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Evaluating the Perceived Preparedness of Pre-Service Music Educators to Teach Students with Disabilities

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EVALUATING THE PERCEIVED PREPAREDNESS OF PRE-SERVICE MUSIC
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**Evaluating the Perceived Preparedness of Pre-Service Music Educators to Teach Students
With Disabilities**

Emily L. Jarvis

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Honors Project

12/4/2023

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Abstract

This study evaluated the perceived preparedness of pre-service music educators to teach students with disabilities based on their university's curriculum. Ten participants responded to a survey that asked questions on their feelings of preparedness in classroom management, teaching students with disabilities, university education, and personal perspectives. Overall, participants indicated they felt comfortable with teaching students with disabilities, but felt unprepared to teach specific components of disability education based on their program studies alone. Suggestions to improve university programs are based on implementing Universal Design Learning (UDL) practices.

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Introduction

Access to high quality music education is essential in fostering positive associations with music from a young age. Awareness of music and different musical pathways while growing up can help individuals identify a need for music in adulthood (Pitts, 2017). These musical pathways are taught to students through effective music educators, who are initially trained by their university Music Education programs. While many programs support high quality learning goals for future music educators, there is one area that is subject for improvement: teaching students with disabilities.

In America, there are policies in place that protect the rights of disabled people's access to quality education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that students with disabilities have access to a free public education with proper curricular support (Crockett, 2017). Another law that protects education for students with disabilities includes the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While not directly related to exceptional students, this act safeguards access to high quality education to disadvantaged students. (Crockett, 2017). Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) posits that no person with a disability can be barred from public activities, including education (Crockett, 2017). While these laws protect students' rights within schools, they do not ensure that future music teachers are prepared to fully engage with students who have disabilities, In fact, many report being unaware of these laws and policies despite more music teachers being expected to effectively teach students with physical and behavioral disabilities (Hammel and Hourigan, 2011).

Despite being unaware of these policies, many future music educators indicate feeling comfortable including exceptional students in their lessons (Johnson and Darrow, 1997). At the same time, pre-service music educators also indicate questioning their preparedness to teach

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students with disabilities at some point (Robinson et al, 2019). For music educators in the field, many also indicate a feeling of comfort in inclusive practices in the classroom but express that they may not have enough time to prepare their classrooms to be as inclusive as possible (Darrow, 1999). On top of individual preparedness, the overall structure of certain music programs may present challenges in teaching students with disabilities. In elementary programs, music education is often structured into the curriculum as an exploratory experience. As the student moves into primary education, they are offered more choice in if they will continue to study music, primarily through performance based ensembles. These performance based ensembles introduce a new set of barriers to students seeking music education (Culp and Clauhs, 2020). One barrier is the structure of performance-based ensembles. Here, an ensemble may only be instructed by one teacher, limiting the amount of individual access a student may have to a teacher. In order to prepare for these barriers and improve levels of comfort for future music educators, university programs should be evaluated to ensure the highest possible preparation for music education students.

Currently, there is little research that evaluates preparedness to teach students with disabilities based on college curriculums. Many studies evaluate feelings of preparedness, but do not factor in students' coursework in their university programs. There is no clear requirement outlined by the National Association of Schools of Music for music education students to take a course dedicated to teacher students with disabilities. The only requirements are that professional education courses, where students learn about the history of education, foundations of education, special education, and more, make up between 15% and 20% of a student's total curriculum (NASM, 2023). Given that university programs are the start of a future music educator's career

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in teaching, considerations should be made toward how thoroughly universities are creating experiences for students to learn about teaching students with exceptionalities.

In doing this study, I hope to outline areas where university programs can grow in terms of teaching inclusivity and adaptive strategies to music educators. When comparing my own coursework to that of my peers in other education programs, I noticed that where they were required to take classes on teaching students with exceptionalities, I was not required to take any. Peers from other universities would report that they were required to spend time observing in a special education classroom, whereas I was not. If teaching students with disabilities was made a priority in other programs, why was it not mentioned in mine? While I did take some courses that referenced accessibility in lessons, these ideas were often fragmented and not situated within the larger concept of the curriculum. As a future educator, I wanted to be sure that I was as prepared as I could be before my first year of teaching and identified this area as a gap in my own knowledge.

Questions regarding the preparedness of future music educators are necessary to answer because they can help isolate areas of needed growth within programs. Since education is an ever-changing field, university programs should reflect those changes to the best of their abilities. In doing so, programs can ensure they are producing well prepared teachers to benefit incoming generations of students.

