Music for All: Supporting Students with Special Needs in the Music Classroom

By

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Abstract

Music education has the potential to provide students with lifelong enjoyment, a sense of community, and a way of understanding themselves, others, and the world around them. This research project addresses the findings of two recent quantitative studies conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a, 2014b) by investigating the ways in which teachers support the learning of students with special needs in the music classroom. Using a qualitative research method, two face-to-face interviews were conducted with exemplary music teachers. Findings indicate in order to better support students with special needs in the music classroom, the education system as a whole must first possess a better understanding of the benefits and importance of music education. Despite a general lack of understanding and support for music education, music teachers are finding new and innovative ways to make music education accessible for all students.

Key Words: music, disability, education
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

In 2013 the Toronto District School Board sought to ease their $27 million deficit by making $2 million in cuts to instrumental music programs. Music is often viewed as frivolous, unnecessary, and as detracting from important subjects such as math and science. In response to the proposed cuts the Toronto Star interviewed successful musicians who graduated from the TDSB. One of the musicians interviewed was Troy Sexton. Sexton struggled throughout elementary school due to his dyslexia – until his teacher introduced him to the drums. Music became his saving grace, and Sexton recalled an enthusiasm and renewed interest in all his school subjects. Sexton has been touring with the percussive stage show Stomp for the past decade. Trish Howells, who taught grade 6 music to Jim Creeggan of the Barenaked Ladies, notes “for some students, the music room is the only place they get to shine in a school environment and that studies have shown music instruction helps all students, including those with learning challenges” (Hunter, 2013). Due to mass public outcry, the TDSB reversed their decision to cut music programs.

There are many benefits of music education for students, such as improved spatial-temporal reasoning, increased self-esteem and self-discipline, improved hand-eye coordination, and improved abstract reasoning skills (Darrow, 2012; Patterson, 2003; Williams, 2007). These benefits may be more significant for students with special needs such as providing an alternate form of expression (Clements-Cortés, 2013; Darrow, 2012), encouraging communication skills, promoting the development of social skills (Clements-Cortés, 2012; Gooding, 2009), and increased focus and attention. As Wilkinson (2013) notes, “music has been shown to enhance learning, reading, and literacy skills, especially in students with learning disabilities” (p. 28).
Music can also create a relaxing atmosphere (Wilkinson, 2013), reduce anxiety (Clements-Cortés 2013), and enhance our connections with others (Clements-Cortés 2012).

1.1 Research Problem & Purpose of the Study

My research focuses on how music teachers support the learning of students with special needs in the music classroom. The last 35 years of music education and disability research has shown a change in attitudes, understandings, and pedagogical theories regarding students with disabilities (Darrow, 1990; Darrow, 1999; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Jellison & Taylor, 2007; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b). These changes have led to a more inclusive education system in which students with special needs are included in many, if not all, of their ‘nondisabled’ peers’ classes, including the music classroom.

1.1.1 Articulation of Research Problem

According to two recent studies conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a, 2014b), almost all music educators surveyed reported teaching students with disabilities. Over 75% of these educators felt they were provided with less than adequate support from special education teachers, school-based therapists, paraprofessionals and aides. However, half of the educators surveyed felt they were able to successfully meet the needs of their students with disabilities. These opposing results have been a recurring trend in most of the studies conducted over the last 35 years of music education and disability research (Gfeller & Darrow, 1988; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b).

1.1.2 Purpose of the Study

Despite receiving less than adequate support, music teachers are not only managing, but
claim they are successfully meeting the needs of all their students, including those with special needs. In order to study this issue, the gaps in the research must first be addressed. Currently, a good amount of the existing research in this area is geographically specific, and disproportionately conducted in American school contexts. Additionally, existing research has predominantly employed the use of surveys as data collection instruments. While widespread surveys are indeed effective to gain a large sampling, they lack the deeper understanding interviews can provide by hearing from teachers about the nuances of their lived experiences.

While the existing research identifies ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the music classroom, they also emphasize the difficulty in orchestrating a cohesive classroom comprised of many different types of learners (Clements-Cortés, 2012; Darrow, 2010b). The purpose of my research is to study how music educators support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom.

1.2 Research Questions

The main question guiding my research study is: How do elementary school teachers self-describe the ways they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom? I use the term ‘self-describe’ as my research is based on teachers’ descriptions of their teaching practices, not on my own direct observations of their classrooms.

Sub Questions:

• What do these music teachers perceive as the purpose of music education?

• What factors and resources support these music teachers’ efforts to be responsive to the instructional needs of students with disabilities?

• What challenges do these teachers encounter in doing this work and how do they respond to these challenges?
• What outcomes do these teachers observe for students with disabilities?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

I have been a music student for over half my life. When I began teaching private music lessons, I developed an interest in the most effective methods of music pedagogy. I have had the privilege of receiving a rich music education, both in school and through private lessons. While I do not identify as disabled, nor will I attempt to claim understanding of the many facets of living with a disability, I have experienced music teachers who failed to accommodate my physical limitations. Perhaps they were ill equipped to modify their teaching style to facilitate an environment in which I could flourish. This is not to say all my music experiences were unsatisfactory. I also had the pleasure of studying under teachers who focused on my abilities and who inspired me to pursue a career in music education.

Music teachers who impacted me positively exuded passion, were supportive beyond their job requirements, created an inclusive and safe learning environment, were sensitive to the needs of their students, took time to learn about their students and involve them in decisions regarding their education, and above all possessed a “can do” attitude. I learned the importance of never judging students in ways that could have a negative impact on their future success.

I have been teaching private music lessons for seven years and have experience in primary, junior, and intermediate music classes. Both my positive and negative experiences as a music student influenced my teaching philosophy. I believe the most important aspect of teaching is attitude; I have a “can do” attitude when it comes to teaching. I believe all students deserve an opportunity to experience music. I strive to apply my experience working one-on-one with students with disabilities during private music lessons to a classroom setting. It is important to me to learn how to best serve all students in the music classroom. I would like to learn from
exemplary educators how to create an inclusive classroom that benefits all students.

1.4 Overview

To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using purposeful sampling to interview two music educators about their strategies for supporting the learning of students with special needs. Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of literature in the areas of benefits of music education, implications of an inclusive music classroom, teacher support, changing values and attitudes towards students with disabilities, and defining “disability.” Chapter 3 presents the methodology and research design used in this study as well as information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research questions. Chapter 5 contains limitations of the study, a discussion of the findings and their significance in relation to the literature, implications for my own practice as a beginning music educator, and areas for further study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review literature in the areas of benefits of music education, implications of an inclusive music classroom, teacher support, changing values and attitudes towards students with disabilities, and defining “disability.”

2.1 Benefits of Music Education

The benefits of music education for students, not only students with disabilities, are well known: improved spatial-temporal reasoning, increased self-esteem and self-discipline, improved social skills, improved hand-eye coordination, improved communication skills, an alternative form of expression, improved abstract reasoning skills, and the development of higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem solving (Darrow, 2012; Gooding, 2009; Patterson, 2003; Williams, 2007). These benefits are the reasons behind many articles advocating the inclusion of students with disabilities into the music classroom (Clements-Cortés, 2012; Darrow, 2010a; Darrow, 2012; Graham, 1988; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995; McCord & Fitzgerald, 2006; Mixon, 2005; Nordlund, 2006; Patterson, 2003).

As McCord and Fitzgerald (2006) note, “for many children with disabilities, music is the one place in school where they are successful” (p. 51). Darrow (2012) suggests students with disabilities may even excel in music because it is taught in many different ways such as auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic. As discussed in Chapter 1, Troy Sexton of Stomp reflected how music helped him overcome dyslexia and boosted his confidence, which transcended to all his other subjects (Hunter 2013). Sexton told the Toronto Star “[I didn’t] have the confidence to express myself academically because I was always nervous that I was going to be wrong…when I went to music class it was the opposite” (Hunter, 2013).
Les Dobbin, Sexton’s grade 6 music teacher, notes additional benefits to music education such as teamwork: “[when] you’re working with a large number of students together – it could be over 100 students working together towards one goal – and this is a life lesson you’re going to use in any profession you go into” (Hunter, 2013).

Music education is about more than “professional musician training.” Music has the power to reduce anxiety, comfort, heal, increase empathy and compassion (Wilkinson, 2013), develop imagination, increase creativity (Harris, 2009), and to help students find identity (Page, 1995). Lubet (2009) argues music is not only in education, but as education – it is a vital piece of how people learn.

As Canadian record producer Bob Ezrin told the Toronto Star, “through music, kids learn how to have constructive relationships with other people, how focus counts, how application produces results, how to dream and most of all, how to feel true joy” (Hunter, 2013).

2.2 Benefits of an Inclusive Music Classroom

2.2.1 Benefits for Students with Disabilities

Music making is an inherently social activity, and the social advantages of music education for students with disabilities are discussed in several articles (Clements-Cortês, 2012; Darrow, 1999; Gooding, 2009). Many students with disabilities reportedly have difficulty with social and communication skills, making music class an excellent place to develop and learn these skills (Clements-Cortês, 2012; Darrow, 2012; Gooding, 2009). In addition to the social advantages of music class, it is also a place for students with disabilities to experience success, improve their self-esteem, and make friends (Darrow, 2012).

Some teachers interviewed felt students with disabilities may experience more success in music therapy than in an inclusive music classroom (Patterson, 2003). While there are benefits
to music therapy, such as creating a song to remember the order for an activity (e.g., getting dressed), this raises the question of students with disabilities being segregated, instead of participating in “real world” experiences (Patterson, 2003). Another issue this raises is the use of music as an aid, rather than an independent enjoyable experience. As discussed under section 2.5 Critical Disability Studies, people with disabilities are often thought of as needing to be “fixed,” and by using music solely as a tool to help them, this defeats the main goals of music education which are to enjoy, experience, and learn an alternative form of expression.

