An Exploratory Study of the Impact of Field Experiences on Music Education Majors’ Attitudes and Perceptions of Music for Secondary Students with Special Needs

By Kimberly VanWeelden and Jennifer Whipple

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Researchers have found that the single most important variable in the success of mainstreaming is the attitude of the teacher toward students with special needs (Stone & Brown, 1987). Studies investigating attitudes toward special learners in music have found music educators generally have positive attitudes toward the concept of mainstreaming (Brittin, 1995; Hawkins, 1992; Sideridis & Chandler, 1995; White, 1981–1982; Wilson & McCrary, 1996). However, many music educators have expressed reluctance to work with students with special needs due to increased challenges of classroom management (Hawkins, 1992), the need to acquire new skills and competencies to adapt instruction (Sideridis & Chandler, 1995), and the need to create a successful learning environment for all students (Gfeller, Darrow, & Hedden, 1990). These concerns have become the impetus for greater training within music education curricula so as to prepare preservice teachers to meet the current challenges of the profession.

Descriptive research examining institutions that offer undergraduate degrees in music education has found that many of them require coursework designed to prepare preservice music teachers to work with special learners (Colwell & Thompson, 2000; Heller, 1995; Schmidt, 1989). It is reasonable to assume that these courses are included in teacher training programs to help foster positive attitudes toward working with students with special needs as well as to provide information to assist with challenges preservice teachers may encounter while working with special learners in music. However, Colwell and Thompson (2000) recommend further investigation of the nature of this coursework to determine what content is covered and whether these courses offer future music educators field-based experiences working with students with special needs in music settings.

While several studies have investigated in-service music educators’ attitudes toward students with special needs, to date little research has been conducted investigating the effects of field experiences with special learners on preservice teachers’ perceptions of music for these students. Two studies, however, relate closely to the current paper. In the first, Kaiser and Johnson (2000) examined the effect of an interactive experience on music majors’ perceptions of music for deaf students. A pretest
questionnaire was administered to all participants, followed by a 30-minute description of the experience and a one-time interaction with the students. The interaction consisted of a performance by the university students; visual-tactile demonstrations of sound vibrations and pitch; and opportunities for the children to feel, play, and conduct the instruments. At the conclusion of the study, a posttest was administered for comparison analysis. Results revealed positive changes in music majors’ perceptions of music for deaf students and in their confidence in their ability to work with deaf children in music settings.

In the second study, VanWeelden and Whipple (2005) examined the effect of field experiences on music education majors’ perceptions of music instruction for secondary students with special needs. A pretest questionnaire was administered to all preservice teachers followed by one week of preparation for the field experience, then by 10 general music experiences with middle school students with special needs. The preservice teachers were divided into two groups: one to work with students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders and one to work with students with acute cognitive delays. All preservice teachers were given the responsibility of planning, preparing, and teaching specific music concepts from an adaptive secondary general music curriculum within their assigned classrooms over the course of 5 weeks. At the end of the field experience, preservice teachers completed a posttest questionnaire for comparison analysis. Results revealed preservice teachers felt significantly more positive about using music in the education of secondary students with special needs after the field experience.

Both field experience studies revealed that preservice teachers’ perceptions of music for the populations served became more positive after the interaction (Kaiser & Johnson, 2000; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2005). However, because preservice teachers worked with only one subpopulation of students with special needs, the question whether preservice teachers would display differences in their attitudes and perceptions if they worked with more than one subpopulation of students with special needs within a field experience has yet to be answered. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to compare the effect of a long-term field experience on music education students’ attitudes and perceptions of music for secondary students with special needs within two subpopulations. Three attitude and two perception questions were examined. The attitude questions were (a) Do field experiences change preservice teachers’ attitudes about their personal comfort when working with persons with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities? (b) Do field experiences change preservice teachers’ attitudes about their professional comfort when working with students with special needs? and (c) Do field experiences change preservice teachers’ attitudes about their willingness to work with students with special needs? The perception questions were (a) Do field experiences change preservice teachers’ perceptions of whether their educational training prepared them to work with students with special needs? and (b) Do field experiences change preservice teachers’ perceptions of behavior and

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learning of students with special needs? Additionally, comparisons were made between preservice teachers who worked with one subpopulation of students with special needs in a previous study (VanWeelden & Whipple, 2005) and those who worked with two subpopulations in the present study.