Methods

Participants

This study involved students in their final year of study in a university music education program. Participants were drawn from four participating universities in Ohio. Senior music education students, or students in their final year of study, were surveyed considering they had

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likely finished most of their program's curriculum. In order to evaluate perceived preparedness based on curriculum alone, these students were also chosen because they would not have started their student teaching internship. Students who are student teaching shadow a teaching professional in a school for the duration of the semester. Given that every student teaching experience is different, students that had not had this experience were chosen so they could reflect on their coursework alone.

Study Design

Participants were invited to take a survey asking questions to determine their thoughts on areas of teaching such as classroom management, teaching students with disabilities, overall preparedness, and personal perspectives. These categories were chosen because they evaluated the student's general sense of comfort related to classroom management separate from their perceived preparedness to teach students with disabilities. The sections with questions regarding overall preparedness and personal perspectives asked the student to consider how prepared they felt based on their university's program alone and how their personal perspectives could influence their responses. Each section had 3-5 Likert scale questions in it. Likert scale questions were used to allow for a range of answers. Using a survey allowed for the study to be distributed to more participants than would normally be available to the researcher, allowing for a greater opportunity for a variety of perspectives. Additionally, using a survey helped collect numerical data on participants' perspectives while also allowing participants to explain or describe their answers. This layout allowed the survey to remain anonymous, given that they would not have to reach out to ask clarifying questions to the participants. Keeping the survey results anonymous was necessary to gather unbiased data. If the data was not anonymous, participants may have felt

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pressured to respond in a way that cast their university favorably or unfavorably, not in a way that reflected their true opinions. A full list of survey questions is available in Appendix A.

Procedure

To further protect the anonymity of survey results, surveys were distributed by the Music Education Department Chairs at each university. This way, the researcher would not have any access to participants' contact information. The survey was kept open for ten days after distribution to get responses in a timely manner, though this window could be adjusted. After the survey was distributed, participants could decide whether or not to respond to the survey

Results

Ten participants from two different universities, one public and one private, responded to this survey. Of the ten participants, three attended the private university and seven attended the public university. Four participants indicated their specialization in band, three noted their specialization in choir, and two specialized in orchestra. One respondent indicated a dual specialization in general music and orchestra.

Before participants were asked about their perspectives on teaching students with disabilities, they were first asked questions on their preparedness with general classroom management, not exclusive to teaching students with exceptional needs. Their responses to these questions are summarized in Figures 1-3.

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I have been taught about classroom management skills.



Figure 1: Classroom management skills

Q11 - I have been taught how to redirect a student who is misbehaving in my class.

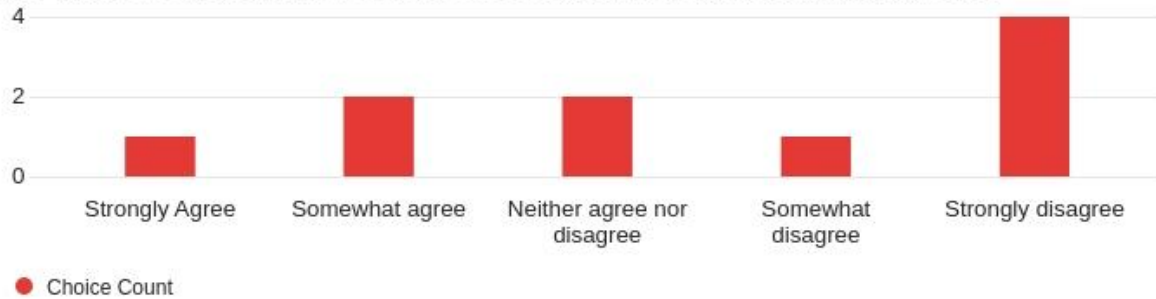


Figure 2: Redirecting behavior

Q12 - I have been taught different strategies to calm down a student who is upset in my class.



Figure 3: Assisting an upset student

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In the Classroom Management section of questions, participants were evenly split between positive and negative associations with general classroom management skills, with no participants indicating a neutral position. Three participants indicated that they felt they had been taught how to redirect a student who was misbehaving in class, with two remaining neutral and five noting they had not been taught how to do this. The next question asked if participants had been taught how to calm down a student who was upset in their classroom. Here, no participants strongly agreed with this statement and one somewhat agreed. The majority of participants indicated they had not been taught different strategies to calm and upset students, with eight total participants selecting a negative association for this question.

The next set of questions asked participants to reflect on their experiences in learning how to teach students with disabilities. The first question in this set asked participants if the majority of students they interacted with did not have a disability. No participants agreed with this statement. The majority of participants agreed, with one student remaining neutral.

