2. to identify teacher competencies taught by col-

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lege and university music education faculty during undergraduate elementary music education methods classes and field experiences regarding the inclusion of special learners

3. to identify teacher competencies considered essential for undergraduate elementary music education students relevant to the inclusion of special learners and to develop a unit of study to address these competencies.

Method

The data, gathered over a six-month period, represent several situations where music educators encounter special learners, either through undergraduate course work, undergraduate field experience, or experience as a music educator in the classroom. The following ethnographic techniques facilitated an in-depth level of analysis: (a) surveys of both elementary music educators and college and university faculty members who teach undergraduate elementary music education methods courses, (b) interviews with practicing elementary music educators, (c) observations of special learners included in elementary music classrooms, and (d) the collection of syllabi from college and university faculty members who teach undergraduate courses that focus on the inclusion of special learners in music.

Two surveys, both researcher-designed, were created to address teacher competencies. Elements of three prior surveys were included in both surveys used for this study. Ansuini (1979) created a survey to identify teacher competencies when working with students with learning disabilities. Heine (1996) constructed a survey for use when discussing inclusion issues. Portions of their free response questions were used in surveys for this study. For the purposes of this article, the investigation will be restricted to the competencies identified by Williams (1988), who identified twenty-six teacher competencies perceived as important by elementary classroom teachers. The research determined whether these competencies remained tenable ten years after identification and whether any of them were found useful for elementary music teachers.

Survey A, with a cover letter and postage-paid envelope, were mailed during the week of September 14, 1998, to all 653 members of the Virginia Elementary Music Educators Association (VMEA). Within Survey A, elementary music teachers identified teacher competencies used in their classrooms when including special learners. The teachers also responded to questions regarding their undergraduate course work and field experiences in preparation for including special learners in music classrooms. In order to receive informa-

tion from the largest cross section of elementary music teachers, follow-up surveys were sent to four music administrators for distribution to their elementary music teachers. Not all elementary music teachers in Virginia are members of VMEA; however, some non-members do attend statewide conferences. Thirty-five elementary music teachers also completed surveys during a conference session at the VMEA In-Service Conference in November 1998.

Survey A included questions designed to determine the amount of undergraduate classroom and field experience elementary music teachers had prior to the student teaching experience. The twenty-six competencies identified by Williams (1988) were listed, and teachers were asked to indicate whether they used each particular competency when including special learners in their elementary music classrooms. The final question on the survey asked teachers to indicate any additional areas of study or experience they thought might be beneficial to the preparation of undergraduate music education students regarding special learners. A total of 202 surveys were completed and returned, with a response rate of 30%.

All 77 college and university music education faculty members who teach undergraduate elementary music education methods classes in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland at schools accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) were sent a survey with cover letter similar to those sent to elementary music teachers. This survey was also mailed during the week of September 14, 1998. In Survey B, respondents identified those teacher competencies relevant to special learners that they perceived to be important for inclusion in undergraduate courses. For music education students in particular, they indicated relevant teacher competencies that were demonstrated by undergraduate elementary music education students during field experiences. Faculty members also responded to questions regarding field experiences for undergraduate elementary music education students at their institutions during the 1997–98 school year. A total of 30 surveys were returned by the college and university faculty members, with a response rate of 39%.

After a pilot study was conducted, three elementary music teachers considered exceptional by their music supervisors were chosen for participation in this study and were interviewed by the researcher. To ensure consistency of data, each teacher responded to identical questions. Transcripts were made from videotapes of the interviews. Teachers were asked questions regarding methods used to include special learners in their music classrooms, the use of IEPs in designing goals

and objectives for music classrooms, attendance at IEP meetings, and the teacher competencies they considered essential for the inclusion of special learners in music classrooms.

Each of the three elementary music teachers selected a special learner for observation during this study. Students were observed during eight separate music classes. Each student had music class once a week for 30–45 minutes. During each of the eight observations, the researcher used an observation form to document competencies used by the elementary music teachers regarding the special learners.

Through university course catalogs, personal recommendations, and a recent study regarding inclusion topics in undergraduate music education curricula (Colwell & Thompson, 1998), fifteen music education and music therapy faculty members in the United States were identified as teaching undergraduate courses that involve music and the inclusion of special learners. These faculty members' syllabi provided information regarding curriculum content and their instruction strategies for teaching undergraduate music education students about the inclusion of special learners in music classrooms. Data gleaned from syllabi were used to delineate teacher competencies taught through students' classroom and field experiences.

Results

For the purposes of this paper, data analysis was limited to the identification of essential competencies. The surveys, interviews, observations, and syllabi were analyzed independently. Each element was investigated according to the twenty-six competencies identified for elementary teachers by Williams (1988). A competency reached the designated threshold for that category when 66% or more of the respondents considered it essential. If it reached the designated threshold in two or more data collection instruments, that competency was deemed essential for the purposes of this study (see Table 1. Teacher Competencies Used by Practicing Elementary Music Educators and College/University Faculty Members).

