Inclusive Music Teaching: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Emotional Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between music educators' self-efficacy and their implementation of inclusive and equitable teaching practices for students with disabilities. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 174 K-12 certified music educators in New York State. Quantitative measures assessed demographic characteristics, self-perceived teaching self-efficacy, and classroom accommodations, while qualitative responses provided deeper insights into educators' experiences and emotional resilience. Statistical analyses, including chi-square and linear regression, revealed significant associations between educators' self-efficacy, the frequency of implementing required accommodations, and the level of institutional support received. Notably, educators with higher self-efficacy demonstrated greater adaptability, employed differentiated instructional strategies more effectively, and reported stronger commitments to inclusive teaching. Qualitative findings highlighted emotional resilience as critical for managing the challenges associated with special education contexts. Participants reported employing coping strategies like mindfulness, peer support, and reflective practices to navigate emotional demands effectively. Moreover, educators emphasized the necessity of robust support systems, institutional policies promoting collaborative partnerships with special education professionals, and specialized training in emotional intelligence and adaptive teaching methods. The study's outcomes underscore significant gaps in pre-service teacher preparation and ongoing professional development concerning inclusive education practices. Recommendations include integrating emotional competency training, practical experience with special education populations, and structured professional networks into teacher education programs. These findings align with and expand upon existing literature on emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and inclusive education, offering actionable insights for educational policy, teacher preparation, and professional development programs. Future research should broaden geographic and demographic representation, employ longitudinal designs, and further investigate the systemic factors influencing music educators' efficacy and resilience in inclusive settings.

Introduction and Purpose Statement

Music education is uniquely equipped to support neurodiverse students through its inclusive and multisensory learning experiences. Proper preparation and ongoing support for music teachers are essential for fostering self-efficacy and creating equitable learning environments for students with diverse abilities (Grimsby, 2020; Hahn, 2010; Salvador, 2010, 2015; Scott et al., 2007). The engagement of multiple brain areas through music can significantly aid in sensory processing and integration, which is beneficial for neurodiverse students (Hammel, 2001, 2004).

Despite these advantages, many music teachers feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities due to insufficient experience and training (Grimsby, 2020). This gap in both pre-service and in-service training

presents a significant barrier to establishing truly inclusive and accessible education practices (Benedict et al., 2015; Grimsby, 2020). Inadequate preparation of music teachers can severely limit students' access to equitable music education, directly contravening the principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; Salvador, 2015).

Furthermore, music's inherent collaborative and adaptive nature uniquely positions it as an effective medium for inclusive education. Group musical activities necessitate peer interaction, providing neurodiverse students opportunities to develop essential social skills such as cooperation, communication, and emotional regulation. Educators leveraging inclusive music instruction strategies can thus foster not only musical skill development but also vital socio-emotional growth among students with special needs. Despite these opportunities, educators frequently encounter structural and systemic barriers, including limited classroom resources and insufficient administrative support, which further complicate efforts to establish consistently inclusive environments.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this cross-sectional survey study is to investigate how in-service music educators' experiences and self-perceived teaching self-efficacy relate to the strategies they use to ensure equitable access and support for students with disabilities. Understanding this relationship can inform teacher-preparation programs and professional development aimed at fostering more inclusive music classrooms (Grimsby, 2020; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). The guiding research question is:

In what ways do music educators' experiences and perceptions of self-efficacy relate to their approaches to providing equitable access and support for special education students?

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which posits that individuals' beliefs in their ability to execute specific behaviors are critical for achieving desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977). In the context of education, self-efficacy refers to teachers' perceptions of their competence in effectively teaching and supporting their students, especially those with special needs. This aligns with the research of Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) and Gibson and Dembo (1984), which emphasize the role of teachers' self-efficacy in shaping their instructional practices and influencing student outcomes.

Educational policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have been pivotal in promoting the educational rights of students with disabilities, addressing issues of segregation, and advocating for accessibility (Darrow, 2010). However, many music educators still report feeling inadequately prepared to teach students with special needs, revealing a significant gap between policy intentions and actual teacher preparedness (de l'Etoile, 2005; Hahn, 2010; Hourigan, 2007; Salvador, 2010; Scott et al., 2007). Closing this gap is crucial to ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have equitable access to quality music education. The historical struggle for inclusive practices underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating disability as a fundamental aspect of diversity within educational settings (Darrow, 2010).

The development of inclusive music education aligns with broader trends in educational equity and culturally responsive pedagogy. Emphasizing inclusion necessitates an ongoing critical examination of pedagogical practices and educator biases. According to Staats (2016), implicit biases can significantly affect educators' expectations and interactions with students, directly influencing academic and social outcomes. Hence, effective teacher training must encompass comprehensive strategies for recognizing and mitigating implicit biases to ensure equitable educational experiences. In the context of music education, addressing these biases not only enhances teaching effectiveness but also fosters a more culturally sensitive and inclusive classroom climate.

