

# The Recorder

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## Features

- 11** Closing the Gap - Revisited  
*Roger Mantie and Lynn Tucker*
- 17** Exploring the Benefits and Issues of  
Special Education Integration within  
Music Education  
*Allesandro Rotondi*
- 22** *Counterpoint* 2018 - Music & the Brain  
*Dr. Kim Eyre and Gena Norbury*
- 24** Opus 100 - Our 2019 Conference
- 27** OMEA/CMIEC OPUS100 -  
2019 Conference Research Sessions
- 28** Music Technology and the Non-  
Traditional Music Classroom  
*Melba Lui*
- 32** Starting a Private Music Studio  
*Rachel Loerts*
- 34** Cultural Appropriation in the Music  
Classroom  
*Lauren Simmons*
- 36** Introducing... Our New OMEA Directors
- 38** Concern and Hope

## Departments

- 4** Contributors
- 6** Editor's Message  
*Dr. Jane Saunders*
- 8** President's Message  
*Isaac Moore*
- 10** Upcoming Issues
- 10** OMEA Privacy Statement
- 37** Corporate Members
- 41** OSA Festival 2019
- 42** Take Note
- 44** Corporate Profile: Cosmo Music
- 46** Guidelines for Contributors



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4 Winter 2019 The Recorder

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# Exploring the Benefits and Issues of Special Education Integration within Music Education

Allesandro Rotondi

Within the recent past, special needs students have begun to find a comfortable place in the world of music education. In terms of music teaching and learning, students with special needs can often function and benefit from inclusion in a typical classroom (Kostka 1999). Like all students, special needs students can perceive, act, and react to music on a physical, spiritual, and personal level. Because of this, music makes for a highly successful education for special needs students in and outside the normal classroom setting. Increasingly, a more individual teaching style is needed in modern classrooms since every student, special needs or not, is unique and learns differently. Music therapy is a fairly new and substantial adjunct to special education and music education. The purpose of this research is to assess the way music, music education, and music therapy function in helping special needs students learn and progress in the classroom. In addition, the preparedness of preservice music educators for integrating special needs students in the classroom will be assessed.

Are there wider benefits to the inclusion of special needs students within regular classrooms? Is it difficult to create a music classroom that can educate all students, including special needs students, simultaneously? These questions cannot be answered definitively, but research is beginning to provide understanding on the subject (Kostka 1999). Further questions about whether or not professional educators receive enough preservice training to teach special needs students in a classroom setting, will also be addressed in this overview.

## **Preservice Music Educators' Special Needs Training, and the Importance of Field Experiences**

Increased numbers of special needs students in classrooms means an increased need for educators to be able to effectively teach all students. Ryan Hourigan (2007b) states that many preservice music educators have limited contact with special needs students, and are not provided with the opportunities and experiences necessary to feel comfortable teaching a diverse classroom of students. Because of this, music education graduates feel inadequately prepared and have preconceived ideologies and apprehensions about teaching students with special needs (Hourigan 2007b). Additionally, these issues cannot be resolved because preservice music educators have a limited frame of reference when trying to understand and prepare for future experiences dealing with special needs students. In order to make the classroom a functioning, all-inclusive environment, teachers must begin preparation during preservice education studies (Hourigan 2007b).

Every special needs student has a capability to learn music. Educators must provide opportunities so that every student can succeed, gain motivation, and garner a positive attitude toward music making and learning. A successful, all-inclusive music educator should possess a list of competencies and attributes that allow all learners to have positive music learning experiences in their classrooms. These include: having the ability to keep track of all students' learning habits, using formal and informal techniques to assess the students, evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum, being able to modify the curriculum to better suit special learners, having a knowledge of legal aspects regarding students with special needs, and possessing the ability to manage the students' interactions, social behaviours, differences, communication abilities, and learning styles (Hammel 2001).

Studies suggest that a leading factor in encouraging students to be accepting of atypical peers in the classroom relies on the teacher being a positive role model that sets an example for the students. The attitudes of music teachers and music therapists towards special needs students would likely influence non-disabled students to be more accepting as a result (Kostka 1999). The key principal in the success of an all-inclusive classroom is the way teachers treat students with special needs (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a). Therefore, having sufficient training and experience with special needs learners in preservice music educators' undergraduate degrees is of great importance.