Method

The subjects \((N = 59)\) were undergraduate music education majors at a large university enrolled in a course titled Assessment and Teaching Music: Secondary. This course was part of the undergraduate music education curriculum and included students focusing on choral, instrumental, or general music. Music education majors \((n = 31)\) who worked with two subpopulations of students with special needs had 9 weeks of in-class instruction (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday every week) and 6 weeks of field-based secondary general music lab experience (working with secondary students with special needs on Monday and Friday) during the spring 2004 \((n = 16)\) and fall 2004 \((n = 15)\) semesters. Music education majors \((n = 28)\) who worked with one subpopulation of students with special needs in the previous study had 10 weeks of in-class instruction (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday every week) and 5 weeks of field-based secondary general music lab experience (working with secondary students with special needs on Monday and Friday) during the fall 2002 \((n = 13)\) and spring 2003 \((n = 15)\) semesters (VanWeelden & Whipple, 2005).

In-class Instruction

The in-class instruction encompassed activities pertaining to various aspects of teaching general music within secondary schools. Specifically, five broad areas were covered: (a) song leading, Orff instrumental orchestrations, world music and dance, and Western art music microteaching; (b) music listening; (c) musical games; (d) issues within secondary schools; and (e) assessment and evaluation procedures. The first three areas gave the preservice teachers an opportunity to plan and teach various musical activities that would be appropriate for a secondary general music class. No accommodations for special learners were required for these activities. The last two areas included multiple assignments, lectures, and readings for accommodating and grading students with and without special needs in secondary general music class settings.

Work with Students with Special Needs

The field-based secondary general music lab experience entailed working with students with special needs at a local middle school. These students were primarily educated within a self-contained, special education setting and were divided into two classrooms based on the students’ special needs. The first class consisted of students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EDBD), whose special needs often result in academic delays. The second class contained students who exhibited acute cognitive
delays (ACD), such as autism, Down syndrome, mental retardation, and extensive learning disabilities. Each classroom had 11 to 15 students representative of standard middle school ages.

Field-Based Experiences

During the spring and fall 2004 semesters, preservice music educators worked with students in both the EDBD and ACD classrooms. The classes were taught at the same time but in separate locations. Preservice teachers were divided into two groups of eight. Each group was assigned to work with students in one of the classrooms for the first 3 weeks of the experience, then moved to the other classroom for the remaining 3 weeks. In the previous study during the fall 2002 and spring 2003 semesters, the preservice teachers were also divided into two groups. However, preservice teachers worked only with students in either the EDBD or ACD classroom for the entire experience. During all semesters, each classroom was supervised by one of the researchers. Additionally, all the preservice teachers were grouped based on their gender and major emphasis (choral, instrumental, or general) to create roughly the same preservice teacher demographics within each classroom. Preservice teachers were further divided into teaching groups of three or four persons, creating two teaching groups per classroom, using the same demographic considerations. The researchers determined all divisions prior to the field experiences.

The researchers created four secondary general music curricula, one for each semester, that were used as the foundation for the field teaching experiences. The curricula contained the same types of activities found in the in-class portion of the course, specifically, song leading, Orff instrumental orchestrations, world music and dance, Western art music, music listening, and musical games. Because most of the students with special needs participated during multiple field experience semesters (i.e., both when preservice teachers taught one subpopulation and when they taught two subpopulations), different curricula were needed to provide new variations of these activities for the students. The only exceptions to this were the opening and closing songs sung by all students and preservice teachers during all semesters.

The week immediately prior to the field experience was devoted to explaining logistics, dividing the preservice teachers into teaching groups, discussing the curriculum, and giving the teaching groups time to plan and prepare for their first teaching experience. During the first week of the field-based experience, preservice teachers introduced themselves, created name tags for each student, sat interspersed with the students, and participated as teaching assistants while the researchers taught the lessons. The purpose of this first week was to give the preservice teachers time to acclimate to the experience and students without the additional responsibilities of teaching.

Beginning in the second week, the preservice teacher groups were given responsibility for preparing and teaching all aspects of the lessons. Since there were two preservice teaching groups per
classroom, the groups alternated lesson responsibilities every other lesson (spring 2004/fall 2004) or every other week (fall 2002/spring 2003). Each lesson contained four activities from the curriculum, giving each member of a teaching group the opportunity to plan and lead the class during the lesson. Additionally, preservice teachers were required to teach a different part of the curriculum every lesson. When groups were not actively involved teaching the lesson, they acted as teaching assistants to help students individually. During the last teaching experience for each group, preservice teachers were responsible for planning and preparing the lesson without guidelines provided by the researchers. The researchers guided individual preservice teachers and teaching groups in preparing lessons as needed to capitalize on strengths of the students within the classrooms to which they were assigned.

