AN EXPLORATION OF AN EXPERIENCED INSERVICE MUSIC EDUCATOR’S ATTITUDE TOWARD TEACHING SPECIAL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 mandates that special learners have the right to receive an education in the regular classroom. Although many music educators have a positive attitude toward teaching special learners, negative attitudes still exist. “The teacher is the greatest determinant of student learning” (McHatton & McCray, 2007, p.27) and the attitude of the teacher toward inclusion can affect the attitudes of their students (Colwell & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, it is important to examine the attitudes of music educators toward inclusion. The purpose of this study is to describe the attitude of an experienced inservice music educator who teaches special learners in an inclusive setting and to describe what factors contribute to their attitude. A middle school band director with 27 years of teaching experience participated in the study. This single case study included in-person interviews, informal observation of the participant’s teaching, on-site field notes, and gathered materials. It was concluded that the educator had an overall positive attitude toward teaching special learners with contributing factors including (a) their early teaching experiences, and (b) their experiences of parenting a child with autism and ADHD. Future research may include a multiple case study of music educators who teach the same subject-area and grade level.
An Exploration of an Experienced Music Educator’s Attitude Toward Teaching Special Learners

At the start to any school year music educators face many challenges including the selection of teaching materials, classroom organization, and perhaps, most importantly, preparation for a new and unique group of students with whom they will be working.

The legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 mandates that special learners have the right to receive an education in the regular classroom. Therefore, many music educators are now teaching typical students along with special learners within their music classrooms (Scott, Jellison, Chappell, & Standridge, 2007).

The following vignette shares the story of a beginning level teacher in her preparation for the first day of classes.

Corinne’s Story

At the beginning of each school year, I was given a folder that contained general accommodations I was required to make for the special learners who would be in my classes. Allowing extra time for homework, seating students near the front of the classroom, and reading tests aloud were some of the many accommodations I had to make. I was confident that if I did the accommodations listed, then those students would be more successful in my classes. During the first week of school, I discovered that I had many students in my band and my general music classes with a variety of special needs. I had a flute player with dyslexia, I had an autistic saxophone player, I had multiple students with emotional and behavioral disorders, and I had a student in my general music class that was confined to a wheelchair and had limited motion and could not talk very well. I began to feel ill-prepared to be their music teacher. I felt like I did not have enough experience teaching special learners to find out what strategies to use so they would successfully learn music. I only had one special education course during my undergraduate studies and the course was only an overview of the different exceptionalities. I did not know what
to do to appropriately assess and evaluate someone who was a special learner. I also began to believe that they would not achieve very much. Overall, I seemed to have a generally negative attitude toward teaching them.

Corinne’s situation may not be uncommon for new teachers and perhaps, experienced teachers.

Although many music educators have a positive attitude toward teaching special learners, negative attitudes still exist (Darrow, 1999; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; Scott et al., 2007; Wilson & McCrory, 1996). What is influencing the negative attitudes of music educators toward teaching special learners? Music educators have identified lack of experience (Darrow, 1999; Frisque et al, 1994; Wilson & McCrory, 1996), lack of resources or support (Frisque et al.; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Wilson & McCrory, 1996), lack of involvement in student placement and/or Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings (Frisque et al.; Gfeller, 1989; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Wilson & McCrory, 1996), and lack of assessment strategies or techniques (Gilbert & Asmus, 1981) as factors that can create a negative attitude toward inclusion.

It has also been reported that music educators feel ill-prepared to work with special learners due to a lack of educational preparation and that they also lack confidence in themselves to adapt instruction for special learners (as cited in Colwell & Thompson, 2000). “The teacher is the greatest determinant of student learning” (McHatton & McCray, 2007, p.27) and the attitude of the teacher toward inclusion can affect the attitudes of their students (Colwell & Thompson, 2000). Therefore, it is important to examine the attitudes of music educators toward inclusion.