2.2.2 Benefits for Teachers

After working with students with disabilities, music teachers felt they improved as educators. They learned new and creative teaching strategies that in turn benefitted all students (Darrow, 1999; Darrow, 2012; Hammel, 2004). As McCord and Fitzgerald (2006) note, “many strategies that help students with disabilities can be integrated into the teaching of all students” (p. 50).

2.2.3 Benefits for the “Regular” Learner

As teachers implement and learn more about differentiated instruction and other teaching strategies, all students benefit (Hammel, 2004). Teachers who taught in inclusive music classrooms noticed students without disabilities were more accepting, understanding, and inclusive towards students with disabilities. Although some teachers did report nondisabled students were resentful towards the students with disabilities, this was not the norm (Darrow, 1999). Teaching students about disability and allowing them to experience education together will continue to challenge and break down the stereotypes and stigmas of past generations.
2.3 Teaching in the Inclusive/Mainstreamed Music Classroom

In addition to the challenges previously mentioned, teachers of any subject must now also teach inclusive or mainstreamed classes. Darrow (1999), a prominent writer in the field of music education and disability, explained inclusion as “placing students with disabilities in classrooms with their nondisabled peers,” (p. 255) while mainstreaming refers to “integrating children with disabilities for only a portion of the day” (p. 255). Inclusion and mainstreaming practices are a reflection of the changing values of society, aiming to break down harmful labels and stigmatisms towards children with disabilities (Darrow, 1999; Reaume, 2014).

2.3.1 Challenges

Despite the good intentions behind educational policies regarding the inclusion and mainstreaming of students with disabilities into a “regular” classroom, many music educators feel ill-prepared to teach students with disabilities, and are concerned about taking time away from the whole class to focus on the “included” students. They are also concerned about the quality of education the students with disabilities receive (Darrow, 1999; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b). Many of these concerns may be attributed to a lack of pre-service or ongoing in-service training music educators receive on teaching music to students with disabilities (Darrow, 1990; Gfeller & Darrow, 1988; Hourigan, 2009; Hammel, 2001; Nordlund, 2006; Williams, 2007; Wilson & McCrary, 1996; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b).

VanWeelden and Whipple (2014b) conducted a study on music educators’ perceptions of preparation and supports available for inclusion and found there were very few workshops offered to music teachers specifically on music education and disability, but some generic
workshops on disability were offered. Of the few workshops that were offered, very few teachers reported attending them.

2.3.2 Support

According to Jellison and Taylor (2007), over the past 30 years there have only been 32 studies conducted regarding music educators’ attitudes towards students with disabilities. Most of these studies were also the only studies containing information about teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of inclusion and support. VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b) conducted the most recent study regarding teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of inclusion in the music classroom, as well as a second study in the same year on music educators’ perceptions of preparation and supports available for inclusion. In both VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014a; 2014b) studies, almost all music educators surveyed reported teaching students with disabilities.

Interesting to note, the two studies yielded opposing results. VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014b) study regarding teacher supports illustrated two thirds of teachers surveyed reported they did not receive enough support (e.g., minimal workshops, little involvement in IEP process, little involvement in placement decisions, lack of extra assistance). However, their other study regarding teachers’ perceived effectiveness of inclusion (2014a) showed half of the educators surveyed felt they were able to successfully meet the needs of their students with disabilities, and felt their own needs were being met.

Both of these studies were conducted using widespread surveys as VanWeelden and Whipple contacted a large number of teachers. The question of “why?” in regards to the differing results between their studies could perhaps be addressed with personal interviews, although this would be difficult to carry out with such a large sampling.
The opposing results between teachers’ perceived effectiveness of inclusion and lack of support found by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b) has been an enduring trend over the last 35 years of music education and disability research (Gfeller & Darrow, 1988; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994). However, the credibility of the previous studies was criticized, as they were geographically specific and used a wide range of measurement tools to analyze their data (Jellison & Taylor, 2007, p.19). In addition, as previously mentioned, these studies were mostly conducted via widespread surveys, lacking the deeper understanding interviews could provide.

Scott, Jellison, Chappell, and Standridge (2007) conducted a follow up study using interviews to gain a better understanding of music teachers’ “perceptions, opinions, and experiences regarding inclusion” (p. 40). The researchers found that less than half the teachers interviewed participated in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process, but were invited to attend IEP meetings. Scott et al. (2007) did not mention how often music teachers were invited to the IEP meetings, but noted many of the teachers interviewed did not attend the meetings even when invited, for various reasons such as short notice or lack of information. Another finding was that most elementary music teachers did receive some form of support either via aides, music therapists or assistive technology (43%, 41%, 33%, respectively) (Scott et al., 2007, pp. 43, 44).

This information provokes questions such as how much responsibility should be placed on the teacher to take the initiative to participate in decisions regarding their students with disabilities. Since these are American studies, what supports are Canadian music educators receiving to support students with disabilities? Are teachers taking the initiative to advocate for extra support in their classrooms?
2.4 Changing Values and Attitudes Towards Students with Disabilities

After reading many studies and articles about music and disability dating from 1980 to present, it became clear that society’s attitude towards disability has greatly changed. This change is most noticeable in the interviews conducted between researchers and music educators, the language and word choice used when discussing students with disabilities, and the advice given in various articles on how to address the needs of students with disabilities.

2.4.1 Teachers’ Values and Attitudes

Recent studies such as VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014a) noted teachers’ attitudes towards students with disabilities have improved in comparison to previous studies (e.g., Darrow, 1990; Gilbert and Asmus, 1981; Frisque, Niebur & Humphreys, 1994). In an article written by Darrow (1990) that surveyed music education studies from 1977 – 1990, she found teachers’ poor attitudes were impacting the success of mainstreaming in music education. Two studies from 1981 and 1982 (White; Elliott & Sins) mentioned in her article found teachers felt students with disabilities should attend separate schools and not be integrated into a “normal” music classroom. These negative attitudes could be attributed to lack of experience with students with disabilities or a lack of knowledge on how to teach students with disabilities, as mentioned previously.

Both researchers and in-service teachers noted positive attitudes as a factor in promoting an inclusive music classroom (Darrow, 1990; Darrow, 1999; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; Hammel, 2004; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995; Pontiff, 2004; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b). There are many factors that may have contributed to an improvement in attitudes among music teachers such as a better understanding of disability,
changing values as a society, and improved resources for teachers to assist students with disabilities (e.g., assistive technology), as reflected in the studies previously mentioned.

In somewhat recent interviews, Scott et. al. (2007) discovered teachers’ expectations for students with disabilities were often much lower than what the students were capable of achieving. Scott et al. (2007) noted “direct contact [with students with disabilities] for an extended period of time is one of the most effective ways to change attitudes” (p. 51). This information has proven to be true in a number of studies regarding teacher experiences with students with disabilities (Hourigan, 2009; Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Pontiff, 2004).

More recent articles written by music educators about meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the classroom demonstrate the positive change in attitude such as focusing on what a student can do instead of what they cannot accomplish, modifying assessment strategies, and advocating for teachers to take initiative to be part of educational decisions regarding their students (Nordlund, 2006; Clements-Cortès, 2012; Mixon, 2005; Hammel, 2004; Pontiff, 2004). The authors’ articles promoted a “can-do” attitude and part of the changing attitude is the mentality that by providing students with disabilities an opportunity to study music, they are receiving the same opportunity as their nondisabled peers to engage in a musical experience and an alternative form of self-expression (Nordlund, 2006; Clements-Cortès, 2012; Mixon, 2005; Hammel, 2004; Pontiff, 2004).

2.4.2 Changing Language of Disability

Most striking when reviewing music education and disability literature published over the last 35 years is the change in language (e.g., Darrow, 1990; Darrow, 2012; Graham, 1988; Hammel, 2004; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995). When referring to students with disabilities, many terms were used such as profoundly retarded, mentally retarded, handicapped, severely disabled,
non-traditional learner, special learner, mentally challenged, learning disability, and learning difference (e.g., Darrow, 1990; Darrow, 2012; Graham, 1988; Hammel, 2004; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995). Many of these terms elicit a negative connotation, promoting a sense of “otherness.” The thought of students with disabilities as “other” or separate (and should be kept separate) from their nondisabled peers was discussed in the previous subheading. These terms will be discussed further in the following section regarding critical disability framework.

2.5 Critical Disability Framework and Defining Disability

2.5.1 Defining Disability

A criticism of almost all the sources referenced was the lack of clarity as to what was meant by “disability,” or the other terms used to describe students with disabilities. Disability is a broad term, and there are even differences amongst Canadian government publications as to the definition of disability. The Disability in Canada: A 2006 Profile refers to people with disabilities as “those who reported difficulties with daily living activities, or who indicated that a physical or mental health condition or health problem reduced the kind or amount of activities they could do” (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, p. 2). The 2013 Federal Disability Reference Guide acknowledged the complexity of defining “disability” noting two approaches:

According the to bio-medical approach, disability is viewed as a medical or health problem that prevents or reduces a person’s ability to participate fully in society…the social approach views disability as a natural part of society, where attitudes, stigma and prejudices present barriers to people with disabilities, and prevent or hinder their participation in mainstream society (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, p. 2).

Due to the nature of my research, the social definition of disability will be adopted.
2.5.2 The Term “Disability”

Although many changes in vocabulary have already occurred over the last 35 years in music education and disability publications, the term “disabled” is not the final agreed upon term. The term “disabled people” places the disability before the person, making it a central part of their identity. The more widely accepted term “people with disabilities” places the person before the disability, however there are critiques on using this term as well. By saying “people with disabilities” it may place a limitation on the person; if a person had a broken leg they would not refer to themselves as a “person with a broken leg,” because that is only one aspect of self. The use of “dis” before “abled” is another aspect, contributing to thinking of people with disabilities as incapable, more than capable (Reaume, 2014).