As confirmed by this study, competencies deemed essential for elementary music education students training for the inclusion of special learners in the music classroom are the following:

1. acquaintance with various handicapping conditions (general knowledge)
2. knowledge of "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)" (legal aspects)
3. knowledge of music teacher's role on evaluation team (assessment and evaluation)

4. ability to develop and use informal assessment procedures (assessment and evaluation)

5. ability to monitor the learning process of all students (assessment and evaluation)

6. ability to evaluate program effectiveness for specific learners (assessment and evaluation)

7. ability to identify areas of particular difficulty for a student (assessment and evaluation)

8. ability to modify, if necessary, the instructional program to accommodate special learners (curriculum planning)

9. knowledge of how to modify the physical environment of a classroom for special learners (classroom structure)

10. ability to encourage appropriate social interactions among all students (classroom management)

11. knowledge of effective classroom management techniques (classroom management)

12. knowledge of appropriate materials for diverse learning abilities and styles (methods and materials)

13. ability to adapt material to provide for individual differences (methods and materials)

14. ability to communicate effectively with support personnel (communication skills).

Discussion

Results of this study indicate that some specific teacher competencies may be recommended when including special learners in music classrooms. Some of the fourteen competencies are recommended when teaching all students, while others are specific to the inclusion of special learners in music classrooms.

Elementary music teachers sometimes include special learners in music classrooms without having the teacher competencies considered essential according to this study. Music teachers may be more well-prepared if these competencies are consistently included in college and university music education programs. The attainment of competencies identified by this research study, as well as competencies not discussed here, may help music education students meet the unique situations they will undoubtedly encounter in their careers.

One practical result of this research was the creation of a unit of study for undergraduate music education students based upon competencies considered essential according to the study's parameters. Designed as a semester course (fifteen weeks) for undergraduate music education students, course work, assignments, and field experiences are delineated at the beginning of the unit. Competencies are introduced and reinforced through lectures, class discussions, assigned readings, and related assignments. Instructors begin with general information regarding each unit of study

Table 1

Teacher Competencies Used by Practicing Elementary Music Educators and College/University Faculty Members^a

No.	Competency	Elementary music teachers			College/University faculty		
		Survey A	Interviews	Observations	Survey B Taught ^b	Survey B Demonstrated ^c	Syllabi
1.	Acquaintance with various handicapping conditions	X		X			X
2.	Knowledge of "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" (IDEA), formerly PL 94-142	X			X		
3.	Knowledge of rights of all parties: students, parents, teachers, school	X					
4.	Knowledge of channels through which to refer students for assessment				X		
5.	Ability to identify and record significant data for referral purposes	X					
6.	Knowledge of music teacher's role on evaluation team	X			X		
7.	Ability to understand and use psychological data for educational planning						
8.	Ability to select, administer, and interpret formal standardized tests						
9.	Ability to develop and use informal assessment procedures	X		X	X	X	
10.	Ability to monitor the learning process of all students	X			X		
11.	Ability to evaluate program effectiveness for special learners	X			X		
12.	Ability to identify areas of particular difficulty for a student	X			X		X
13.	Ability to evaluate curriculum to determine appropriateness for special learners						X
14.	Ability to write behavioral objectives and/or plans for implementation				X		
15.	Ability to modify, if necessary, the instructional program to accommodate special learners	X			X	X	X
16.	Ability to design individual programs based on assessment information						
17.	Ability to implement an individual program for a student based on an Individualized Education Program						
18.	Ability to recognize the effects of physical conditions on learning (i.e., room arrangement or noise)				X		
19.	Knowledge of how to modify the physical environment of a classroom for special learners			X	X		
20.	Ability to encourage appropriate social interactions among all students	X		X	X		
21.	Knowledge of effective classroom management techniques	X	X		X	X	
22.	Ability to maintain objectivity when faced with inappropriate behaviors	X					
23.	Knowledge of appropriate materials for diverse learning abilities and styles		X		X		X
24.	Ability to adapt materials to provide for individual differences			X	X		X
25.	Ability to communicate effectively with support personnel	X			X		
26.	Ability to communicate assessment findings and plans to parents						

^aThe 26 competencies are identified in D. Williams, "Regular classroom teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to work with mainstreamed students as a result of preservice coursework" (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1988); bold-faced items are competencies considered essential according to this study. ^bCompetencies taught by college faculty during music education methods classes. ^cCompetencies demonstrated by undergraduate music education students during field experiences.

competency and introduce more specific information as students demonstrate an understanding of previous material. This spiral (rather than topical) curriculum approach provides consistent reinforcement of information.

According to the unit of study described above, one competency considered essential was the knowledge that music teachers need concerning their specific role on Individualized Education Program (IEP) evaluation teams. Students learn their role on IEP evaluation teams through class discussions, participating as observers and teachers in field experiences, and by attending IEP meetings of special learners. Through classroom discussions and written evaluations, reflective writings, and a reaction paper based on their IEP meeting experience, students demonstrate their attainment of this competency.

It is also important to note the difference between competencies that practicing music teachers consider essential and competencies that they actually use. Teachers may endorse competencies that they themselves do not possess. This supports prior research indicating that teachers continue to seek out competencies that they do not yet possess (Hawkins, 1991).

The fourteen competencies identified are not the only competencies essential for inclusion of special learners in music classes, but fourteen of the twenty-six that were investigated through this study. Future studies may confirm other competencies not identified or encountered in this study.

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