**Literature Review**

The legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
mandates that special learners be placed in the regular classroom unless the appropriate accommodations cannot be made (IDEA, 2004). Many undergraduate music education students are required to take courses that will prepare them to teach special learners (Colwell & Thompson, 2000) and some colleges and universities include a unit of study covering the competences essential for teaching music to special learners, specifically in elementary music (Hammel, 2001). Some colleges and universities also include preservice field experiences with special learners. Although it may be sufficient preparation, field experience alone does not prepare preservice teachers for every scenario they will encounter in the classroom with students that have special needs (VanWheelden & Whipple, 2007). Darrow (1999) found that many teachers have concerns and struggles regarding inclusion. For example, teachers who experience frequent disruptions or verbal abuse from students with disruptive behavior disorders might become less willing to provide adaptations in teaching methods for those students (Gfeller, 1989).

Stone and Brown identify teacher attitude as most important in the success of teaching special learners in the inclusive classroom (as cited in Colwell & Thompson, 2000). There is a widespread belief that attitudes are acquired and are likely to influence the behavior of both teacher and student (D’Alonzo, Giordano, & Cross, 1996). “The classroom teacher is the greatest determinant of student learning” (as cited in McHatton & McCray, 2007, p. 27).

McHatton and McCray (2007) surveyed elementary and secondary education majors to discover the perceptions of both groups toward the inclusion of special learners in the regular classroom. The survey contained thirty-five attitudinal statements. Each
survey used a Likert scale, which ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. The results of the study showed that both elementary and secondary education majors were less likely to believe that students with disabilities could be educated in a general education environment. Perceptions toward inclusion overall were more favorable for elementary education majors than for secondary education majors. However, both groups were less likely to favor inclusion for students with cognitive impairments, multi-disabilities, and behavior disorders.

To discover teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of handicapped students in the regular classroom, Jobe, Rust, and Brissie (1996) surveyed 182 subjects from 500 randomly selected public school teachers throughout the United States. The survey included a questionnaire with “an attitude scale entitled Opinions Relative to the Integration of Students with Disabilities (ORI)” (Jobe et al., 1996, p. 150). Along with completing the questionnaire, subjects were asked to report biographical and training information such as their gender, teaching experience, experience in teaching special education and any in-service training on inclusion. For some teachers, their attitude toward inclusion was dependent upon the particular disabilities a student might possess. In fact, it appeared that teachers were more willing to accommodate students who have physical disabilities as compared to those with cognitive, emotional, or behavioral problems. It was also found that teachers with less than six years of experience did not have significantly different attitudes toward inclusion than more experienced teachers.

Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2000) surveyed all of the elementary general educators, elementary special educators, and administrators from a single school district. The survey addressed collaboration between general education and special education
teachers, instruction of special learners, teacher preparedness for teaching special
learners, and perceived achievement outcomes of special learners. An interview was
done with four general educators, four special educators, and four administrators, all
randomly selected. An administrator who was interviewed stated that not all general
education teachers are willing to do what is necessary to effectively teach special
learners. General educators, special educators, and administrators all agreed that general
education teachers were not prepared to meet the needs of special learners. One general
education teacher noted that many of the general education teachers lacked confidence
and the skills to know how to help the students. The general educators, special educators,
and administrators all acknowledged the social benefits of inclusion, yet disagreed with
the idea that special learners can successfully achieve on an academic level when in a
general classroom environment.

There are many factors that contribute to the formation of teachers’ attitudes such
as, demographics, environment, experience, and skill acquisition through preservice and
inservice training (D’Alonzo et al., 1996). VanWheelden and Whipple (2005) conducted
a study to determine if the perspectives of the music education students toward special
learners would change after a long-term field experience. The subjects were enrolled in a
course that focused on teaching secondary general music. Before in-class instruction
began, each subject completed a questionnaire that included questions regarding “how
prepared, comfortable, willing, and perceptive they were toward working with special
learners” (VanWheelden & Whipple, 2005, p. 64).

During the field experience, the subjects worked with students with special needs
at a middle school. The students were divided into two categories, emotional and
behavioral disorders (EDBD) and acute cognitive delays (ACD), and placed in self-contained classrooms respectively. The subjects were divided into two groups according to gender and emphasis of musical study. One group completed their field experience with the EDBD students and the other group completed their field experience with the ACD students. After each field experience session the subjects met with the researchers for a discussion about the teaching experience.