With an examination of preservice music educators' special needs training, we see that many of the undergraduate degrees contained coursework related to special education preparation for preservice educators, thought to inspire positive and creative thinking in the field of special education and working with special education students (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a). Even though many undergraduate degrees contain studies in the field of special education, why is it that many teachers feel inadequately prepared to deal with atypical students? Perhaps this is because there is not enough focus on field experience within preservice music education studies. Despite the benefits of special education studies in undergraduate degrees, greater focus is needed in getting preservice music educators to experience special needs students, authentic teaching environments, and genuine results. The goal is to be immersed in the real world of teaching, to experience person to person communication, garner first-hand knowledge, and gain direct exposure to special education (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a).

Music educators are generally accepting of all-inclusive classroom ideologies, but some expressed apprehensions regarding integration of students with mental, emotional, and behavioural exceptionalities into general classrooms. Studies conducted on preservice teachers proved that the views and opinions of the teachers changed after given the opportunity to interact with special needs students in a learning environment; in this case, a music lab experience. The personal and professional attitudes of preservice teachers became more positive, levels of preparation for teaching special needs students in music education settings were rated much higher than prior to the field experience, and willingness to work with special needs students in the future increased (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a). In another study, conducted by Ryan Hourigan (2007a), two preservice music educators spent approximately six months teaching music to a special needs boy in an elementary school. Both preservice educators experienced fear prior to the lessons, claiming to have had no prior experience in the field of special education. The study proved that as the educators gained comfort teaching the student, preconceived apprehensions faded, the learning environment became more comfortable for the educators and the student, the working relationship between the student and educators strengthened, and the student became more successful during instruction (Hourigan 2007a). These aforementioned studies suggest the importance of field experience in preservice music education studies, and how field experience can strengthen the quality of music educators.

These immersive field experiences give the educator an opportunity to create a frame of reference, and to feel more comfortable when handling new and unfamiliar situations in the classroom. The stressed importance of preservice music education training in the field of special education, with special regards to field experience, is crucial to becoming a more individual-based, all-inclusive teacher, a more comfortable and capable problem solver in unfamiliar scenarios, and a positive role model for normal students to learn from and follow.

### **Benefits and Issues in the Integrated Classroom, and the Need for Individualized Educational Approaches**

Research has established the fact that special needs students benefit greatly from inclusion in regular classrooms. Kostka concluded that students with special needs being integrated in regular classrooms helped in acquiring "accepted social behaviors, increased self-awareness and self-esteem, improved ability to follow directions, and increased interactions with "normal" children" (Kostka 1999).

One issue that provides a challenge for all-inclusive classrooms is the need for a more individual teaching style and curriculum, and an understanding that each student is different and learns differently. Elizabeth Bauer (2004) explains that "states and countries are being held to standardized curricula. While in and of themselves standards are not bad because they set education expectations, dictated curricula do not allow for individuality and creativity" (Bauer, p. 187). In many school settings, a suggestion to address this problem is an IEP, or Individualized Education Plan. An IEP allows students to learn based on individual potential and learning capacity, and constructs educational goals the student is expected to reach within one academic year. These plans favour the importance of the individual learner; students would not necessarily follow the same curriculum (Bauer 2004).

The benefits of IEPs not only apply to special education, but can be applied to all classrooms with a wide range of students. For example, imagine a grouping of five students in an interactive group project. Two students have prior experience in music, two have little experience, and one has no experience. This group could be assigned different parts supported by each student's abilities. The experienced students could be assigned a challenging piece on the instrument of choice - like a piano part with melody and chord changes, or a saxophone part with a melody that expands the student's capabilities. The two students with a small amount of previous musical experience could perform a simple part on the instrument of choice - like a single handed melody line on piano, or a simple melody line on the first string of a bass or guitar. This can be learned by notation if the student has a basic knowledge of music theory, but informal learning techniques can be utilized. The student with no experience could play simple percussion on a drum, shakers or woodblock, in order to establish rhythmic capabilities and a sense of musical interaction with the other players. These combinations are interchangeable, and create a learning atmosphere where students work in coordination, learn group effort and social communication, and develop skills



in an individualized curriculum. Students will discover that despite each individual's level of prior knowledge, every student is moving their music learning forward. This individual-based approach to music education can be surprisingly integrating after all (Kostka 1999).