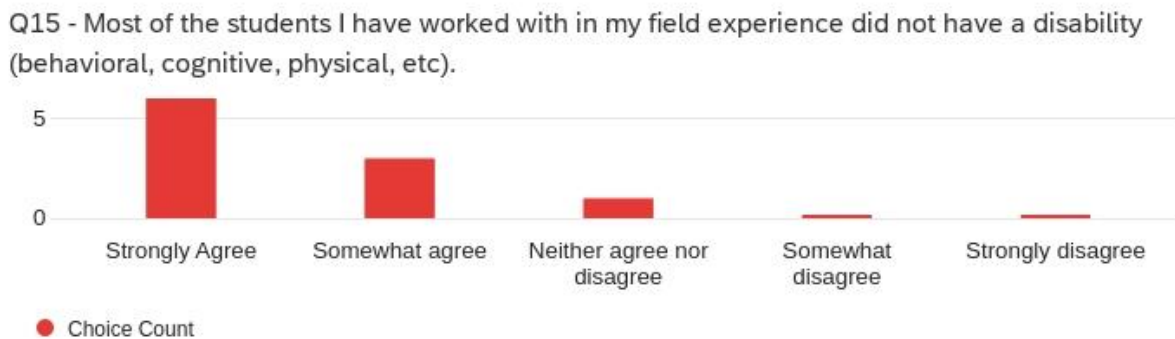


Figure 4: Student interactions in field experience

The next two questions asked students about their familiarity with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The first question asked if participants were familiar with IEPs in general, while the second question asked if they were familiar with the specific language of IEPs.

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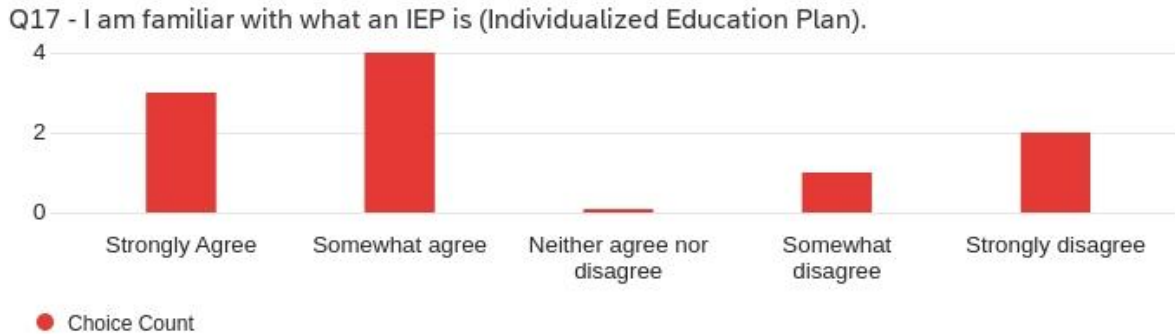


Figure 5: Familiarity with IEPs

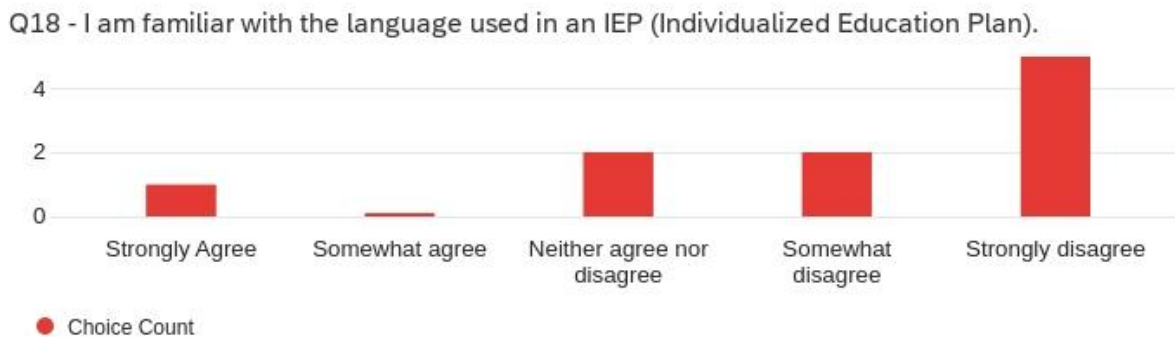


Figure 6: Familiarity with IEP language

Participants indicated that most were at least somewhat familiar with what an IEP was, with seven total participants positively associating with this question. When asked about the language used in IEPs, more participants indicated that they were not familiar, with seven participants somewhat or strongly disagreeing with this statement, though one participant strongly agreed.

The final question in this set asked participants to indicate their comfort with including learners of all abilities in their lessons.

