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### Maintaining Our Proud History of Teaching Music to Students with Disabilities

Alice Hammel

Alice-Ann Darrow

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# Introduction

## Maintaining Our Proud History of Teaching Music to Students with Disabilities

by *Alice M. Hammel and Alice-Ann Darrow*

The music classroom has long served as a welcoming place for students with disabilities. Early music educators recognized that music's appeal and natural adaptability made it an effective agent of inclusion. The first recorded instances of music education for students with disabilities were in the mid-nineteenth century. Lowell Mason, considered the father of music education in the United States, taught students with visual disabilities at the Perkins School for the Blind from 1832 to 1836.<sup>1</sup> In 1848, the early efforts of William Wolcott Turner and David Ely Bartlett on behalf of children who were deaf showed that even a child with little hearing could learn music and that convincing reasons existed to support such an endeavor.<sup>2</sup> At the time these music educators were teaching students with disabilities, there were no courses in special education or special educators. Special education as a profession did not begin until the early twentieth century, making music teachers true pioneers in educating students with disabilities. Early music educators recognized the benefits of musical experiences for students with disabilities. What they knew intuitively then is now supported by research that links music's positive effects on students' academic and socio-emotional success.<sup>3</sup> Music educators can be proud of their history in educating students with disabilities.

With the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and its reauthorization as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, including students with disabilities in music classes was no longer an act of magnanimity but the law. Most music educators have adapted well to these legislative mandates, particularly those that concern the movement toward full inclusion. The multitude of recent publications and conference presentations on teaching music to students with disabilities is evidence that music educators are earnest about meeting the needs of these students. Nevertheless, some music educators have expressed they lack the knowledge to effectively accommodate students with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, preservice music teachers have acknowledged apprehensions about the abilities of these students to succeed in music.<sup>5</sup> There are numerous reasons for these concerns. Music and other classroom educators generally have one course in special education compared to the roughly eleven courses that special educators take in their college curricula.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the number of students with disabilities and types of disabilities represented in the music classroom has increased over the past twenty years.<sup>7</sup> As the breadth of student diversity has increased, so too has the knowledge base music educators must possess to work effectively with all students.

Another possible factor affecting music educators' concerns about the inclusion of students with disabilities is the recent emphasis on teacher accountability for students' academic growth. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that passed in 2015 does not require state teacher evaluation systems based solely on students' test scores, teachers still report pressure to demonstrate improvement in student test scores. Ryan Shaw, an assistant professor of music education at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, found in a recent study that music teachers, like classroom teachers, are experiencing stress over issues such as teacher evaluation and tenure, the need for the teachers' schools to improve their test score-based school ratings, and increased attention to ensemble performance ratings.<sup>8</sup> Multiple measures of music knowledge and skills are the most equitable and accurate assessments for all students but particularly for those with disabilities. Throughout the ESSA, references are made to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a special education initiative that proposes multiple ways for students to engage in lessons and demonstrate what they know. Understanding how to implement UDL and being aware of important provisions for students with disabilities found in the ESSA—such as allowances for testing accommodations—are key to alleviating

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*Alice M. Hammel is on the faculties of James Madison and Virginia Commonwealth Universities. She is also an independent scholar and clinician. She can be reached at [hammela@mac.com](mailto:hammela@mac.com). Alice-Ann Darrow is the Irvin Cooper Professor of Music Therapy and Music Education at Florida State University, Tallahassee; she can be contacted at [alifsu@me.com](mailto:alifsu@me.com).*

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educators' concerns about teaching students with disabilities.

But how does a diligent music educator keep current on educational laws and special education initiatives? Doing so can be daunting for new teachers and experienced ones as well. Knowledge of recent and continuing initiatives, such as Universal Design for Learning, positive behavioral supports, and testing accommodations, can be helpful to music educators, but they, like other educators, need the time and opportunity to learn about these teaching innovations and how to incorporate them into their unique curricula. Opportunities for continuing education and professional development are vital to music educators' success in the classroom. Understanding students' disabilities and learning about types of adaptive music curricula and assessments, contemporary technologies, and innovative instructional strategies can improve music educators' effectiveness in teaching students with varying abilities.

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) has been responsive to the professional development needs of its membership by sponsoring recent preconference sessions on teaching students with autism spectrum disorder and learning disabilities. In addition, NAfME's National In-Service Conference typically includes a number of sessions on teaching students with these and other disabilities. NAfME publications on teaching students with disabilities include books, monographs, and articles. These resources are found in the

NAfME Publications catalog online at <http://bit.ly/RowmanNAfME>. The Association also sponsors a Special Interest Research Group (SRIG) devoted to music researchers and teachers who share an interest in students with disabilities. The mission of the SRIG is to promote the understanding of students with varying exceptionalities and provide opportunities for music educators and researchers to exchange information about and collaborate on strategies for teaching students with disabilities in all areas of music education. The Exceptionalities SRIG website is <https://sites.google.com/site/exceptionalitiessrig/home/about-us>.

We are grateful to NAfME for publishing this Special Focus issue of *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* on Teaching Students with Disabilities. In this issue, we bring together articles by authors who have made significant contributions to the knowledge base in teaching music to students with disabilities. We hope this issue of *MEJ* will provide readers with relevant information on best practices in special music education. Music educators have a proud history of teaching music to students with disabilities. Let's make it our goal to protect and maintain that history.

## NOTES

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