After all of the field experiences were completed the subjects answered the same questionnaire that they completed prior to the field experiences. Results of the study show a significant increase in the perceptions of general interactions, comfort, and preparation. An increase in willingness to work with students with special needs was also shown.

Another study by VanWheelden and Whipple (2007) was completed to “examine preservice teachers’ predictions and perceptions of students with special needs’ levels of mastery of specific music education concepts and actual grades achieved by these students” (VanWheelden & Whipple, 2007, p.74).

The subjects were undergraduate music education students who were enrolled in a course that focused on assessment and teaching music in secondary schools. Nine weeks were devoted to in-class instruction and following that, the students completed a six week field experience with special learners at a middle school.

The special learners were divided into two self-contained classrooms, one consisting of students with EDBD and the other consisting of students with ACD. The preservice teachers were divided into two groups. Each group of preservice teachers either taught melody content or rhythm content to both groups of special learners.
Between both groups of preservice teachers, 30 music concepts in all were taught to the special learners. The preservice teachers also had to plan and implement accommodations for testing and alternative assessments for the students. The preservice “teachers formally assessed music concept mastery only for the second group of students with which they worked because the intent of the study was to determine whether assessment abilities would differ for teachers who worked with two populations versus one” (VanWheelden & Whipple, 2007, p.78). Both groups of special learners were assigned an overall grade for the class and a participation grade by the preservice teachers. The preservice teachers in the EDBD classroom also decided to assign a behavior grade and the preservice teachers in the ACD classroom decided to assign a grade based on student progress.

Prior to in-class instruction and after the field experience, the preservice teachers completed a survey to rate their perceptions of the EDBD and ACD students’ mastery of the 30 music concepts. Prior to the field experience, it was hypothesized that the mastery level of the 30 music concepts would be higher for the students with EDBD than the students with ACD.

Following the field experience, the preservice teachers completed the same survey. After the field experience both prediction scores for EDBD students and ACD students mastery levels of the 30 music concepts increased and there were no significant differences between them.

After the field experience no significant differences were found between the final student grades of both classes. There were, however, significant differences between the final music concept grades of both classes, with the EDBD students achieving higher than
the ACD students.

Results showed that after having field experiences with various types of special learners, the positive perceptions and attitudes of preservice music teachers increased overall.

Gfeller, Darrow, and Hedden (1990), surveyed music teachers in Iowa and Kansas to discover the effectiveness of inclusion, or mainstreaming, as it was then called, of special learners in the music classroom. The music teachers indicated they had little participation in the placement of special learners, limited in-service training, and not enough preparation time to determine appropriate accommodations or modifications. Sixty-five percent of the participants were expected to mainstream all students with disabilities. However, support from administrators was lacking, as were adequate resources and adequate amounts of collaboration between themselves and the special educators. Half of the subjects thought that the needs of special learners would be better met in a special education class.

Has there been a change in the negative attitude of music educators toward inclusion over the past twenty years? Forty-three music educators who had experience in inclusive music classrooms were interviewed using open-ended questions, to gather new information about perceptions, opinions, and experiences regarding inclusion (Scott, Jellison, Chappell, & Standridge, 2007). The participants had between three and thirty-six years of teaching experience. The frequency of their positive and negative comments were used to interpret their perceptions. Overall, most of the teachers interviewed had positive attitudes toward inclusion. The researchers believe it could be that there are more teachers involved in the IEP process. Collaboration between music therapists,
music educators, and parents can aid the music educator by knowing what long-term goals were set for the student and what steps to take to make appropriate modifications. Positive comments were made regarding the perception of individual achievement of special learners. This could be a result of low expectations, however, “teachers and students may have higher expectations and positive attitudes as a result of “natural” contact with children with disabilities in inclusive settings” (Scott et al., 2007, p. 51).