The fact that disability is currently a more widely accepted term than those mentioned under the “Changing Language of Disability” heading suggests a societal willingness to change, and to continue to rework and adapt the terminology for those whom it affects (Reaume, 2014). For the purpose of my study the terms “students with disabilities” and “students with special needs” will be adopted and used interchangeably, as they are currently the most widely accepted.

2.5.3 Critical Disability Studies

Attitudes towards students with disabilities have changed significantly over the last 35 years of music education and disability research, as have the attitudes towards people with disabilities in general. Critical disability studies challenges approaches that pathologize physical, mental, and sensory differences as being in need of correction, and instead advocates for both accommodation and equality for disabled people in all areas of life. Critical disability studies seek to change conventional notions of disabled people as pitiable, tragic victims who should adjust to the world around them (Reaume, 2014, p. 1248).
Critical disability studies are an important aspect of my research as the ideas behind it embody my own personal teaching philosophy as well as many of the modern teaching, and music teaching philosophies. One of the most common teaching philosophies currently in practice is differentiation, which “structure[s] learning to fit the students rather than require…students adapt to fit the curriculum” (Standerfer, 2011, p. 43).

Critical disability studies also challenge the definition of disability, as discussed above, and what it means to be disabled. Although critical disability studies advocate research should not only be about people with disabilities, but their voices should also be present, this may not be possible for me to fulfill given the limitations of the Master of Teaching Research Project.

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review I examined research on the benefits of music education, teaching in the inclusive/mainstreamed music classroom, changing values and attitudes towards students with disabilities, critical disability framework and defining disability, and the benefits of an inclusive music classroom. This review elucidates the need for Canadian music education research regarding inclusive music classrooms. While inclusive and mainstreamed classrooms have existed for about 40 years, it is questionable as to how successful teachers’ efforts are in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, especially in the music classroom. Darrow (2010a) used an American example to illustrate this point: “inclusion may be like many other issues wherein people agree on an idea, such as equitable health care for all, yet struggle with the logistics of implementing the idea” (p. 44).

VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014a; 2014b) recent studies brought to light some important points: almost all music teachers teach students with disabilities, most of these teachers feel they are lacking support, but at the same time feel they are able to meet the needs of
their students with disabilities. There is clearly a need for more qualitative research in order to
gain a deeper understanding about the support music teachers do receive when teaching an
inclusive music classroom, and what strategies they use to support students with disabilities.

The goal of my research is to make sense of current quantitative music education and
disability studies by conducting face-to-face interviews with exemplary music educators. Since
the earliest study conducted on mainstreaming in music education (Gilbert & Asmus, 1981),
research has consistently shown teachers feel they are not receiving enough support to meet the
needs of students with disabilities. As a student, researcher, and teacher, I am in a unique
position to promote and carry out change in music education.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This study examines how teachers self-describe the way they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. This study first reviews existing literature in the field of music education and disability followed by interviews with two exemplary music teachers who have demonstrated commitment and leadership in supporting the learning of students with special needs. This chapter reviews the general approach, procedures, and data collection instruments, followed by a discussion of the participant sampling and recruitment. An explanation of the data analysis procedures and ethical considerations follow, along with a discussion of the methodological limitations and strengths of this study. Lastly, the conclusion provides a brief summary of the main methodological decisions regarding this study and rational for these decisions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study follows a qualitative research approach. After deciding to research supporting the learning of students with special needs in the music classroom, I acknowledged my prior assumptions about the topic and reflexively positioned myself within the study. I conducted a literature review to understand what is known about this topic, what problems existed in this field, and gaps in the current literature. I found there were many articles discussing how to include students with special needs in the music classroom but few studies, qualitative or quantitative, addressing this topic. Out of the existing studies, the majority were quantitative, lacking the deeper understanding interviews can provide. While the quantitative studies elucidated the problem and need for further research in the field of music and disability, they failed to provide answers to why these problems exist, and how they can be resolved. These
open-ended questions are best suited to qualitative research, which gives participants an opportunity to share their lived experiences through interviews (Creswell, 2013, Chapter 3).

The primary method of data collection was through interviews with music educators (see Appendix B). These were informal, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews aimed at gathering information about how teachers self-describe the ways they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom, to learn about their pedagogies, and the outcomes they observe for their students. Following interviews, the data was analyzed according to various themes. Lastly, the data was presented in aims of accurately representing the participants and portraying a complex picture of the issues researched in this study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

This study aimed at understanding how teachers support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. In order to address this topic, I collected data via semi-structured interviews with two music educators. Semi-structured interviews involve a prepared set of open-ended questions to be addressed, while allowing the interviewee to elaborate on issues important to them. This differs from a structured interview which places restrictions on how an interviewee is able to respond to the given questions. As Harvey-Jordan and Long (2001) mention, semi-structured interviews provide rich data, while also maintaining focus through the use of open-ended questions. By allowing participants to speak more freely than in a structured interview, themes additional to those predicted may arise creating an even deeper understanding of the topic (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001).

As mentioned previously, the majority of studies conducted on supporting students identified with special needs in the music classroom are quantitative studies involving large-scale surveys. As Denscombe (1998) pointed out, structured interviews are often associated with the
collection of quantitative data. An issue examined in both this study and the large-scale surveys is whether or not teachers receive classroom support from education assistants, therapists, paraprofessionals, aides, etc. While the large-scale surveys were able to obtain yes or no answers for this question, I was able to ask teachers to elaborate and provide examples, gaining a deeper understanding of how classroom supports effect teachers’ abilities to be responsive to the educational needs of students identified with special needs. By choosing to conduct semi-structured interviews I learned about the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences of two music educators, and how to better my own practice as a new teacher (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001).

3.3 Participants

It was important to find exemplary music teachers in order to learn about best practices for supporting the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. This section reviews the sampling criteria established for participant recruitment, a review of participant recruitment methods, and a brief biography of each participant.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Five years teaching experience
2. Practicing music educators who spend all or most of their school schedule teaching music
3. Considered to be skilled in supporting the learning of students with special needs (e.g., leadership within their school/board, possess additional qualifications in special education, etc.)
4. Have had students identified with special needs in their class(es) within the last two years
These criteria were important in order to make a meaningful contribution to the limited body of qualitative research on supporting the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom, and to benefit my own teaching practice.

Teachers possessing at least five years teaching experience have “internalized effective pedagogical practices and [have] had so much experience that much about teaching has become second nature” (Wasiak, 2013, p. 69) “Master teachers,” according to Wasiak (2013), are able to set and carry out educational goals while also understanding that a “lesson plan may look wonderful on paper, but be a disaster as it unfolds in the classroom” (p. 69). They are able to effectively respond to the discrepancy between plan and reality, carrying out meaningful lessons. This criterion is important as “master teachers” have spent years experimenting and discovering what works in specific classroom situations, and how to effectively address new and unexpected challenges. Their insight into the art of teaching music provides examples of excellent pedagogy.

The second criterion was teachers who were practicing music educators who spent all or the majority of their schedule teaching music. It was important to choose teachers who were currently practicing because they are better informed of new pedagogies and teaching strategies in the field of music education. It was also important that the majority of their day was spent teaching music as they would have a better understanding of issues specific to music education than a generalist teacher who may only teach music a few times a week.

The third criterion was the music educators be skilled in supporting the learning of students with special needs such as showing leadership within their school or board, possessing additional qualifications in the area of special education, a master’s degree, etc. By showing
leadership or possessing extended education, these teachers have demonstrated a commitment to supporting the learning of students identified with special needs.

The last criterion was teachers who had students identified with special needs in their class(es) within the last two years. Research has shown teachers who teach students with special needs have a better understanding of disability, higher expectations for students with special needs and a more positive attitude towards teaching these students (Jellison and Taylor, 2007).

In order to understand how to best support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom, it was important to interview teachers who have had practical experience supporting students with special needs.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures

A non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit participants. The main characteristic of non-probability sampling is that the participant selection is purposeful, rather than left to chance. This was most appropriate given the limited number of participants allowed for the Master of Teaching Research Project. The chosen participants were those who would best represent a diverse perspective amongst the music education community in the Greater Toronto Area (Denscombe, Chapter 1, 1998).

One technique used to recruit participants was through convenience sampling via recommendation. Convenience sampling is considered as a way to save time, money and effort when recruiting participants, but may yield poor quality data that lacks credibility (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). As I am currently part of a community of teachers and sought to interview teachers, I did not experience the negative effects of using convenience sampling. Recommended participants met the established criteria in section 3.3.1 and were able to recommend more participants, creating a “snowball” effect. While I did use convenience
sampling to find some of my participants, I did not know them prior to this study therefore had no prior beliefs or biases about them, just as in purposeful sampling.

In addition, I used purposeful sampling to contact music professionals who work with teachers throughout various school boards for their participation or recommendations. I provided my contact information via email to potential participants along with an overview of my study and what would be required if they chose to participate (Denscombe, 1998).

Purposeful sampling involves actively selecting participants based on a predetermined set of criteria. The benefits of purposeful sampling are obtaining a variety of participants who are not familiar with the researcher therefore avoiding any prior beliefs or biases about the participants. In addition, these participants may be able to recommend other participants for the study (Creswell, 2013; Marshall, 1996).

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

Sara was in her eighth year of teaching. She had previously taught kindergarten to grade eight music for three years, and had been at her current school for five years where she taught junior and intermediate music, and intermediate homeroom (literacy and numeracy). Her current school had approximately 300 students of mixed socioeconomic status as well as a number of English language learners and students identified with special needs. Sara estimated about 40% of all students in her classes had Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Sara was also a PhD candidate at OISE, University of Toronto.

Connie was also in her eighth year of teaching. Connie had previously taught at a special education school spanning from grades 7 – 10; during this time, she completed the special education part one additional qualification course. Her second school was a high school with a large special education population, and she had recently started a new position at another high
school. Over the course of her career, Connie taught music classes comprised of few students with special needs to 100% of her students having special needs. Connie was on maternity leave when I interviewed her and had not begun her most recent teaching position.