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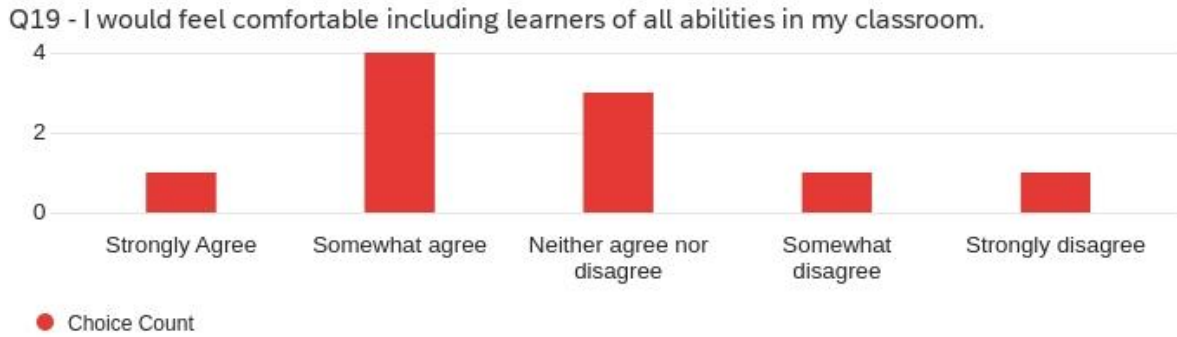


Figure 7: Including learners of all abilities

The majority of participants indicated a neutral or positive stance on this question, with only two participants selecting somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

The next section of questions asked about how prepared students felt to teach students with disabilities based on their university coursework alone. One question asked about each participant's university program overall, while another asked if that program had provided guidance for students to find resources on strategies for teaching exceptional learners.

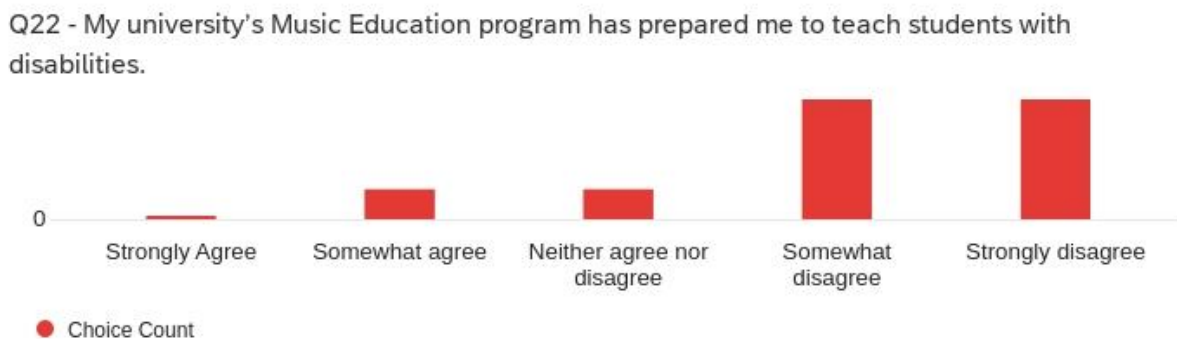


Figure 8: Preparedness based on university program

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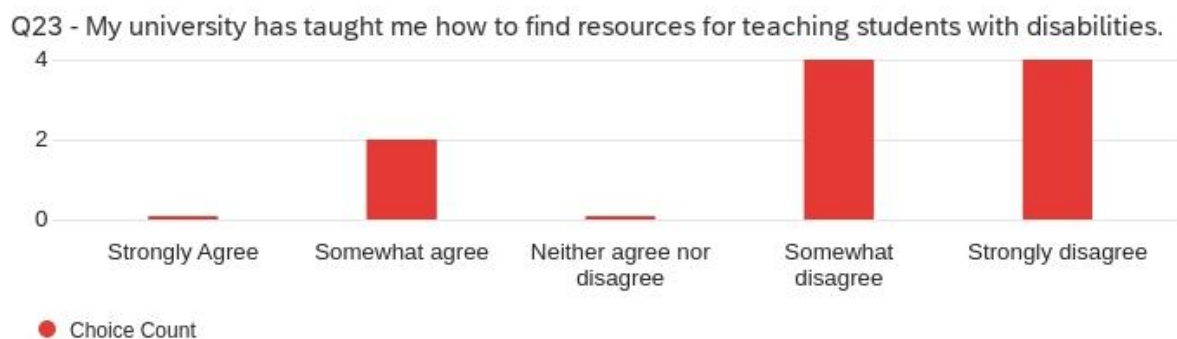


Figure 9: Finding resources

For both questions, the majority of participants either somewhat or strongly disagreed. Eight participants chose these associations for both questions, with one remaining neutral and another somewhat agreeing on the first question, and two somewhat agreeing on the second. There were no participants who strongly agreed with these questions.