The present study is an exploration of an experienced inservice music educator’s attitude toward teaching special learners. The purpose of this study is to describe the attitude of an experienced inservice music educator who teaches special learners in an inclusive setting. The study was designed to answer the following questions.

1. What is the attitude of this experienced inservice music educator toward teaching special learners?
2. What factors contribute to the attitude of this experienced inservice music educator toward teaching special learners?

**Methodology**

This study was a single case qualitative design (M.D. Gall, Borg, & J. P. Gall, 1996, p.545). The primary form of data collection included in-person interviews, informal observation of the participant’s teaching, on-site field notes, and gathered materials.

Mrs. Matthews\(^1\) was selected purposefully by the researcher based on the number of years of teaching experience and during the time of the study she taught instrumental music in an inclusive setting.

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\(^1\) All names of people and places have been altered to protect the identity of the participant.
The researcher made the initial contact through email with the participant. The email contained the focus of the study which included an informal observation of Mrs. Matthews teaching a music class that included special learners, and an audio recorded one-on-one interview. A formal consent letter that provided more specific details about the study was attached to the email. She responded to the email with her name, phone number, email address, school district, and total number of years teaching music as consent to participate in the study.

Mrs. Matthews has 27 years of teaching experience. She has taught special learners in her classroom since her first year of teaching. During her first three years of teaching, she taught 4th through 12th grade instrumental music and Kindergarten through 8th grade general music for a school district located in the southern region of the United States. After attending graduate school, she moved to the northeast region of the United States where she has spent 24 years teaching music in a suburban school district. She currently teaches 7th and 8th grade instrumental music at Mason Street Middle School where she sees her students in both group lesson and full ensemble settings.

Mrs. Matthews not only has many years of experience teaching special learners, she also has experience interacting with special learners as a parent. Her son is diagnosed with autism and ADHD.

Procedures

Data collection occurred at the end of March 2009. A phone call was made by the researcher to each participant prior to an on-site informal observation of them teaching a music class that includes special learners. The purpose of the phone call was to confirm the time and date of the observation and interview. It was also used to collect
demographic information about their instrumental music class, including if there are any paraprofessionals that assist special learners.

During the on-site informal observation the researcher took field notes to record what she observed. After the observation, a one-on-one, audio recorded interview with Mrs. Matthews was done by the researcher. The interview did not have specific pre-planned questions, but was free-flowing. Interview topics included formal training, assessment techniques, professional development experiences, personal experiences with special learners, and any extra information Mrs. Matthews considered relevant to the topic. Any materials each she had from professional development workshops or training regarding special learners were also used as data. The field notes and gathered materials were used to verify what was said by the Mrs. Matthews during the post-observation interview.

To analyze the data the researcher transcribed the post-observation interview and field notes. Once the transcriptions were completed, the researcher created color-coded posters containing synthesized information from the interview, field notes, and gathered materials. The data was divided into segments and coded for attitudinal constructs.

**Limitations of the Study**

The reader cannot assume that the participant used in this study represents the population of experienced inservice music teachers. The researcher assumed that the participant responded truthfully during the post-observation interview and did not adjust her teaching methods to fit what they thought the researcher wanted to see during the informal observation. This research study had time constraints, as it had to be completed during one academic semester. Since the participant was only observed and interviewed
once, an in-depth look at the participant was not able to be studied.

**Results**

“I know a new song!” said Andrew, an 8th grade baritone player, walking into his band lesson very eager to play what he had practiced during spring break. “How?” said Mrs. Matthews. “I just played it!” Andrew exclaimed. While Andrew played *Up On the Housetop*, Mrs. Matthews observed what she heard and saw. It seemed that she was impressed and proud of Andrew for learning new music on his own. After Andrew played his new song, Mrs. Matthews was quick to praise him for things he played well, such as interval leaps and jumps within the music. After praising him for the good aspects of his playing, she offered constructive criticism for the areas in which he could improve. At the end of the lesson Mrs. Matthews said to him, “Do you remember what I said I would give you if you did good today?” “An ‘A’?” Andrew asked. “Band music!” said Mrs. Matthews. Andrew appeared excited and grateful for this reward.