3.4 Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted they were transcribed and returned to the participants to review. The interviews were coded using a combination of descriptive, in vivo, and value codes during the 1st coding cycle. Descriptive codes provide a summary of what is being said, while in vivo codes are words or phrases as said verbatim by the participant that captures the essence of the data. Value codes are based on the underlying beliefs of the participant (Saldana, 2008).

Descriptive codes were mainly used for the 2nd cycle of coding. Descriptive codes were useful to combine 1st cycle codes as they “summarize the primary topic” (Saldana, 2008, p. 3). For example, some of the 1st cycle codes were: lack of instruments, instruments in disrepair, lack of external fundraising, and old and damaged books. These codes all described difficulties experienced by the teacher, therefore the 2nd cycle code was entitled “teacher barriers.”

Due to the complexity of coding, it became apparent I required a 3rd coding cycle in order to better address my research questions. For example, the 1st cycle codes mentioned above (lack of instruments, instruments in disrepair, lack of external fundraising, and old and damaged books) were grouped into three categories: classroom materials, external support, and money. These three categories were then grouped into the larger category of “teacher barriers” (see Table 1). This provided a more detailed picture when addressing the factors and resources that support music teachers’ efforts to be responsive to the instructional needs of students with disabilities.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Cycle Code</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Cycle Code</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Cycle Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of instruments</td>
<td>Classroom materials</td>
<td>Teacher barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments in disrepair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Old and damaged books</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Having to use supplementary material</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting educational assistant support</td>
<td>External support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s responsibility to be</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special education support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of external fundraising</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

This research study followed the ethical review procedures stipulated by the Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto. Prior to the interview process participants signed letters of informed consent permitting them to be interviewed and audio recorded, in addition to the expectations of participation (see Appendix A). Participants were also informed that their participation and all names would remain anonymous and were informed that they had the right to withdraw during any stage of the research before publishing. The University of Toronto wrote the letter of consent and participants were required to sign the form before interviews could commence. All forms were duplicated so both the participants and researcher possessed copies (Creswell, Chapter 3, 2013).

Prior to each interview the nature and topic of the research was reviewed with participants, participants were informed they could refrain from any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, and were reminded the interviews would be recorded in order to generate a transcript. Upon completion of interviews participants were provided transcripts to review for accuracy and any information they felt may have been misrepresented or wanted to retract. All data was stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed after five years (Creswell, Chapter 7, 2013).
There are no known risks to participation in this study. Course instructors at the University of Toronto Ontario Institute for Studies in Education provided supervision and input during the two years of this study to ensure all ethical standards were met.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

This research study involved interviews with two music educators. While interviewing only two participants may be seen as a limitation, existing research in the field of music education and disability has predominantly been limited to widespread surveys with very few qualitative studies. Widespread surveys are indeed an effective tool to gain a large sampling but lack the deeper understanding interviews can provide. By conducting in-person interviews I was able to learn about the lived experiences of two exemplary teachers and contribute to the limited selection of qualitative studies in this field. In addition, the teachers were given an opportunity to reflect upon their own practices and pedagogical decisions.

One of the limitations of the Master of Teaching Research Project was being unable to speak with students or conduct classroom observations. This would have contributed to a richer understanding of the information discussed during the teacher interviews. Another limitation of this research project was that the interviewees had to be educators. Given the nature of my research, interviewing music therapists, paraprofessionals, or aides may have provided additional insight on how to best support students identified with special needs in the music classroom. The techniques used in a therapy setting could potentially be adapted to better support students with special needs in a school music classroom.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the considerations and steps taken when collecting the data. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews in order to allow participants the freedom to
speak to issues important to them while maintaining the focus of the study. A series of descriptive, in vivo, and value codes were used when analysing the data to accurately capture the ideas of the participants. Several considerations were taken into account when recruiting participants such as various criteria, and the methods in which participants were recruited. The following chapter discusses the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report and discuss the findings derived from two interviews conducted with practicing music educators. I use the data from the interviews to provide examples as to how music educators are supporting the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. The research findings are organized into four overarching themes with sub-themes: 1) the importance and purpose of music education, 2) the challenge of meeting all students’ needs, 3) strategies used to support students with special needs, and 4) advice for new teachers.

4.1 Teachers describe the importance and purpose of music education

The two participants, Sara and Connie, taught in different school boards in Ontario. Both participants touched upon three ideas related to the purpose and goals of music education: lifelong enjoyment, meaning making, and music as community. Both Sara and Connie highlighted meaning-making and lifelong enjoyment as a higher priority than the traditional goals of music education such as playing an instrument proficiently.

4.1.1 Lifelong Enjoyment

Sara discussed one of her goals of music education:

I would say my goals are for an individualized, authentic musical experience for each student. So that might be different than the one that I had, that might be different than the dominant discourse that’s coming from the Ontario curriculum…So what might bring me joy to sit and play an instrument and read, you know, from the Westernized canon and do that kind of stuff might not be what works for them.

Sara’s beliefs align with the new music education paradigm, initiated by the realization that music teachers are “totally out of touch with the musical needs of…society, to the point where students find us irrelevant and unconnected to their lives” (Williams, 2007, p. 21).
Students are experiencing music in a vast number of ways, which are not always reflected in the music classroom. In order to change music education, teachers must develop new ways for students to have musical experiences through incorporating materials relevant to the students and their cultures; they must be willing to to learn alongside their students (Blesdoe, 2015). This is a sentiment shared by many music educators (Clements-Cortés, 2012a; Clements-Cortés, 2013; Colwell & Davidson, 1996; Darrow, 2012; de l’Etoile, 2005; Harris, 2009; Hillier, 2011; Lubet, 2009; Page, 1995; Standerfer, 2011; Williams, 2007).

Connie also discussed how music education can be particularly beneficial for students who may not have had a positive relationship with school: “kids who maybe haven’t necessarily always had the most positive relationship with school and are sort of eager to like, ‘when I’m done I’ll never do that again.’ And I hope that with music that’s something that they look forward to continuing to do.” While many students may be able to avoid using the quadratic formula once they leave high school, Connie notes how music is embedded in every part of our culture: “whether [students] continue to play…they’re gunna hear music for the rest of their lives.” Connie explains why she values lifelong enjoyment over traditional goals of music education: “I want the kids to feel good about what they produce, that they sound good, they feel good about it, and they want to go and perform it, and to share it, and they’re excited, that sort of thing I think is…I’d rather do that than be able to sit down and write out a Schenkerian Analysis.”

Both Connie and Sara understand traditional goals of music education are not only irrelevant to their students, but may turn them off music for the rest of their lives. They understand how influential early music experiences are in fostering a lifelong love for music.
4.1.2 Meaning Making

Sara’s discussion of the purpose and importance of music education was more abstract and conceptual than Connie’s. This could be attributed to Sara being a PhD candidate and currently in the process of developing her philosophy of music education. Sara’s discussion focused on the broader ideas of music and self:

So the purpose…I really think it is to help create this whole person. And not in like a holistic personhood sort of way. But, you know, it’s just a part of who we are, and it’s a part of what we do. And I think we need to allow space for that to occur in our schools. And for some people, that might not be music in the traditional sense, but I really do believe it’s so inherent to who we are as people, and as a society and a culture and all the weight that those words give us. I think it is a necessity for life.

The concept of music inherent to being human has been discussed by many authors (Colwell & Davidson, 1996; Harris, 2009; Lubet, 2009; Page, 1995). As Page (1995) noted, “music is not just an important part of life – music is life itself. Music is alive and by singing and creating sounds we become more alive” (p. 7).

Connie’s beliefs towards meaning making tie in with her beliefs about lifelong enjoyment. As mentioned in the previous section, Connie understands students will continue to interact with music whether or not they partake in school music programs. She sees meaning making as students being able to

connect with a lot of the things that they’re hearing outside [of school]…and to help them…make understanding and make meaning for all these things they’re already experiencing in their life and be like “oh that’s what’s going on here, I can understand this better, I can appreciate that better” … as opposed to… “well I can play all the scales on my saxophone.”

Despite the humor in her final remark, Connie was quick to add “not that there’s not value in [playing scales].” From speaking with both Sara and Connie it is obvious they see music education as extending beyond school. Music is inherent to who we are as humans, and
they see the role of a music educator as more than someone who teaches students to read notes. While note reading is important, Connie and Sara understand music education can serve a higher purpose of helping students make sense of themselves, and the world around them. As Page (1995) notes, “the expression of music is the expression of self” (p. 13).

4.1.3 Music as community

Music has the power to bring together people of many different backgrounds and abilities. Sara discussed her experiences having students with special needs integrated into her music classes:

When [my students are] engaged all those barriers just seem to fall away and they, they support who needs support and they challenge each other. So I really think that it’s important that they’re integrated because then that’s how you learn about the world and about interacting with people who are different than you.

Sara added, “all my students who are identified [don’t] all group together to do something, they [work] with their friends.” Communication and relationship building are some of the positive outcomes Canadian music therapist Clements-Cortés noted in support of inclusion (2012).

Connie also discussed music as community, stating “I think a big part of music education is the …the social emotional development aspect of it. I think it’s probably the most beneficial to the most students.” Connie continued, explaining “I really try to make a community in the classroom, definitely… so that everyone is contributing and feels good about it, welcoming, that sort of thing, … making friendships, and you know, sounds kind of cheesy, but making music together, and making friendships.”

Connie noted the value of a strong sense of community especially for students who struggle with school:
If there’s kids who maybe have had trouble finding success elsewhere in school, that they’re really like struggling in everything else, but they were doing well in music and music’s a place where they come and hang out in the music room at lunch, where they’re excited to be there, be a part of the community… Hopefully you’ve succeeded in creating an environment that they can be a part of and feel welcome in.

A strong sense of community has the potential to boost the self esteem of students with special needs (Clements-Cortés, 2012), provide a welcoming, safe environment (Darrow, 2012), and develop social skills (Gooding, 2009).