The last set of questions asked participants to express their personal beliefs on the role of accessibility in music education curriculums. All participants strongly agreed that accessibility should be taught in college-level Music Education curriculums.

Discussion

Discussion of Results

The results discussed above provide some insights into how prepared some future music educators feel to teach students with disabilities. With regard to general classroom management, participants were evenly divided on feelings of preparedness. These questions were included because classroom management is essential to running an effective classroom for all students. Clear expectations for behavior outline expectations for learning in the classroom, with the teacher enforcing those expectations. Not only do classroom management strategies support expectations, they also support strategies for redirecting and reengaging students who may be

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unfocused. In some schools, students with disabilities may not enter the classroom with extra support, meaning the classroom teacher must be prepared to manage general classroom behaviors and those of students with disabilities who may need additional support. Given that there was no strong skew in either direction for this data, it is hard to determine any trends. For the next two questions about redirecting a student who was misbehaving in class and strategies for calming an upset student, the data shifted slightly toward negative responses. Only three students somewhat or strongly agreed that they would be able to redirect a misbehaving student, whereas only one student somewhat agreed that they would know how to calm down a student who was upset. Misbehavior and being upset are both factors that can influence the way a student reacts in the classroom. In order to mitigate those behaviors, it is necessary that a teacher is able to stay calm, which in part could come from feeling confident in behavior management. While it is important for a teacher to be confident in these skills for the benefit of all students, it is especially important when working with students with disabilities who may need adaptive strategies in order to respond to behavior management. The results from this section may indicate that future music educators could use more instruction on classroom management. With more exposure to these skills, future music educators may feel more confident in general classroom management, allowing them to better participate in conversations regarding adaptive management strategies for students with exceptionalities.

The questions that asked students to reflect on teaching students with disabilities indicated that most participants had not interacted with many students with disabilities. One participant noted in the comments for this section that their field experience placement allowed them to work with a choir made up of mostly students with exceptionalities, yet this participant still indicated a neutral stance on the question. This question was included to allow students to

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reflect on their experiences in the field, which are included in Music Education curriculums. However, this response in particular also showed how field experiences can vary from student to student. Since most participants indicated their lack of experience with working with students who have disabilities, this could indicate a lack of opportunity to teach students with disabilities. Given that field experience placements are often mandated by university curriculums, perhaps providing more opportunities for future educators to observe and interact in classrooms designed to accommodate students with exceptional needs could help them become more familiar with interacting with students with disabilities. In fact, one study noted an increase in perceived preparedness when music education students were placed in a semester-long field experience with students with disabilities. Students indicated before this field experience that they did not feel prepared to teach students with exceptionalities. After the field experience was over, students noted an increase in their feelings of preparedness (VanWeelden and Whipple, 2005). This study notes the importance of selective field experiences in teacher education, and perhaps suggests that more placements should occur in special education classrooms.

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are one component of teaching students with disabilities. These plans outline areas where the student may need more assistance and what strategies are being used to help the student succeed. For example, a student with the learning disability dysgraphia, which affects the student's ability to interact with written language, may be allowed to type assignments that others may have to write by hand. Since IEPs are vital to helping to create quality learning experiences for students with disabilities, asking questions about them in the survey was necessary to determine how well music educators feel prepared to engage in conversations about IEPs. Oftentimes IEPs have specific, common language that guides teachers in their approaches for certain students. This study showed that participants

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largely understood what an IEP was, but fewer participants were familiar with how to read them. Learning how to read IEPs is an essential part of developing lesson plans that are inclusive. Practicing this skill while completing university coursework may help future music educators feel more prepared to teach in their first year and can help them be proactive in their planning of lessons and accommodations.

Despite participants not having much experience with teaching students with disabilities, few participants indicated that they would feel uncomfortable with including learners of all abilities in their lessons. Participants were asked about their comfort to gauge their attitudes toward teaching students with exceptionalities. The majority of participants indicating a positive or neutral stance on this question suggests that participants are willing to include students of all abilities, despite not currently having much exposure to different techniques or strategies for classroom inclusivity. These results are consistent with those reported by Johnson and Darrow.

The next set of questions asked participants to reflect on their university's Music Education programs. The majority of participants felt that their program had not prepared them to teach students with disabilities. One student indicated they somewhat agreed that their program had somewhat prepared them, but no students felt strongly prepared based on the program alone. The second question in this section asked students if they felt their university's program had taught them how to find resources to teach students with disabilities. This question was asked to better understand the content of the curriculum within the university. If the program could not accommodate a class on teaching students with exceptionalities, perhaps they embedded lessons within certain classes that would prepare students to find resources on their own. The responses for this question were similar to the question before, with the majority of participants expressing that they had not been taught how to find resources to teach students with

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disabilities. These responses show that students at the end of their degree programs did not feel prepared to teach students with disabilities. While one could expect that some of these experiences would occur during student teaching, placements in a variety of different schools do not guarantee an equal educational opportunity for all music education students.