During my observation and interview with Mrs. Matthews, I sought to determine her attitude toward teaching special learners. I was also curious to discover what factors might have contributed to her attitude. Mrs. Matthews is an advocate of the idea that music is for everyone, regardless of if they have a disability or not. She cares about the musical progress of each individual student and will do whatever it takes for her special learners to progress or achieve. She also finds joy in the accomplishments of her students with special needs and also when she sees them be excited and proud of their successes and progress.

**Music For All**

It quickly became apparent that she is an advocate of music for everyone. She did not turn special learners away from the band program because they might not be able to play or achieve at the same level as typical students. The following vignette is a description of her experiences teaching special learners in marching band early on in her career.
I tried my best to be patient and . . . if I saw that they just couldn’t do it, I rewrote music and, you know, ‘Ok well we won’t grade on this part’ or ‘Right here you just put a rest.’ Whatever you had to do. I had kids in marching band who . . . just struggled and struggled with left foot, right foot. And you know what, I thought ‘I’m not telling them they can’t be in it.’ Marching band was a club, not a class, where I taught. So, it was an optional kind of thing. . . . I’ve never been one to say ‘Well you can’t achieve this so I don’t want you here.’ I have a serious problem with that. Especially in music. Music should be as open as it possibly can be.

Her opinion that music is for everyone appeared to be cultivated during her first few years of teaching. She stated that she has had special learners in her music classes for as long as she could remember and had always felt like music is a great way to get them involved in school activities. She believes that it provides an outlet for the students and, in some cases, is a safe place and provides a way to make life easier for them by focusing their attention on music and not on the worries of everyday life. The following vignette tells about Mrs. Matthews’ experience with Olivia, an 8th grade clarinet player with special needs.

She’s got some home issues that are really, really rough. [Olivia gets] almost no encouragement at home. [She] said her dad helps her out . . . . for [her] school is a safe place to come.

**Concerned with musical progress**

I noticed certain aspects regarding Mrs. Matthews’ teaching during my observation: (1) she took time to give verbal encouragement and constructive criticism when appropriate; (2) she demonstrated musical skills for the students to imitate; (3) she taught at a pace appropriate for the students in the lesson; and (4) she gave one-on-one attention to students who had trouble. These observations led me to believe that she was concerned with the musical progress of her special learners.

From observing her interactions with Andrew, it appears that she is genuinely
concerned with his musical progress. For his reward of doing a good job in his lesson, she gave him a copy of the Alma Mater and Anchors Away to practice because they are not too difficult for him to play. She also gave him another piece to help develop musical expressiveness, which is what she was working on with all of the 8th grade students, because “it fits well with the kids who are a little bit behind.” One of her goals for teaching Andrew was to “…do what we can to help him play along with the 8th graders.”

Reflecting upon my observation of Mrs. Matthews teaching special learners, it appeared that she would do whatever it took for them to achieve and succeed. This idea took shape in many forms, from individualizing assessments to adjusting materials, curriculum, and instruction. She also appeared to value training opportunities and reflection upon what she is doing as a teacher so she can best meet the needs of her special learners.

The individualization of assessments is necessary in helping special learners achieve and succeed. Mrs. Matthews assessed through informal observation in the classroom and provided feedback as needed. When grading special learners she used the phrase ‘Mark Reflects Individualized Criteria’ so each student can achieve to their own level. This form of assessment is beneficial for the students as it places emphasis on their individual progress instead of on musical skills they cannot do. The following vignette demonstrates her viewpoint on assessing special learners.

Now, they’re never going to be superstars. They’re never going to be on grade level. So when we grade them, we have this little phrase that says Mark reflects individualized criteria and it can be as individual as I need it to be. And so they can achieve at their level and nobody’s the wiser. Any time it says ‘individualized’ it can be whatever the individual teacher decides. . . . basically each one of those kids is graded on his or her own ability level. I have an autistic . . . student. . . who is. . . on another
individualized criteria because there are certain things he can do and other things he’s never going to be able to do and so we just don’t grade that. But mostly you kind of say ‘Alright, this is what I know they can do. How much can they achieve? Where can they go from there?’ And as long as they’re making some kind of progress. . . you try and give them a grade that shows progress.