In order to create a strong sense of community, Connie and Sara discussed breaking down the misconception of the purpose of music education as “professional musician training.” Sara noted the irrelevance of this goal, stating “most of my students aren’t gonna become music teachers. So we need to make [music education] accessible to them.” Several authors discuss how music education was (and still is, to some extent) ruled by notions of the “elite,” or “talented,” versus “not talented” (Blesdoe, 2015; Colwell & Davidson, 1996; Lubet, 2009; Page, 1995; Williams, 2007). Page (1995) effectively explains this, stating “there is no separation between talented and untalented. In the Western world, however, we perceive a huge gap – a gap of our own invention” (p. 7).

As Blesdoe (2015) notes, music educators influence how students and society interact with music, and how students perceive themselves as musicians, or non-musicians. Whereas music was once thought of as an elite art, educators are now advocating for music education for all students (Blesdoe, 2015; Clements-Cortés, 2012; Colwell & Davidson, 1996; Darrow, 2012; Gooding, 2009; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995; Lubet, 2009; Mixon, 2005; Pontiff, 2004). Music allows students, especially students with special needs, to socialize (Clements-Cortés, 2012; Gooding, 2009), express themselves (Page, 1995), find identity (Colwell & Davidson, 1996),
experience success (Clements-Cortés, 2012), and experience a sense of community (Clements-
Cortés, 2012; Darrow, 2012; Darrow, 2010a).

4.2 Teachers encounter difficulties balancing the needs of the entire class with the needs of
individual students

As discussed in the literature review, two studies conducted by VanWeelden and
Whipple (2014a; 2014b) are the most recent studies addressing teacher support and perceived
effectiveness of inclusion in the music classroom. The studies revealed two thirds of music
teachers surveyed felt they did not receive enough support (e.g., minimal workshops, little
involvement in IEP process, little involvement in placement decisions, lack of extra assistance),
however, half of the total educators surveyed felt they were able to successfully meet the needs
of their students with disabilities, and felt their own needs were being met. My discussion with
Sara reflects these opposing results:

As a teacher, it’s programming 12 different lessons for one period. Making sure that everyone is okay and
understanding, and put that on top of all the other things you need to do as a music teacher. You know?
Fixing instruments, dealing with this fingering, and dealing with you know, “I don’t know how to read this
rhythm,” and it’s a lot. I’m not gunna lie. I’ve gotten better, I think, over the years, trying to get them to
work together and help each other…yeah, there’s no real solution, it’s just really tiring every day…and
really rewarding.

While teachers wish they had more support, they are developing ways to support the learning of
students identified with special needs within their classrooms. Teachers are making the most out
of their situations. My interviews with Sara and Connie shed light on some of the difficulties
teachers encounter when supporting the needs of both the entire class and students with special
needs: lack of support in and out of the classroom, subject disconnect, formal identification,
resources determine accessibility, and misconceptions about music education.
4.2.1 Lack of support in the classroom

Sara and Connie discussed the lack of support available within the music classroom, a recurring trend amongst literature (Darrow, 2009; Darrow, 2010b; Nordlund, 2006; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b). Sara mentioned a SERT (special education resource teacher) was available for out of classroom consultations but could not provide educational assistance in class. Connie, who had taught at both segregated special education and inclusive schools, discussed the variances in support she received. She mentioned one of the special education schools she taught at had a few EAs (educational assistants) who provided in-class support. Connie reflected on the benefits of having EA support in the music classroom, noting “it made it a lot easier to split the class into groups, and to work with the kids in smaller groups, or one-on-one.”

I asked Connie what support she would like to have for students with special needs in the inclusive music classroom: “well…this is never gunna happen, but ideally…having support in the classroom, like having an EA accessible.” Connie’s response (i.e., “this is never gunna happen”) reveals the complexity and difficulty in providing a solution to this problem. Special education personnel, such as educational assistants, are important resources as they are able to provide frequent one-on-one support for students with special needs, have a better understanding of the idiosyncrasies of a particular student and their needs, and can work on additional goals with the student (e.g., social skills). The following sub-themes discuss why music educators may not receive support within the classroom.

4.2.2 Subject disconnect: lack of understanding about music education

Another topic that arose when discussing available support was subject disconnect. Sara and Connie defined subject disconnect as a lack of understanding about music education in
general, or a lack of understanding about the differences in supporting students in the music classroom versus a “core” subject classroom. Sara explained this, stating “[educational assistants] know how to help a student with math and literacy but they won’t know how to help a student with music.” Connie felt the same, stating “I think it gets a little trickier in a music class, than say an English or a math class where there’s more…seat work…the EA or whoever was there, the resource teacher, probably doesn’t have that knowledge to really… help [students] with [music work].”

Connie shared how educational assistants in the resource room at her school were unable to help her students due to lack of musical knowledge. Connie explained she only used the resource room as a place for students to “cool down” if they were having emotional difficulties, or to complete written assignments. She discussed how often, although resource room support was available, she could not send students there because of the performative nature of music education: “You couldn’t really send [a student] [to the resource room] with their trumpet, and be like… ‘go practice your trumpet’ when there’s ten other kids doing their work…that kind of I guess fell more to me as a teacher.”

Perhaps one interpretation of VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014a; 2014b) studies are that the supports available to music teachers are not conducive to the performative nature of music education. Connie noted how often times, instead of sending students to the resource room, she tried “to do other things in the classroom that didn’t necessarily directly involve … the EA, or directly involve the resource teacher.” If she was unable to support a struggling student on her own, the only way she could provide additional help was by removing the student from the classroom. While this may be a useful option for students who have behavior or emotional
difficulties, it is unlikely to provide extra support in terms of specific music education learning goals and activities in class.

Only offering out of class support may bring back old notions such as students with special needs should attend segregated schools, they hinder the learning of their non-disabled peers, or teachers and students should not have to work with these students (Darrow, 1990; Frisque, Niebur & Humphreys, 1994; Gilbert & Asmus, 1981). In-class educational support advocates an equal opportunity for all students to experience and make music.

When discussing the subject disconnect, neither Sara nor Connie placed blame on the support staff for their lack of musical knowledge, nor did they insinuate staff should possess a higher degree of musical knowledge. Connie emphasized this point during her interview: “Music specific stuff I felt it was difficult to get that kind of support, just because of lack of expertise, which I don’t blame the program, I wouldn’t expect [educational assistants] to know all that stuff.” Sara had similar sentiments, stating “that’s where your subject expertise as a music teacher comes into play.”

When discussing with Connie the ways in which personnel supports were useful, she mentioned having an “extra set of eyes” to monitor students, someone to support students with behavior difficulties, and take students to the office or on walks to cool down. Perhaps music educators are not seeking a second music teacher in the classroom, but someone who can support students’ learning by helping to foster responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation.

4.2.3 Difficulties obtaining formal individual education plans for music education

Another barrier to receiving educational assistance or resource room support was the process of formal identification of exceptionalities. Connie expanded upon this, stating
“sometimes there are kids, and everyone knows they would benefit from [an IEP], but there’s a lot of barriers actually to getting that.” Sara also shared the difficulties of students with special needs not having a formal IEP (individual education plan):

I know there are some students who are on unofficial identification plans, but they’re not really legally binding yet… So I’m not allowed to modify the curriculum I can just modify the accommodations… so I need to find a way to accommodate them in an arts-based learning environment even though they require so many heavily modified, uh, subjects for like language and math.

In addition to being unable to modify the curriculum, Connie mentioned students who did not have formal identifications could not receive extra time on exams and were not allowed to go to an educational assistant’s resource room. She also noted how lengthy the formal identification process could be, especially if parents were unable to afford a private assessment.

Sara discussed how despite providing many accommodations for a student, such as environmental changes, proximity to teacher, and buddy systems, she still had to assess them based on their grade level if they did not possess a formal identification plan.

4.2.4 Resources determine accessibility

Sara and Connie taught at a number of schools, each with different music resources. Connie discussed how some of the resources available at her past schools were more accessible to students with special needs than those available at her current school:

Two of the schools I’ve taught at actually had steel pan [drums], which was good… that was a lot more accessible for a lot of students with special needs, than band or strings… they could be successful right away. Like the very first day, like “ding!” they made a sound, they can play a song the very first day.

Whereas in a band or a string class [there’s] a lot more, like, how to hold your instrument, how to set it up, how to get a sound, especially in band, like “oh I’m not getting a sound on my flute” and they’re getting frustrated, and having to memorize all the fingerings. With steel pan it’s all laid out, and the notes are all labelled.
Both teachers also mentioned the importance of having working instruments. In addition to working instruments, Connie noted the benefits of technology in supporting the learning of students with special needs, but that the computers were often old, so they froze, or the software crashed.

Sara mentioned the difficulties in receiving funding, or fundraising for new materials, as her school did not have a parent council. Perhaps some of the difficulties in organizing a parent council at her school could be attributed to the multitude of single-parent families, or parents who spoke English as a second language. Sara sympathized, stating “[the parents] have their own struggles they’re dealing with.”

Instrument selection and funding affect the level of accessibility for students with special needs. Perhaps Connie and Sara experienced these difficulties as they taught at schools in mid- or low socioeconomic areas, had many single-parent families, and parents who spoke English as a second language. Perhaps future research could examine the differences in available support for students with special needs in more affluent areas compared to lower socioeconomic areas.

4.2.5 Misconceptions about music education, and how to support students with special needs in music education

This sub-theme was exclusively discussed by Sara. From our interview, I gathered she felt different from the other teachers within her school because of how different music education is compared to core subjects. Sara shared some of the differences supporting students with special needs in the music classroom compared to supporting these students in core subjects:

I don’t wanna just put headphones on a kid and put ‘em off in the corner. …[B]ut a lot of people will say “well that’s how I differentiate in my homeroom, in my language and math room” but because it’s so performative and it’s such a collaborative community and culture, we don’t want them to feel annexed.
Sara’s point reiterates the difficulties of subject disconnect discussed in section 4.2.2. While teachers and support personnel understand how to support students with special needs in a traditional classroom setting, the music classroom is quite different. As Darrow (1999) noted, most school administrators are unaware of how complex and detailed the music curriculum is, and the difficulties in teaching this curriculum. Because of this, many administrators or people in positions of authority believe any student can be integrated into music education to simply “listen to music.” This point is not an argument against integration, but rather a possible explanation as to the lack of support provided in the music classroom. Since administrators may not understand the difference in how students with special needs require support in the music classroom compared to core subject classrooms, they may not believe there is a need for additional support.