Additionally, the researchers met with the preservice teaching groups immediately after each teaching session to aid their self-evaluation. At the end of the spring and fall 2004 semesters, each preservice teacher had taught twice within both the EDBD and ACD classrooms, taught in four different general music curricular areas, and assisted individual students with various musical tasks during 12 class periods. Preservice teachers involved in the field experience during the fall 2002 and spring 2003 semesters taught four times in different general music curricular areas and assisted individual students with various musical tasks during 10 class periods in either the EDBD or ACD classroom.

The Survey Instrument

The dependent variable was a survey comprising 17 questions about the preservice teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of music for secondary students with special needs, including how comfortable, willing, prepared, and perceptive they were in working with special learners. This questionnaire was fashioned after a similar survey instrument used by Kaiser and Johnson (2000), who investigated the effect of an interactive experience on music majors’ perceptions of music for deaf students, and was piloted by the authors in previous studies with a comparable population of preservice teachers teaching students with special needs (VanWeelden & Whipple, 2005). Prior to any in-class discussion relating to students with special needs or general music lab experience, teacher-subjects for all semesters were asked to complete the pretest questionnaire. At the conclusion of the field experience, teacher-subjects were asked to complete the same questionnaire, creating a pretest-posttest design. All survey questions used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to ensure all participants interpreted the rating scale in the same direction. Questions are listed in Figure 1.
Results

To begin the analysis, questions were grouped according to the following categories: personal attitudes (questions 1, 2, 3, and 4); professional attitudes (questions 5, 9, 10, and 11); attitudes of willingness (questions 12, 13, and 14); perceptions of teacher preparation (questions 6, 7, and 8); and perceptions of student behavior and learning (questions 15, 16, and 17). A one-way ANOVA comparing the pretest scores of the preservice teachers who worked with one population of students with special needs to those who worked with two populations of students with special needs was completed for each category. No significant differences were found between the two groups of preservice teachers for any category. Another one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the posttest scores of the preservice teachers who worked with one population to those who worked with two populations of special learners. Again, no significant differences were found between the two groups of teachers within any attitudinal or perception category.

To determine whether preservice teachers’ attitudes and perceptions changed over the course of the two types of field experiences, one-way ANOVAs for both preservice teacher groups were conducted. Significant increases from pretest to posttest were found for both teacher groups. For the group of preservice teachers who worked with two populations of students with special needs, scores significantly increased after the field experience within the categories of personal attitudes $[F(1, 60) = 34.41, p < .001]$, professional attitudes $[F(1, 60) = 11.03, p = .002]$, and perceptions of teacher preparation $[F(1, 60) = 9.79, p = .03]$. Significant increases were also found when all categories were combined, creating an overall pretest and posttest score $[F(1,60) = 20.60, p < .001]$. Attitudes regarding willingness and perceptions of student behavior and learning both increased, though not significantly.

For the group of preservice teachers who worked with one population of students with special needs, scores significantly increased after the field experience within the categories of personal attitudes $[F(1, 54) = 6.20, p = .016]$, professional attitudes $[F(1, 54) = 11.34, p = .001]$, and perceptions of teacher preparation $[F(1, 54) = 18.46, p < .001]$. Significant increases were also found when all categories were combined, creating an overall pretest and posttest score $[F(1, 54) = 9.58, p = .003]$. Attitudes regarding willingness and perceptions of student behavior and learning both improved, though not significantly. Refer to Table 1.

Discussion

The field experiences described in this study gave preservice teachers an opportunity to work with students with special needs in self-contained, special education classrooms. Neither field experience structure (i.e., teaching one versus two subpopulations) gave the preservice teachers the opportunity to work with students with and without special needs together in one classroom. This may explain why
preservice teachers’ perceptions of the behavior and learning capabilities of the students with special needs, compared to other children of the same age, did not change significantly after either type of field experience. However, the personal attitudes of the preservice teachers, when interacting with persons with physical, mental, and emotional special needs, did become more positive after the field experience, regardless of whether they worked with one population or two populations of students with special needs. Similar results were found within the professional attitudes category where both preservice teacher groups’ attitudes toward working with students with special needs in music settings improved. Positive teacher attitudes, both personal and professional, are important components in the successful inclusion of special learners in music classrooms (Stone & Brown, 1987).