Individualizing instruction, curriculum, and materials also appeared to be important to Mrs. Matthews when teaching special learners. Brittany and Olivia, both 8th grade clarinet players, are special learners. They have their clarinet lesson together.

When working with these girls, Mrs. Matthews sang their part and pointed to each beat in the music as they played Swan Lake Suite. The particular teaching technique of pointing to each beat might not be used for typical students with the same amount of playing experience as Brittany and Olivia. However, because they are both lower functioning, the singing helps them with pitch error detection and pointing to each beat helps them follow the music more easily and stay together when playing in unison.

Mrs. Matthews self reported that training opportunities were minimal when she was in college. Her training consisted of one 3-hour workshop on a Saturday afternoon sometime during the late 70’s or early 80’s when she was a junior in college.

“That’s all we got because. . . they didn’t have it. It just wasn’t that kind of thing. I know that shocks people. It changed shortly after that and I’ve had a lot of workshops and training throughout the years. Education has really tried to keep up with that. That’s what they need to do. That’s why we’re here. “

After graduation she began attending seminars and workshops that focused on special learners. One training seminar that stuck out to her was about non-verbal communication with special learners. It struck a chord with her because it was around the same time that her son was diagnosed with autism. Mrs. Matthews believed that it was important for teachers to realize that most communication is non-verbal and that
some special learners might not understand it. Teachers should try to take advantage of as many extra professional development opportunities and training sessions as possible in order to better understand and meet the needs of their students.

Along with training, reflection and evaluation of what she is doing as a teacher are important to Mrs. Matthews. Here are a few statements regarding her beliefs on this reflection and evaluation.

Well the thing is every kid is a little bit different. They can have the exact same diagnosis, but they’re different. And then you think about your. . . average child, they’re different, too. They’re coming with different genetics and background and abilities and all. And really, it’s our job to try and meet every one of them where they are and bring them a little bit further. It seems unbelievable sometimes that we [teachers] can achieve anything. So it’s a continual and very, very necessary thing as teachers to keep working on it. What’s, what can we do? What can we do better? What are we going to fix? And I think, generally teachers do that. Even if you have the structured curriculum . . . you have to find ways to teach it, ways to make it fresh, ways to help the kids understand it and get something out of it, and I think that’s very necessary.

Finding joy in their attitudes and accomplishments

Mrs. Matthews appreciated the attitudes of her special learners who tried their best during lessons and rehearsal. Even though “they’re never going to be superstars,” she wants to get as many special learners involved in music as possible.

Mrs. Matthews finds joy in seeing her special learners accomplish something they had struggled with previously and also from the happiness those students exude. For her, perhaps, this may be her favorite part of teaching. Mrs. Matthews described what she enjoys most about teaching special learners in the following vignette.

Probably the thing that I enjoy the most is that they are still a little bit on the young side. In middle school, by 8th grade, they don’t show anything they like. It’s totally unpopular to like something for most of them. And so the enjoyment they get from achievement is what I, you know, if Alice
had gotten that, that one high note...well, the one time she did I thought maybe if I ignore her a while and she keeps at it, maybe she’ll figure out what to do. Cause she has struggled with that and she may never get it. But two times out of the... past 10 lessons she’s gotten the high notes and the rest of the time it was just like today... the fingers don’t go in the right place and then she can’t remember the letter names and when she does get them but the sheer enjoyment of ‘Oh my goodness! I can actually make this sound!’ or ‘I can actually play what everybody else is playing!’ And after our concert in... January... they were so excited. It was the best concert and they probably played less than half of the music. But they were so thrilled to be a part of it. That was just, that was just the best thing. So that, for me, is just a simple pleasure.

