

Empowering Students with Disabilities Through Music Education: Student Teaching in a Self-Contained Classroom

By Kaylee McGuire, Baylor University

When I began student teaching at the elementary level, my mentor teacher informed me that we would be instructing a self-contained classroom of kindergarten and first-grade students. The school heavily focused on promoting inclusion, with three other special education classes participating in inclusion classes for specials. Conversely, hearing that the class we would be servicing could not incorporate into an inclusion class surprised me.

During my undergraduate studies, I had the opportunity to collaborate with a faculty mentor on my thesis for the Honors College program. Our work expanded beyond the initial project and led to several exciting research opportunities. Presenting my findings at multiple research conferences opened doors to having my work published multiple times. My projects focused on adaptive materials for students with disabilities, including sound-blocking headphones, adaptive recorders for limb differences, and elastic cuffs to help with grip strength issues. These materials were helpful to students, giving them the individual tools that they needed to reach their goals in the classroom. Most recently, my research projects focused on how Texas music educators perceived inclusion efforts to be beneficial in their classrooms, and I found that inclusion was beneficial for some students. I also found that educators felt inclusion requires careful implementation accompanied by the right timing and resources to be truly effective. Educators had difficulties in simultaneously providing necessary attention to multiple students at once and in communication barriers that disabled efficiency.

To my surprise, I found myself implementing my previous work in a significant way. Unable to understand why I was nervous to teach this group of students, I wondered if it was the unpredictability of a self-contained room or the unexpected visit that was causing my unease. These students in the self-contained class became easily overstimulated by too many students in the room, burdened by the heavy noise level of 20-30 extra first graders. They also encountered obstacles with transitions, so the decision was made to try a new approach. Fortunately, the other

music teacher at the school offered to cover the general education first-grade class while also instructing her group of students. This arrangement enabled my mentor teacher to visit the self-contained classroom every day, developing a collaborative effort to effectively support this group of students. This approach ensured that the students remained in a familiar environment, solely introducing the new variable of a different teacher rather than a completely new space or set of classmates.

My first few days were overwhelming as I was a newcomer to students who thrived in consistency rather than change. Most of the students struggled with verbal communication, and I felt the barrier between us as I had not learned their rhythms or what they needed from me. There were times when I misunderstood students, and that was frustrating for them. Rather than telling me, "No, I actually meant this," they might scream or cry. Not knowing which students were able to communicate with words or which ones relied on sign language, I felt unsure of how to assist them.

As I continued to visit the classroom over my eight short weeks at my placement, spending time with those students easily became the highlight of my day. I began to understand what they were trying to tell me after observing their interactions with their teacher, aides, and classmates. The consistency of our visits led to growth in their musical, social, and emotional skills. One student, in particular, demonstrated an exceptional talent for understanding melodies and rhythms. She would memorize the words to multiple songs that we would sing and would belt them at the top of her lungs, leading her teachers to be quick to learn which songs were "her songs." When working with rhythms, she was able to create and count rhythms of quarter notes and eighth notes. We used rhythm clocks, which are wooden circles with triangular slices that correspond to the rhythmic value of the note. As the frequency of using the clocks grew, the student continued to experiment with the manipulatives. To our surprise, we discovered that she was correctly writing and counting syncopated rhythms. This skill not only surprised us as she discovered it on her own but is far above expectations for a student at her grade level. The manipulatives brought the rhythms to life for her, allowing her to touch, feel, and move them.

I began catching glimpses of the concepts that I had been researching. Touched by the excitement that filled the room when we arrived, I looked forward to the moment every day when my mentor teacher and I would reveal what music manipulatives we brought. Molding

clay, stuffed animals, rhythm blocks, and beat buddies put success within their reach by providing them with the tools and encouragement they needed to succeed. For many of these students who struggled in other academic areas, their remarkable progress in music gave them a voice that they had been unable to find elsewhere. Outside of my academic bubble, I was able to witness students firsthand, along with recognizing an educator's unwavering dedication to her students. While aligning with the data I worked to collect, my firsthand experiences carry a weight that surpasses numbers, statistics, or surveys.

During my last week at the school, we implemented a new approach. Rather than only staying in their classroom, we transitioned a select group of students from that class into the music room. One student struggled with the change, and she was hesitant to participate. After a few days of making the trip down the hallway, she kept inching closer and closer to the door. We were all elated when she walked into the room to put her materials away and whispered, "music is fun." This accomplishment marked the end of a long-range goal for the class: to reintroduce a variable in a way that was least restrictive. The students completed music activities in the music space, which might allow them to rejoin the inclusion class in the future. Whether or not they ever rejoin the class, these students are being provided music services in the way that they need them.

Reflecting on my placement now that I have finished student teaching, I am amazed at how nervous I was when it came to spending time with these students. It's simple to me now; they're just kids. Yes, there were emotional outbursts, screaming, and tears, but I was able to look past these moments to view them for who they were. These students are entitled to the same high-quality level of music instruction as any other student, which might just look a little different. The students in this class will always have a profound impact on me. The irreplaceable experiences I gained here will indubitably influence my future endeavors as an educator, equipping me to step back to implement creative solutions for my students. I was able to put my beliefs into action, participating in the goal of fostering a safe environment for learning. As I take the next steps of beginning my first job and starting my graduate degree, I will always have this unique group of students in the back of my mind. They taught me to look beyond their disabilities, foster meaningful relationships, and not be afraid of a challenge I have not encountered before.