As we explore the IEP, it is evident that is simply not possible to accurately predict the capabilities of the student. Stereotypes make predictions biased, and in-class observation alone is not enough to make accurate assumptions or learning plans. Because of this, individual assessment becomes a requirement to more accurately determine a student's capabilities as a learner. In a study by Kimberly VanWeelden and Jennifer Whipple (2007a), preservice music educators were given the opportunity to work with special needs students in a music setting. The preservice educators were asked to predict the level of mastery the students would achieve before instruction began, perceptions of the students' abilities during instruction, and the grade determined to be appropriate, before alternative testing was done to provide comparison grades. This study proved that special needs students attained a much higher level of achievement than the preservice music educators initially predicted. Moreover, these results mirrored those of an earlier study, thus proving that individual student assessment can be considered a highly beneficial aspect of modern curriculums in the field of music education and special education (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007b).

When special needs students are integrated with their peers and have individualized curriculum based on IEP's, it allows special needs students the chance to feel and be treated as though each student has equal importance and potential. Evidence has pointed to substantial social development for all children in inclusive learning environments, not just those with special needs. When inclusion is pursued, all students learn positive interaction and relations with peers (Twyford 2012). Studies assembled by Marilyn Kostka (1999) reveal that most students are generally accepting of other students regardless of appearance, and physical or mental abilities. The students surveyed did not form opinions on atypical peers based on singular characteristics and written dialogue alone. Remarks from students included: "You can't judge a person from his abilities alone", "I would need to know more about him or her," and "We all should have the same chance for friendship" (Kostka, p.4). This data suggests the benefits of special needs students being integrated into regular classrooms.

### **Music Therapy Working in Coordination with Music Education**

Music therapy can be defined as the use of music in helping in the growth and learning of a special needs person. In the field of special education, music therapy has been extremely beneficial in helping special needs students overcome learning blocks, improve the overall ability to learn and absorb information, and provides the students with a more pleasurable experience in a learning environment (Ropp 2006). As Mitchell (2016) notes, music therapy not only provides students with a therapeutic approach to learning, but also creates immense personal growth in synchronization with musical growth. Therefore, music therapy in coordination with music education can work together to greater benefit personal growth in special needs students. As Dobbs (1968) states, "Has music any contribution to make to the satisfaction of these (students') needs? It certainly has a strong influence over the emotions: it is one of the most powerful means for both exciting and releasing emotional forces at a deep level, and it provides a medium of non-verbal communication between the individual and the world around them" (Dobbs, p. 134). This inference, though dated, still resonates. Special needs students, like all students, use music as an emotional output, which is being positively harnessed as the implementation of music therapy and music education in the lives of special needs students is increased. Oldfield (2006) notes that all children, whether disabled or non-disabled, value things that are recognizable. For instance, familiar melodies such as "Row, Row Your Boat", "Twinkle Little Star" or popular melodies heard in the media, can stimulate a student's interest in musical learning. Oldfield also believes that before music learning and use of music in the classroom officially begins, individual student assessment is required to determine each students' unique abilities, learning needs, and goals. This further enables the development of the IEP.

In VanWeelden and Whipple's (2007b) study on preservice music educators' perceptions and assessment of special needs students, commonalities were noted between music education and music therapy. Also noted was the important idea that music education and music therapy can work together towards achieving a common goal. This common goal is to create the most successful, comfortable, goal-oriented learning environment possible, and allowing special needs students to function to the highest level of individual capability, while developing personal, musical, and general educational skills (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007b).

Music therapy inspires unity among peers in a classroom setting, and helps students develop a sense of oneness in the school community. Twyford (2012) states that group music therapy can encourage typically developing peers to develop relationships with children with identified needs and learn to accept diversity. The teaching of engaging, prompting and assisting skills to typical peers produces a noticeable increase in peer interaction, as they can provide a same age model for both musical and non-musical behaviours and offer a bridge between the group members.