**Contributing Factors**

The positive and encouraging attitude Mrs. Matthews had toward teaching special learners may have come from her early teaching experiences and perhaps, her experience as a parent of a child with autism. During her early years of teaching, prior to her son’s birth, she may have had too high expectations for special learners, perhaps because her training in teaching special learners was minimal. As Mrs. Matthews recalled, “there were times when I think we expected more of kids than they really could handle, but often they would achieve because we didn’t limit them.” Seeing the successes of the students without her thinking they cannot do this or that because they have dyslexia or trouble with fine motor skills or any other disorder, helped her to develop her positive attitude toward teaching special learners.

It is likely that her attitude toward teaching special learners also stemmed from her experience as parent of a special learner. She recalled, “It was when he was born and then diagnosed that [I] really got into some of these other things.” Those ‘other things’ might possibly include receiving as much training as possible to improve skills in dealing with special learners, knowing what to expect from special learners with varying abilities, and trying to find a way to make life somewhat easier for special learners by giving them
an opportunity to express themselves through music.

Conclusions and Implications for Music Education

The positive attitude Mrs. Matthews displayed toward teaching special learners is essential and one that is worthy of adoption by practicing music educators. Her belief that music is for everyone mirrors the attitudes of other music educators (Scott, Jellison, Chappell, & Standridge, 2007). Our music programs should not be limited to only those students who have the potential to become the next Brahms or Beethoven. Music, for some, can be an escape from their academic struggles or simply be a unique way to express themselves. Music educators should be mindful that everyone can be musical, even if it is not to the same degree. These students might astound us with what they can achieve if we maintain a positive attitude. This is important for music educators to consider when recruiting for their programs and also when teaching.

The concern for the musical progress and the individual achievements of special learners (Scott et al., 2007) was evident through Mrs. Matthews teaching. If music educators want special learners to succeed in their classroom, it is imperative for the educator to have a positive attitude (Colwell & Thompson, 2000). We as music educators should be mindful that the “teacher is the greatest determinant of student learning” (as cited in McHatton & McCray, 2007, p27). Special learners deserve no less of our efforts and attention than average or gifted students do.

The inspiration and joy Mrs. Matthews had when she saw her special learners achieve (Scott et al., 2007), appeared to be part of a cycle that might possibly influence the attitudes and behavior of both her and her students (D’Alonzo, Giordano, & Cross, 1996). The encouragement and support special learners receive might be a springboard
for them to work toward their musical goals and strive to achieve at their best level. For some music educators, seeing this drive to succeed and then watching as the students reach their goals might reinforce the already established positive attitude of the educator. Thus, creating a cycle of positive behavior and attitudes in both educator and student.

The early teaching experiences of Mrs. Matthews might have been a possible factor for her continuous positive attitude throughout her career. Her direct contact with special learners outside of class, specifically during marching band, perhaps influenced her expectations of achievement and positive attitude toward teaching special learners (Scott et al., 2007; VanWheelden & Whipple, 2007). Music educators should try to involve special learners in music activities, both within and outside of the classroom, as much as possible. This is especially important for those new to the profession in order to develop or increase positive attitudes toward special learners (VanWheelden & Whipple, 2005; VanWheelden & Whipple, 2007).

Similar to her early teaching experiences, her experience as a parent of a child with special needs has, perhaps, reinforced her already positive attitude of teaching special learners due to the “natural” contact she has with him (Scott et al., 2007). Although throughout her career she had a positive attitude toward teaching special learners, when her son was diagnosed with autism, she became very interested in knowing as much as possible about students with special needs. This not only benefited her as a teacher, but also as a parent. Being proactive in learning about special learners can be helpful to an educator in any field and also to those who have contact with special learners in social settings outside of the classroom.

This study was limited due to time constraints. Therefore, interviewing and
observing Mrs. Matthews multiple times might have revealed more information about her attitude toward teaching special learners.

Further research possibilities include a longitudinal study tracking any changes in attitude toward teaching special learners that occur over an extended period of time. A multiple case study of music educators who teach the same subject-area could be done in future research. Research possibilities also might include a study that compares the attitudes of music educators who have their own children with special needs and those who do not.
References