Research has found that music educators generally have positive attitudes toward the concept of mainstreaming (Brittin, 1995; Hawkins, 1992; Wilson & McCrory, 1996), yet they have expressed negative attitudes regarding the actual integration of students with mental, emotional, and behavioral disabilities in general music classrooms (Sideridis & Chandler, 1995). The personal and professional attitudes of the preservice teachers within this study, however, became more positive after interacting with students with special needs in the general music lab experience. Thus, it seems, combining knowledge and teaching skills acquired in class with direct hands-on application with either one or two populations of special learners can alter preservice teacher attitudes, since both types of field experiences achieved comparable outcomes.

The preservice teachers’ perceptions of educational preparation to work with students with special needs in music education settings were rated significantly higher at the end of the field experience. A major factor of working in the field during preservice training is to practice and prepare for “real-life” experiences. Since this field experience was designed to prepare preservice teachers to successfully work with students with special needs in music, the results of the study indicate this goal was met.

Willingness to work with students with special needs in the future also showed increases for both groups of preservice teachers (either one or two populations), though neither was significant. This was the only category of questions that asked preservice teachers to predict future activities. Because most preservice teachers do not know what type of position they will take after their internship, speculation could have been difficult for the teachers. However, the preservice teachers did have significant improvement in their personal and professional attitudes and when all categories were combined. Therefore, a longitudinal study during the preservice teachers’ internship and/or after they are working within the profession could be used to investigate whether attitudes regarding willingness to work with students with special needs in their specific music education setting have changed. In addition, the use of interviews and observations could further help answer the research questions found herein and may be beneficial in future study.
It is interesting to note that both field experiences produced the same outcomes. Creating and arranging a successful field-based experience can be a time-consuming and logistically challenging endeavor for the university music education faculty. We believed that the more diverse experiences that were provided for preservice teachers to work with various subpopulations of students with special needs, the better prepared they would be for later employment situations. However, the results of this study indicate preservice teachers’ attitudes and perceptions improved regardless of how many populations they worked with during the field experience. Ultimately, it seems that any experience working with students with special needs may be beneficial because it is impossible to prepare preservice music teachers for every situation. Furthermore, good teaching is good teaching, regardless of the presence or absence of student disabilities. In regular, inclusive, and self-contained classrooms, the goal is to break down the task in whatever way necessary to best meet student needs. Therefore, future teacher trainers may not need to incorporate numerous subpopulations of students with special needs within their field experiences in order for preservice teachers to benefit.

References
Brittin, R. V. (1995, November). Changing music educators’ attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities. Poster session presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for Music Therapy, Houston, TX.

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**Figure 1. Survey Instrument Questions**

1. I am comfortable interacting with middle school students.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

2. I am comfortable interacting with people with physical disabilities.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

3. I am comfortable interacting with people with mental disabilities.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

4. I am comfortable interacting with people with emotional disabilities.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

5. I believe music education should be a part of the curriculum for students with special needs.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

6. I feel my educational training has prepared me to work with students with special needs in a secondary general music class setting.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

7. I feel my educational training has prepared me to work with students with special needs in a music ensemble setting.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |

8. I feel my educational training has prepared me to work with students with special needs in a private music studio setting.

   | Strongly Disagree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Strongly Agree | 5 |
9. I would be comfortable working with students with special needs in a secondary general music classroom.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

10. I would be comfortable working with students with special needs in a private studio for music lessons.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

11. I would be comfortable working with students with special needs in a music ensemble.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

12. I would be willing to provide music experiences to students with special needs in a secondary general music classroom.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

13. I would be willing to provide music experiences to students with special needs in a secondary performance ensemble.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

14. I would be willing to provide music experiences to students with special needs in a special education classroom.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

15. I believe students with special needs behave in class the same as other students their age.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

16. I believe students with special needs can learn the same musical material as other students their age.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

17. I believe lesson adaptations for students with special needs should be stated on the lesson plan.

    Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree  5

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Table 1. Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations by Category and Teacher Group

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*p ≤ .05

**p ≤ .001