Sara also discussed the lack of value placed on Arts education: “there’s also a hierarchy of uh, privileging core subjects over the Arts…’cuz ... some people don’t value music.” Sara’s experiences are not unique. Advocacy for the Arts has been, and continues to be, a long, uphill battle. This may be another reason why music educators continue to receive a lack of support. As Colwell and Davidson (1996) point out, “some claim that music, because it is such a part of our lives and is common to all cultures, may not need instruction time as part of the school curriculum. Of course, the same argument can be made about language arts” (p. 59). I argue music education is important because it is such a large part of our lives and common to all cultures.

4.3 Specific strategies used to support the learning of students identified with special needs

Sara and Connie discussed many strategies they use to support the learning of students identified with special needs. These have been grouped into the following sub-themes:
community building, sensitivity to students’ needs, classroom management, technology, and accommodations.

4.3.1 Community building

Music as community was a recurrent theme throughout both interviews. Sara and Connie mentioned using the principles of TRIBES – mutual respect, attentive listening, right to pass, appreciation, and no put-downs – as an integral part of creating a safe and supportive learning environment. Sara mentioned in addition to leading community circles in her classroom, her school had weekly assemblies to discuss various issues and worked through case studies and scenarios to promote tolerance for all students.

Connie discussed the importance of getting to know every student. She noticed when students felt connected to their teacher they were more likely to ask for help, and were more receptive to support. Connie also mentioned she tried to contact every student’s parents within the first week of school to form a strong parent-teacher support system. Many authors have discussed the benefits of teachers learning about and forming connections with their students with special needs: increased understanding of how their students with special needs learn (Hourigan, 2009), a more positive attitude towards students with special needs (Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Pontiff, 2004), and higher expectations for these students (Mixon, 2005; Scott, Jellison, Chappell, & Standridge, 2007),

Teacher attitudes are also crucial to fostering a sense of community. Studies have shown teachers’ perceptions of students with special needs change drastically after working with them. Pontiff (2004) conducted interviews with veteran teachers noting “all of the teachers interviewed said that though they were nervous about working with special learners at first, they found teaching them to be one of the most rewarding things they had ever done” (p. 58).
Sara mentioned this as well, stating:

I learn so much. Just being with [students with special needs] I think has made me a better teacher… Just understanding, not even how to teach differently, but how they interpret differently…you have to see what works for them, and everyone is different…[and] when that kid gets it, and you see what the misconception, the barrier is, and they make that you know, C on their clarinet, and they get excited, it’s amazing. It just makes me feel like, totally worth it all, that extra work.

Connie mentioned similar points to Sara, as well as discussing how music can extend beyond instructional time:

If there’s kids who maybe have had trouble finding success elsewhere in school, that they’re really struggling in everything else, but they were doing well in music and music’s a place where they come and hang out in the music room at lunch, where they’re excited to be there, be a part of the community. That’s… rewarding as a teacher too. Hopefully you’ve succeeded in creating an environment that they can be a part of and feel welcome in.

When teachers possess positive attitudes about teaching students with disabilities, all students benefit (Darrow, 1990; Darrow, 1999; Frisque, Niebur, & Humphreys, 1994; Hammel, 2004; Humpal & Dimmick, 1995; Pontiff, 2004; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a; VanWeelden & Whipple 2014b). Sara noticed her students learned about bias and perception, were more tolerant and accepting of difference, and actively supported students with special needs, results also reflected in a 1999 study conducted by Darrow. Sara explained inclusion was important because “that’s how you learn about the world and about interacting with people who are different than you.”

4.3.2 Sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities: “fitting in”

Connie and Sara discussed the issue of “fitting in,” and how this has influenced the accommodations they use to support students with special needs. Sara elucidated this issue:
I think the real barrier is that fitting in, and the fact that you have to be able to use this you know, notation, that’s been decided for you and you struggle enough with reading in your own primary language and now we have this secondary one and it’s so performative, and everyone can hear what you’re doing and if you make a mistake, and “why can’t you follow along?”, “why can’t you be in rhythm?”, “someone sounds out of tune”, that’s terrifying.

One of Sara’s main goals when determining accommodations was for students to have “something that they can have in their book so they can still participate aurally and still play, but no one knows that they’re doing something different.” Connie also mentioned the importance of not singling out students by using strategies such as showing instrument fingerings while conducting, or calling out bar numbers. The idea of using accommodations that do not single out students with special needs has been discussed in a few articles (Adamek, 2001; Darrow, 2008; Hammel, 2004), with the goal of “maintain[ing] as normal an environment as possible for the student [with special needs]” (Darrow, 2008, p. 33).

Connie also mentioned along with “fitting in” was the fear of failure, or of “sticking out”: Not that the kids necessarily know who like… “oh that kid has an IEP” but, often the kids can see [which] person’s struggling, right? And so often, I also have had kids who’ve found like strategies I guess to hide it…if they are…particularly embarrassed… some of the kids will act out, or have like, you know, their behavior stuff kind of for some kids becomes an issue because they’re using that as a way to like, get out of whatever they have to do, or are being asked to do. Um, and some of the kids would maybe sort of just stop, or like fake play, like move their fingers, and like that sort of stuff. But they’re not actually playing, and hoping that you don’t notice.

De l’Etoile’s (2005) ideas align with Connie, explaining students with special needs often act out to avoid doing work because they have a low tolerance for frustration, are easily discouraged, and have poor self-esteem. Sara also sheds light on this issue, noting “when you’re 12 and 13, you care so much about what your peers think about you.” She continued, stating that if a
student feels they do not fit in, it “can hurt so deeply that it could turn someone off from music forever.”

Neither Sara nor Connie want their students with special needs to have negative experiences in class, or to discontinue experiencing music in adulthood. They understand the importance of all students feeling included, as reflected in their beliefs about fostering a strong sense of community in which all students feel safe and included. In order to help students with special needs “fit in,” Connie noted using strategies which were useful for all students, so students were not singled out.

4.3.3 Classroom management strategies

Connie and Sara discussed using similar classroom management strategies which support the learning of all students, including those with special needs. Connie and Sara mentioned whole class instruction, small groups, and one-on-one instruction.

During my interview with Sara, I asked her to describe how she would structure her music class. She described first using whole class instruction to introduce a concept, ask the students to find the concept in their music, discuss how it works in the music, and then play the piece as a group. Following whole group instruction, students were given time to work in small groups or independently on their new piece. During this time, Sara was able to work one-on-one with students who required additional support. To consolidate the lesson, Sara would engage the entire class in a discussion with questions such as “what did we notice? What were some misconceptions? What were some things that were challenging?” Sara noted the importance of alternating between whole group, small group, and individual instruction to ensure all students understood the concepts.
Connie mentioned using similar strategies of alternating between whole group, small group, and individual instruction. She also mentioned strategies she used while the entire class played through a piece of music, such as proximity to students who needed extra support following along. Connie discussed the use of flex-band music, which is arranged so many instruments can play each part, as a way to support struggling learners. She described her method of grouping students, choosing to place about three stronger players with two struggling players on the same part. She noted,

the [stronger players] are really helpful, … and the other kids aren’t really embarrassed, so it’s not an issue… it also helps to … keep them on track too, and hear how it’s supposed to go, or I’ll tell them to … “ask the person next to you.” Or, “watch what they’re doing.” that sort of thing.

Connie’s decision to group struggling learners with stronger players also reflects her sensitivity to helping students “fit in.”

Sara and Connie discussed the importance of providing one-on-one support for students with special needs. From their experiences, they determined the most effective way to provide one-on-one support was by dividing the class into small groups, and either working with the struggling learner’s small group, or pulling them aside for extra support. Sara also provided insight into the importance of using small groups, stating “by setting up the whole class to be kind of … nebulous and … all over the place, everyone’s working on something different, it really normalizes this idea that we can all do different things.”

Many authors advocate the use of small groups to provide differentiated instruction (Darrow, 2008; Hillier, 2011; Standerfer, 2011), noting students “have the opportunity to become acquainted with their own ‘voice’ as learners; they grow more comfortable expressing their needs, understanding their abilities and areas for improvement, and taking personal responsibility for their progress as a musician and collaborator” (Hillier, 2011, p. 51). Small group
differentiated instruction also shifts teacher as director to teacher as co-learner and facilitator, and student as leader.

4.3.4 Technology as an aide and main component of lessons

Connie and Sara discussed the importance of technology as an aide and as a main component of their lessons. Connie discussed playing audio files from websites like JW Pepper, an online print music store, so students could hear their part and play along with the recording. Sara mentioned using websites such as Band Pad and Noteflight to help students learn the correct fingerings and rhythms for their music. She also mentioned sometimes using Noteflight to notate music that did not have a recording so students could listen to their parts.

Connie noted the importance of using technology as the basis for lessons as “it sounded more… relevant … or similar to what [students are] hearing outside of school.” Connie mentioned using GarageBand as a way to introduce formal concepts such as form, having students create loops and singing, rapping, or playing their instrument overtop. She attributed the success of using technologies such as GarageBand to their accessibility, especially for students with special needs. Connie noted, “it made stuff sound cool right away… and a lot of the kids got pretty into it.” De l’Etoile (2005) also noted the importance of relevancy and understanding when teaching students with special needs. Based on these principles, Connie’s use of GarageBand was successful and engaging because electronic music was relevant to her students, and they understood how to use the program.