The last question on the survey asked participants if they believed that accessibility should be taught in Music Education curriculums, which all participants strongly agreed to. This would suggest that while participants did not think that their university had taught them strategies for accessibility in the classroom, they did believe that they should have been taught these things.

Teaching is a profession that requires flexibility and continuous learning with experience. Classroom management skills and exposure to students with a variety of needs will likely happen as young teachers begin their careers and learn from their individual classrooms. However, confidence in these areas at the start of a young teacher's career are valuable in ensuring the best experience possible for the teacher and students alike. Though this is a preliminary study and additional research should be done to determine trends across more music education students, this data may suggest that music education students are not being prepared to teach students with disabilities based on their university education.

As referenced before, participants from two different schools responded to this survey. Students at the private institution are required to take a course on teaching students with exceptionalities, but participants from the public university do not have this requirement. Of the two participants who responded either somewhat agree or neutral when asked if their program had prepared them to teach students with disabilities, both were from the private institution. All of the participants from the public university disagreed that their institution had prepared them to

teach students with disabilities, as well as one student from the private university. Given the small sample size of this study, it is challenging to determine if these results were influenced by the presence of a course about teaching students with exceptionalities. Future research could be done to see if there is a difference in results based on if a university does or does not have this course requirement.

In the state of Ohio, there are twelve public institutions that offer a Music Education program. Of those institutions, only two do not require a course in exceptional learning. One of those universities is represented in this study. This university, though it does not require this course, does require a course on diversity in schools. In this course, one might assume that perspectives on teaching diverse populations are taught, including people with disabilities. However, given that these courses must address diversity as a whole, it is unlikely that disability studies occupy more than a fraction of the course's subject matter. To support the findings of the survey, research on the program requirements for certain public and private universities was also conducted. The results from this research are summarized in Figures 9 and 10. Information was pulled from each university's website, but are not cited in the bibliography to protect the anonymity of participants given that some schools in this data are also represented in the survey.