## Implications for the Importance of Special Education Inclusion within Music Education, and Quality Preservice Music Educator Training

One of the most important variables in a successful classroom is the teacher. The teacher is required to have an all-inclusive outlook in order to be a positive role model for all students to follow and learn from (Kostka 1999). In order to support the attainment of these qualities, it is important that educators receive sufficient training and field experiences in special education during preservice music education (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a). This leads to better preparation, and a frame of reference when referring to new and unfamiliar situations in all-inclusive classrooms. Practice and preparation in this area leads to more comfort in real life educational settings, and result in a more confident, inclusive, and positive educator for the students to learn from (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a). Additionally, the need for field experiences during preservice music educators' studies is important. When field experiences were applied, many teachers gained confidence and willingness to work with special needs students in the future (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007a).

Inclusion of special needs students in regular classrooms leads to benefits for all students. Special needs students improve social interactive abilities, and progress in a typical learning environment, while other students learn diversity, acceptance, communication, and alternate learning styles. Additionally, all students learn that similarities outweigh differences, and the common goal is to be successful and create music (Kostka 1999, Twyford 2012). Individual learning approaches, through the use of IEPs, help students to function and learn to the best of their personal abilities (Bauer 2004). Plus, individual learning styles create a sense of unity among students that work together toward achieving a common goal (Kostka 1999). Additional to the integration involved in individual learning styles, music therapy also inspires unity among peers in a musical setting, and helps create a sense of oneness in the educational community (Twyford 2012). Music therapy and music education compliment each other, and can work alongside one another in a classroom setting to strengthen each area (VanWeelden and Whipple 2007b).

In conclusion, special needs students belong in all classrooms. The benefits of inclusion are evident; the more this practice is implemented, the more successful and functional it becomes. Greater focus on field experiences in preservice music education studies will result in better preparation and a feeling of readiness for the music educator. Positive, comfortable, role model teachers can help teach students acceptance, leading to diversity, strong social communications, and a sense of togetherness. Music therapy can provide additional support to special education integration in the field of music education, and can improve the experience of special needs students, regular students, and educators in the classroom and beyond.

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#### President's Message .... continued from page 8

and professional development. I could not imagine my professional life without this organization, and I am so proud to play a role in continuing the strong traditions of advocating for music education in our province, and in supporting teachers in our profession.

Oh, and ONE MORE THING. The year 2019 marks an important milestone in our organization. In April of 1919, at the fifty-eighth annual convention of the Ontario Educational Association, a group of educators met to “discuss matters of particular concern to those responsible for supervising the teaching of public school music and for overseeing the musical training of teachers at the provincial Normal Schools” (Brault, 1977, p.44). This particular group of educators laid the foundations for what would eventually be reorganized in 1949 and renamed the OMEA. As such, we are the oldest continuing music education association in Canada. In 2019, we celebrate one hundred years of our organization! For this reason, we are planning big things to commemorate this milestone year, culminating at our Opus 100 conference from November 7th to 9th in Toronto. Mark your calendars and make plans to attend this truly “once-in-a-lifetime” event!

I look forward to collaborating with all of you as we celebrate and look back, but more importantly, look ahead to what the next one hundred years may bring for the OMEA and music education in our province. I truly believe in the transformative power of music in schools, as I am living proof that it changes lives - those of students, teachers, and our school communities. I am the successful product of the amazing public music education system in Halton region, and I truly do not know where I would be today if I had not been given the opportunity to make music while I was in school. I, like so many students, was desperately searching for an identity when I entered high school. Music classes, Concert Band and Jazz Band in high school, coupled with joining the ranks of the Burlington Teen Tour Band began a personal journey for me that taught me how to set attainable goals, reflect on my own learning, follow directions, pay attention, and be a working part of something larger than myself. I also developed a deep love and passion for making music and as I entered the Faculty of Music at Western University in London, I knew that becoming a music teacher was the only job I was interested in. As the leader of this great organization, I will continue to work tirelessly for all Ontario students who need music in their school day and in their lives as much as I did - and still do. 

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