Clements-Cortés (2013), a prominent Canadian writer in the field of music therapy, noted how advances in technology have created opportunities for students with both physical and mental disabilities to participate in school music programs. She noted most students were already familiar with some form of technology, so it was a smooth transition adapting the same
technologies for musical purposes. Music technologies have the potential for all students to compose, improvise, and provide an outlet for self-expression.

Sara also mentioned using technology for composition, and created an editable list of technology resources through Google Drive that students could add to, hoping “there [will be] enough stuff there that there’s something for everyone who needs that specific support.” This ties in with Connie’s comment about relevancy, as both Sara and Connie incorporated resources their students currently use or enjoy using. Sara noticed technology based lessons were a way for students with special needs to share their “knowledge bases” with peers, allowing them to contribute resources and ideas. Sara reflected upon the success of these lessons, saying “it is really fascinating to watch. It’s hard [for me] not to [help them] ‘cuz it’s exciting.”

4.3.5 The importance of accommodations for meaningful participation and accurate assessment

In addition to technology, Sara and Connie also used “traditional” accommodations to support the learning of students with special needs. Sara said she would rewrite certain parts of the music, enlarge the size of the music notation, or highlight the parts students needed to play. Connie mentioned she would allow students to write in the note names, fingerings, and highlight or circle patterns in their music. Connie noted the importance of giving students time to figure out the note names and fingerings without the help of the teacher: “it’s a tough balance sometimes between … helping the kid and doing it for them … Because it can be tempting to just do it yourself sometimes, but that’s not really beneficial for them.” She noted once a student had tried to label some of the notes, she would then help them correct and complete the page.

Sara and Connie’s strategies were also discussed in literature about accommodations for students with special needs (Adamek, 2001; Clements-Cortés, 2012; Darrow, 2007; de l’Etoile, 2005; McCord & Fitzgerald, 2006). The main goal when using these accommodations is for
students with special needs to be able to participate in a meaningful way, and not be “singled out,” as discussed in sub-theme 4.3.2.

Sara also noted the importance of using fair assessment practices when determining a student’s understanding of a piece of music:

I have one student where … he’s reading … at a grade one level, but he’s in grade eight. He might not be able to type quickly, he might not be able to speak without um, some, I wanna say speech impediment issues, but he can comprehend at a grade eight level. So just being in the class, you know, he can hear a piece of music and he can tell you, he can analyze it, he can explain it to you on a deep rich level. But if you said “here’s a music listening journal” he couldn’t write that.

As Sara pointed out, if a teacher’s main goal is to assess a student’s musical understanding, assess their musical understanding – not their writing proficiency. Sara’s use of verbal assessment instead of written assessment is also suggested in several articles (Adamek, 2001; Darrow, 2007; VanWeelden, 2007). Standerfer (2011) notes giving students choice as to how they will demonstrate their understanding may reduce stress and allow for a more accurate picture of what they have learned.

4.4 Teachers reflected and shared advice for new teachers

Sara and Connie were both at positions in their life where they were able to critically reflect upon their pedagogies. Sara, being a PhD candidate, mentioned she was currently developing her teaching philosophy and her program challenged her to critically reflect upon her teaching practices. When I interviewed Connie, she was on maternity leave. Time away from the classroom also provided an opportunity to reflect, as it is often difficult to engage in critical reflection while in the midst of teaching. This theme is divided into two sub-themes: reflections and the future.
4.4.1 Reflections about growth as a teacher

During Sara’s interview, we discussed the evolution of her teaching practices. She reflected:

I think my first year teaching I was very subject centered. I definitely prioritized the music, and the content and the curriculum above the student. And I can only say that now because I’m reflecting. I didn’t know that at the time. And I think now I’m just really, really focusing on student-centered teaching, conceptual teaching, and re-imagining and reworking what my goals are for them. Because before, the goal was to play band music and hopefully get that inherent joy that I got from it. Well they’re not all diggin’ it. They’re not all enjoying it. So we gotta find a way that they do enjoy it and a way that they understand it.

Sara’s thoughts are the epitome of the new music education paradigm. As Blesdoe (2015) notes, “the students in our schools are becoming musicians with and without the help of music educators” (p. 21). Students are experiencing music in ways that are not reflected in school, and music programs are excluding a large number of students. Blesdoe (2015) questions “are we comfortable knowing that we send the message that some music and some kinds of participation are right and the rest are wrong?” (p. 21).

As Humpal and Dimmick (1995) stated twenty years ago, changes to music education “will take time and may not always be comfortable, yet it is inevitable” (p. 23). Perhaps Sara and Connie are the first generation of teachers to push forward with change, placing less emphasis on the ideals of traditional Western music, instead focusing on lifelong enjoyment, meaning making, and music as community.

4.4.2 The future

During interviews the participants and I discussed their future practices, and advice they had for me, as a new teacher. Sara mentioned her challenge was connecting “that kind of fun composition figuring-it-out-ness and connect that to band, playing your instrument. I don’t know
how to do that yet. I’m working on it; I’ll get there.” She also discussed the difficulties in straying from the dominant music education paradigm, wanting “more spaces where this kind of teaching is accepted and … just given the same weight as traditional teaching.”

Sara also discussed the challenges new teachers face when carrying out new practices, mentioning the teaching network she formed. She noted how isolated music teachers can feel given how little the staff at her school understand about music: “I think there’s also a bit of mystery about what I do. Because I take this child, who doesn’t know how to play an instrument, or in the traditional band sense, and by the end of the year they can kinda play some songs.” By forming a teaching network, Sara is able to connect with like-minded professionals. Reflecting on her network, she mentioned “I can’t imagine what it would be like to not have that network, you know? When you first start, you don’t know who to talk to.”

Many studies have addressed pre-service and in-service teachers’ perceptions of their abilities and readiness to teach students with special needs (Darrow, 2009 & 1999; Hammel, 2001; Hourigan, 2009; Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Scott, Jellison, Chappell, Standridge, 2007; Pontiff, 2004; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b; Wilson & McCrary, 1996). One of the main findings was that experienced teachers perceived they were better able to meet the needs of students with special needs than new teachers (Pontiff, 2004; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b). Hourigan (2009) sheds light on this finding, noting that since new teachers are often struggling with basic skills such as lesson planning, classroom management, observation, and reflection, placing them in situations outside their comfort zone, such as teaching students with special needs, may cause anxiety.

Sara touched upon creativity as a necessary attribute for music teachers. Many authors have stressed this point (Adamek, 2001; Clements-Cortés 2012; Darrow, 2007; Hillier, 2011;
Humpal & Dimmick, 1995; Standerfer, 2011), in addition to noting teaching students with special needs makes teachers more creative, and better teachers (Darrow, 2012). As Sara stated, “just being with [students with special needs] has made me a better teacher.” As Darrow (2012) notes, the strategies teachers use to support students with special needs can be used to benefit all students.

At the end of each interview I asked participants for advice as a new teacher looking to support the learning of students with special needs in the music classroom. Connie’s advice was discussed under sub-theme 4.3.1: community building, with ideas such as contacting parents and getting to know each student. Sara’s advice encompassed and summarized many of the strategies and ideas discussed throughout the above themes:

First of all, let go of whatever expectation you have of what this is supposed to be like. Let go of the idea of the performer, and the elite, and of valuing product. ‘Cuz that’s not the goal. Get to know your kids. Even if it’s just a couple minutes here and there talking to them, get to know them, see what they like, ask them what they like to do in music. It took me a long time to ask them. I would just assume that, you know, they would like what I like. And they don’t. And it sounds, sounds like something we should all know, but when you’re in it, and you’re just trying to make something from nothing, that’s when you really see, yeah we’re all in this together. Just treat them as equals, treat them as, you know, share the power. Let them have some choice in what they do, let them see that you care and that you’re trying different things. And just be open. If you’re just open about that you love music, and you love teaching, and that you love them, then good things can happen.

Sara, Connie, myself, and many other music educators have a shared vision for the future of music education. We see a place where all students have access to and are engaged in music making and learning, creativity is at the forefront of planning, critical thinking and collaboration are fostered, there is a supportive community of learners, and teachers are continually searching for new and better ways to teach music.
4.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main themes that arose from my interviews: the importance and purpose of music education, the challenge of meeting all students’ needs, strategies used to support students with special needs, and advice for new teachers. Both participants expressed placing higher importance on non-traditional goals such as meaning-making and lifelong enjoyment over traditional goals, such as playing an instrument proficiently. In addition, participants discussed that despite receiving inadequate support, they are developing ways to support the learning of students identified with special needs in their music classrooms. When determining teaching strategies to support students with special needs, both participants’ first consideration was how the strategy would impact the students, taking care to avoid “singling them out.”

The following chapter addresses the implications of these findings in relation to the broader educational community, and my own professional practice, followed by a discussion of recommendations and areas for further research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This study examined how teachers self-describe the ways they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. The findings support current literature regarding music teachers supporting students with special needs. As discussed in Chapter 2, two recent studies conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b) found that most music teachers who teach students with disabilities feel they are lacking support, while also feeling they are able to successfully meet the needs of their students with disabilities. The interviews conducted for the present study, as discussed in Chapter 4, provided insight into the opposing findings of current literature, such as the studies conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b). This chapter will discuss key findings and their significance, implications for various stakeholders, and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

This research study focused on how teachers self-described the ways they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two exemplary teachers who are committed to supporting students with special needs in their classrooms. The findings reinforce current literature discussing privileging core subjects (such as literacy) over music, the lack of understanding about music education and the benefits it has for children, and due to this, a lack of support. Despite these difficulties, participants discussed ways in which they were able to successfully support students identified with special needs indicating their resiliency and determination. The major findings will be discussed in further detail in the following section as they relate to the broad implications.
5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Community

This study found participants received minimal to no educational support. These findings mirror results from VanWeelden and Whipple’s (2014b) study about music teachers’ perceptions of available resources and personnel to support students with special needs in the music classroom. As VanWeelden and Whipple’s study was a widespread survey, it did not allow for participants to speak to why they felt they did not receive adequate support. The current study discovered participants attributed a lack of educational support to subject disconnect, or support personnel’s lack of musical knowledge.