Public University Course Requirements

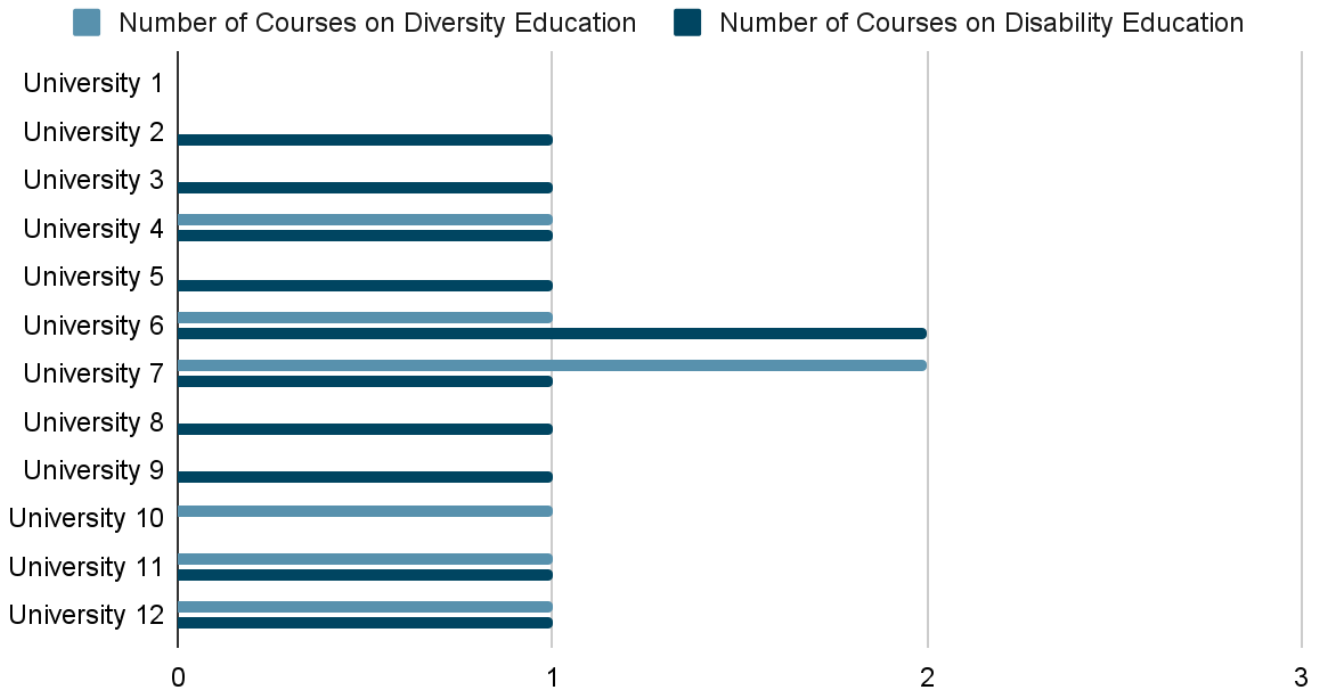


Figure 10: Public university course requirements

Private University Course Requirements

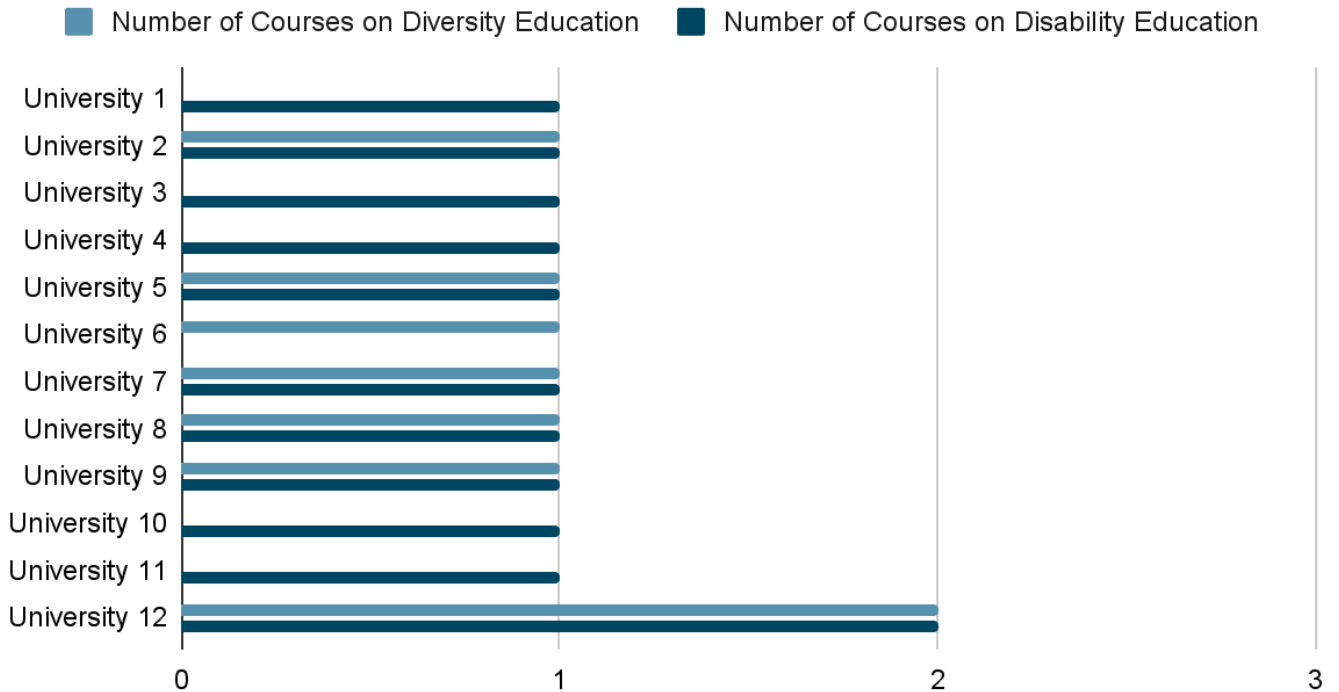


Figure 10: Private university course requirements

While this data does represent all public schools with a Music Education program in Ohio, only the twelve largest private schools with a program were evaluated. The addition of more private schools could reveal more schools that do not require a course on teaching students with exceptionalities, however the data suggests that the majority of universities in Ohio do require this course. According to this data, only 12.5% of schools do not require a course on disability education for music education students. More research could be done on if the presence of these courses helps students feel more prepared to teach students with disabilities. Given that many participants in this study acknowledged that they did not feel prepared by their

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programs, the addition of a similar course could prove beneficial for schools who do not already have one.

Future Implications

While implementing more requirements for special education and field experience in special education classrooms may provide music educators with more foundational knowledge, there are limitations with this solution. Some universities may be at odds with school and state requirements, leading to a gridlock when it comes to adapting curriculum. Additionally, many music education programs involve students operating at the maximum credit hour load for many semesters. Most of the required special education courses ranged from 2-3 credit hours. For students that are consistently at their maximum credit hour capacity, or those who only have room for one extra hour, this extra class could put added mental and financial stress on the student, who likely has to pay for credit hours taken over the maximum. Even if this course is taken, this does not guarantee that a student will feel more prepared.