Participants defined subject disconnect as a lack of understanding about music education in general, or a lack of understanding about the differences in supporting students in the music classroom versus a “core” subject classroom. Participants noted this subject disconnect was present amongst persons in higher positions and fellow teachers, leading to participants feeling isolated within their schools. These findings suggest that subject disconnect is one of the main reasons why music teachers receive limited educational support.

A second important finding that was noted in both the extant literature and the present study pertains to experience. Experience is discussed in many articles and studies, noting that more experienced teachers perceived they are able to better support students with special needs than teachers with less experience (Darrow, 2009 & 1999; Hammel, 2001; Hourigan, 2009; Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Scott, Jellison, Chappell, Standridge, 2007; Pontiff, 2004; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a; Wilson & McCrary, 1996). These same studies also discussed the lack of pre-service and in-service support available to teachers regarding supporting students with disabilities specifically in the music classroom.
Both participants discussed how their teaching practices improved as they gained more experience, allowing them to better support students with special needs. One participant explained this as a process of first unlearning what she knew about music education, followed by challenging herself to teach music in a way that was accessible for a greater number of students. Her determination also led her to create a network of music teachers who share similar values, in addition to her actively seeking out resources to better her practice.

These findings imply new music teachers may be vulnerable due to subject disconnect, in addition to possessing a lack of experience supporting students with disabilities. In addition, although novice music teachers may feel alone or vulnerable, it is important to note that experienced music teachers are creating networks in which to share and discuss resources. While these networks may not be easy for new teachers to find, it seems they are important in ensuring new music education practices continue to thrive, allowing music to be accessible for all students, in addition to supporting the well-being of the teacher. This finding will be discussed further under section 5.3 Recommendations.

5.2.2 Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

This study reaffirms my practices of actively seeking support from colleagues and engaging in collaborative planning. After interviewing two experienced music educators, I feel better prepared to not only support students with special needs, but all students in the music classroom. I feel less anxious about not “knowing it all” as a new teacher. Through hearing about other teachers’ journeys I appreciate the time it takes to become an exemplary teacher.

The process of conducting interviews with fellow musicians helped me understand I am not alone in my endeavours to better music education, but there are times I may feel alone during my journey as a new music teacher. I feel better prepared to navigate these difficulties, armed
with a plethora of ideas and resources. In addition, this study has fuelled my motivation to continue questioning and challenging traditional music education paradigms in order to make music education accessible for all students.

I have also gained a new perspective and appreciation for disability, and an understanding of the ways in which society and schools affect students who identify as having a disability. I will take these understandings with me as a teacher in order to advocate for my students to ensure they receive equal educational opportunities. I also strive to learn more about critical disability studies and pedagogies in order to make music education accessible for all students.

This study was my first venture into the field of qualitative research. I now understand the value and importance of qualitative research and research based pedagogy, and how qualitative research contributes to and compliments quantitative research. I have a greater appreciation for researchers, especially those who conduct lengthily studies. As a teacher-researcher I feel empowered to improve my own practice, better support students with special needs, and be an active member in various music educator communities.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I have organized my recommendations into two categories: general recommendations, and recommendations for supporting students with special needs.

General Recommendations

- If a student receives additional support in core subjects, this support should be extended to the music classroom
- Music teachers should actively seek out or create networks for support, and resource and idea sharing
Example networks include the Ontario Music Educator’s Association, Ontario Band Association, Canadian Music Educator’s Association, The Coalition for Music Education in Canada

- There is a need for more Arts-based resources within school boards
- There is a need for more Art-based funding within school boards and individual schools
- There is a need for education about the benefits of music in order for music education to be valued alongside “core” subjects

Recommendations for Supporting Students with Special Needs in the Music Classroom

- Advocate for students who receive IEPs in core subjects to receive an IEP in music
- Plan performance activities with accessible instruments such as auxiliary percussion (e.g., hand bells) and steel pan drums
- Integrate technology into lessons or use technology as the basis of the lesson
- Foster a sense of community through community building activities (e.g., TRIBES)
- Organize students into small groups or pairs to ensure all students’ needs are being met
- Create learning centers (similar to literacy centers) in order to better meet the needs of individual students
- Use visual aids for written notation:
  - Highlight a student’s part directly in their music; highlight important notes
  - Write note names directly on a student’s music
  - Write fingerings directly on a student’s music, using numbers or drawing fingering charts (fingering diagram builder: http://fingering.bretpimentel.com)
- Create clear and fair assessment practices based upon students’ strengths
5.4 Areas for Further Research

This study has shed light on the findings of qualitative studies such as those conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b), stating music educators feel they receive a lack of support, but despite this they are managing to meet the needs of their students with special needs. In addition, my participants provided valuable insight as to how to support students with special needs in the music classroom. However, given the limitations of the Master of Teaching Research Project I was unable to observe these teachers in the classroom. Due to this, I recommend further research be conducted on observing music educators support students with special needs in a school setting. I wonder if there are discrepancies between teachers’ self-descriptions and actual practices.

In addition, this study was one of the few qualitative studies conducted on the topic of how music teachers support students with special needs. To increase knowledge of this topic, perhaps more qualitative studies of this nature should be conducted, ideally with more participants for a broader perspective. I wonder if how music teachers support students with special needs is affected by factors such as the geographic location of the school, teaching experience, and socioeconomic factors.

Another stipulation of the Master of Teaching Research Project was researchers were limited to interviewing education personnel. I am interested to discover how students perceive their needs being met by teachers, how they feel about their music education programs, and how they perceive their needs could be best met.

A final question stemming from my research findings regards technology. I wonder how technology integration or technology based lessons impact success amongst students with special needs.
5.5 Conclusion

This study began as a reaction to two large scale quantitative studies conducted by VanWeelden and Whipple (2014a; 2014b), seeking to better understand how music educators support the learning of students with disabilities in the music classroom through qualitative research methods. The findings suggest in order to better support students with special needs in the music classroom, we must first possess a better understanding of the benefits of music education. If non-music teachers and those in positions of higher authority do not understand the benefits of music education, there is little reason for them to advocate for additional funding or provide support personnel in the music classroom. Based on literature and the findings of this study, current and new music teachers are likely to encounter a general lack of knowledge about music education.

Despite the lack of understanding and support, music educators prevail. Music teachers are finding new and innovative ways to make music education accessible for all students. As with any profession, this study has shown that experience matters. If novice music teachers are able to overcome the many barriers unique to their discipline, they will gain the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully support the learning of students with disabilities in the music classroom.

Music education has the potential to provide students with lifelong enjoyment, a sense of community, and a way of understanding themselves, others, and the world around them. To diminish the importance of music education is to remove ourselves from something so inherent to our being. As author and educator Henry van Dyke stated,

“The woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best.”
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying how elementary school teachers self-describe the way they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Rodney Handelsman. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45 – 60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only person who will have access to my assignment work will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Researcher name: Ilana Manning

Phone number, email: (647) 210 – 4722 manning.ilana@gmail.com

Instructor’s Name: Rodney Handelsman

Phone number: __________________________ Email: rodney.handelsman@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Ilana Manning and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this research study. The aim of the study is to learn how elementary school teachers self-describe the way they support the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom. This interview should last approximately 45 - 60 minutes. I will ask you questions concerning your school, your music background, teaching beliefs and values, and teaching practices. I want to remind you of your right to choose to not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A: Background Information

1. How many years have you worked as a teacher? How many years have you been teaching at this school?
2. What grades and subjects do you currently teach? What grades and subjects have you previously taught?
3. Please describe your school for me (e.g. size, the socioeconomic status of students, program priorities).
4. How many students in each of your music classes would you say have special needs (identified or other)?
   • How do you identify their special needs?
5. What supports do you receive in and out of the classroom (e.g., education assistants, therapists, paraprofessionals, aides)?
   • Please elaborate.
   • Please provide an example of how they support you during classes.

Section B: Why? (Beliefs/Values)

6. What do you see as the purpose of music education in schools?
7. What are your main goals in your music class?
8. If you were the principle of your school and could decide how to program for students with special needs, what would you program?
   a. How would you implement this?
   b. When do you think it would be appropriate to segregate students with special needs? To integrate?
9. What do students identified with special needs require in and from a music program?
10. In your experience, what are some of the greatest barriers faced by students identified with special needs in the music classroom?
11. What do you see as the benefits to having students identified with special needs in the music classroom?
   • For students? Teachers?
   • Please provide an example.
12. What do you see as some of the challenges to having students identified with special needs integrated into the music classroom?
• For students? Teachers?
• Please provide an example.

Section C: What/How? (Teacher Practices)
13. What educational goals do you have for students with special needs in your music classroom?
• What non-musical goals do you have?
14. What instructional approaches and strategies do you use for students identified with special needs?
• Why?
• Do you use these accommodations with all students?
• Have you noticed any outcomes from students using these accommodations?
15. What resources are available to you to support the learning of students identified with special needs? What resources do you use?
• What resources do you find most useful?
• Please provide an example of how you have or might use this resource.
16. What outcome or impact do you observe music education has on students identified with special needs?
17. In addition to teaching strategies, what other factors might impact a teacher’s success in supporting the learning of students identified with special needs in the music classroom?

Section D: Barriers (Challenges)
18. What obstacles or challenges, if any, have you faced when using your pedagogies to support the learning of students with special needs?
• How do you respond to these challenges?
• How might the education system further support you in meeting these challenges?
19. What feedback, if any, have you received from people outside the classroom regarding your music pedagogies in the classroom with students with special needs?

Section E: Next Steps (What Next?)
20. What advice would you give to a new music teacher who is committed to supporting the learning of students identified with special needs in their classroom?

Thank you for your time and participation.