To further accommodate students and for programs that cannot be changed, universities should consider reevaluating the content of their curriculums. For example, many universities require that music education students learn basic skills on a variety of band, orchestra, and choral instruments and techniques. Within these courses, professors could adopt a common approach to incorporating planning diverse lessons. For example, these courses might each require a project where the student has to plan an adaptive lesson. Keeping students engaged with consistent conversations on improving accessibility in the classroom may allow them to integrate these approaches into the way they think about teaching as a whole.

One approach that could help unify collegiate coursework is the implementation of Universal Design Learning (UDL). UDL creates flexible, adaptive spaces for students to learn in.

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These spaces can accommodate students of multiple ability levels. UDL meets students' needs on three different levels: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of expressions, and multiple means of action and expression. These factors comprise an education that supports IDEA's concept of least restrictive environment, which posits that students with disabilities should be included with students without disabilities as much as possible (Armes et. al, 2022). In music teaching, multiple means of engagement could involve allowing students to make decisions on the music they are making, such as choosing repertoire. This could also mean allowing students a space to reflect on class processes (Armes et. al, 2022). For multiple means of expression, music classrooms could encourage multiple ways to demonstrate an understanding of a musical concept. Music teachers may use colorful icons and symbols in addition to or instead of traditional music notation (Armes et. al, 2022). Multiple means of action and expression refers to how students learn a concept, and can be incorporated into the music classroom by encouraging students to respond to music in a way that works for them. Here, students may also engage in the development of their own goals for the music classroom (Armes et. al, 2022). Overall, education on UDL promotes an understanding of music education that meets students where they are and embraces all different levels of understanding.

Conclusion

Overall, this study provides an introduction to the evaluation of Music Education Programs and how they prepare pre-service music educators to teach students with disabilities. While many programs are evaluated on the state level, certain recommendations for enhanced practices regarding disability education can be made for different universities. This study indicated that while many pre-service music educators felt they could welcome students with disabilities into their classrooms, they did not feel prepared by their universities to engage in the

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best practices for teaching them. Students with disabilities are protected by laws that secure quality education for them, and these laws should be considered when preparing future educators. Implementing Universal Design Learning as a common thread through Music Education programs where additional coursework cannot be added may be beneficial in encouraging pre-service music educators to think about adaptive strategies for their classrooms. Effective preparation of future teachers is essential in ensuring a high quality experience for educators and students alike.

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Appendix A

List of Survey Questions

1. What University do you currently attend?
2. What is your area of specialization? (General Music, Band, Orchestra, Choral, Other)
3. How many courses, if any, have you taken pertaining to child psychology/educational psychology?
4. How many courses, if any, have you taken pertaining to teaching students with disabilities (a course designed **specifically** for instruction on teaching students with disabilities)?
5. How many of your courses addressed strategies for teaching students with disabilities (EX: a unit within a class not specifically intended for instruction on teaching students with disabilities)?
6. How many total semesters have you had field experience as part of your curriculum NOT including your student teaching experience (semesters spent observing, assisting, or teaching in a music classroom)?

Rate your agreement with the following statements (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Classroom Management (General)

- 1.) I have been taught about classroom management skills.
- 2.) I have been taught how to redirect a student who is misbehaving in my class.
- 3.) I have been taught different strategies to calm down a student who is upset in my class.
- 4.) In my classes, we have discussed how to reach students who may not be interested in the subject I am teaching.
- 5.) In my classes, we have discussed how to assess students.

Teaching Students with Disabilities

1. Most of the students I have worked with in my field experience did not have a disability (behavioral, cognitive, physical, etc).
2. I have been taught how to include accommodations for students who may need them in my lessons.
3. I am familiar with what an IEP is (Individualized Education Plan).
4. I am familiar with the language used in an IEP (Individualized Education Plan).
5. I would feel comfortable including learners of all abilities in my classroom.

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Preparedness

1. My university's Music Education program has prepared me to teach students with disabilities.
2. My university has taught me how to find resources for teaching students with disabilities.
3. My university's Music Education program challenged me to find different ways to teach the same lesson.
4. I have learned about different types of disabilities (physical, behavioral, cognitive, etc.).

Personal Perspectives

1. I believe that, typically, general music courses are accessible to most students.
2. I believe that, typically, performance-based music courses are accessible to most students (band, orchestra, choir, etc.).
3. I believe that accessibility should be taught in college-level Music Education curriculums.