Methods
Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional online survey design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Dillman et al., 2014). A single questionnaire combined Likert-type items with brief open-ended prompts to enrich

interpretation. Quantitative responses were analysed with descriptive statistics and regression techniques, while the open-ended comments underwent reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board (IRB# STUDY00007373), ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Participants

The study focused on in-service music teachers from kindergarten through twelfth grade in New York State, certified in music for K-12. Convenience sampling was used for recruitment via listservs of county and state music education organizations (Fink, 2017). IRB approval ensured ethical conduct. The survey captured demographic data, including age, gender, educational background, and teaching experience, which are summarized in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for complete responders by gender identity, age, ethnicity/race, highest degree, and years employed as a music educator

Characteristic	Frequencies	% (*N* = 174)
Gender Identity		
Female	68	39.1%
Male	101	58.0%
Not Reported	5	2.9%
Age		
20-29	30	17.2%
30-39	85	48.9%
40-49	47	27.0%
50-59	1	0.6%
60 or older	11	6.3%
Ethnicity/Race		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	6	3.4%
Asian	7	4.0%
Black or African American	2	1.1%
Hispanic or Latino	6	3.4%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	1.1%
White	147	84.5%
Other	1	0.6%
Not Reported	3	1.7%
Highest Degree		
Undergraduate	79	45.4%
Master's Degree	61	35.1%
Doctorate	30	17.2%
Not Reported	4	2.3%
Total Years Employed as Music Educator		
1-5	51	29.3%
6-10	90	51.7%
11-15	6	3.4%
16-20	3	1.7%
21 or more	24	13.8%

Table 2

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Descriptive statistics for complete responders for school demographics and student demographics and population

Characteristic	Frequencies	% (*N* = 174)
Total number of years employed in current school district		
1-5		
6-10	111	63.8%
11-15	24	13.8%
16-20	9	5.2%
21 or more	2	1.1%
Not Reported	15	8.6%
	13	7.5%
Type of area in which school district is located		
Urban	70	40.2%
Suburban	66	37.9%
Rural	38	21.8%
Socioeconomic status of majority of students		
Low-SES	48	27.6%
Mid-SES	83	47.7%
High-SES	43	24.7%
Grade Level Taught		
K-5	50	28.7%
6-8	75	43.1%
9-12	49	28.2%

Data Collection

A survey, informed by prior research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Grimsby, 2020; Hahn, 2010; Hammel, 2001; Hourigan, 2009), included sections on coursework, teacher competencies, demographics, and school characteristics. Quantitative data covered demographics, district characteristics, teaching levels, and self-efficacy. Qualitative data were collected through eight open-ended prompts, such as: 'Reflecting on your experiences, describe any particular situations or challenges that significantly shaped your understanding and approach towards teaching students with special needs,' and 'Considering your confidence, preparedness, and practical skills, describe your ability to teach students with special needs.' These items were informed by prior research on teacher self-efficacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998) and designed to elicit reflective narratives about educators' preparedness and inclusive practices. The survey consisted of 30 items in total, with 22 closed-format and eight open-ended questions, and required approximately 15 minutes to complete. The eight open-ended questions are listed in Appendix A. The survey, distributed via Qualtrics from November 2 to November 23, 2023, obtained 174 complete responses.

Data Analysis

Qualitative responses to the eight open-ended survey items were analyzed through multiple coding cycles following the Data Analysis Spiral framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In Vivo and descriptive coding were used in the first cycle to remain close to participants' voices and to categorize responses into meaningful themes (Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). A second cycle of emotion coding captured the affective dimensions of educators' experiences, leading to the development of a continuum of emotional responses. In the third cycle, deductive coding, guided by Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001), aligned emergent themes with constructs of self-efficacy, behavior, and environment. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies included triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data, maintenance of an audit trail, memoing during coding, reflexive awareness of researcher positionality (Peshkin, 1988), and peer debriefing with colleagues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This iterative, theory-driven approach ensured both depth and rigor in interpreting educators' narratives.

Results/Findings

The findings are structured to align with the guiding research question, integrating both quantitative results and qualitative narratives. This thematic organization allows for a comprehensive exploration of each research question, providing a nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

In what ways do music educators' experiences and perceptions of self-efficacy relate to their approaches to providing equitable access and support for special education students?

Self-Efficacy and Inclusive Teaching Practices

Music educators' sense of self-efficacy significantly influences their ability to implement inclusive and equitable teaching practices for special education students. The study revealed varying levels of understanding and application of students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Approximately 31.6% of participants reported understanding IEPs 'Sometimes,' while 27.6% reported understanding them 'Most of the time'. Regarding incorporating required accommodations, 29.9% did so 'Most of the time,' and 20.7% 'Always'. This highlights a gap in consistent application and comprehensive understanding, indicating areas for improvement in educator training. A chi-square test revealed a significant association between the integration of students' accommodations and the overall support available for educators ($\chi^2(16) = 82.07$, $p < .001$; see Table 3).

Table 3

Chi-Square Test of Independence Between How Frequently Teachers Incorporated Required Accommodations and Overall Level of Support Received

		Overall Level of Support					
		None	**A little**	**Moderate**	**A lot**	**Extensive**	**Total**
How Frequently Teachers Incorporated Required Accommodations	Never	4	1	0	1	0	6
	Sometimes	0	8	10	12	1	31
	About half the time	2	7	19	13	8	49
	Most of the time	0	14	19	12	7	52
	Always	1	10	6	8	11	36
Total		**7**	**40**	**54**	**46**	**27**	**174**

Additionally, a linear regression analysis indicated a significant relationship between the percentage of special education students in classrooms and educators' self-efficacy levels ($F(1, 38) = 4.365$, $p < .05$; see Table 4). Higher percentages of special education students predicted lower self-efficacy scores, emphasizing the need for better preparation and support. Qualitative data revealed educators' proactive strategies and challenges in fostering inclusive environments. For example, one educator shared, "I feel extremely comfortable teaching students with special needs... I read all the IEPs of the students I teach... to ensure I am supporting the non-musical goals of my students while they are in class." However, others expressed concerns about inadequate support systems: "I believe it is highly important for the right and appropriate supports to be in place outside of music to support [these] children."

Table 4

Linear Regression of Self-Efficacy and Percentage of Formally Identified Students

			95% CI			
Variable	**Beta**	**SE**	**LL**	**UL**	**β**	**p**
(Constant)	3.292	.342	2.599	3.985		<.001
Percentage of Formally	-.022	.011	-.043	-.001	-.321	.043

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| Identified |
| Students |

Overcoming Challenges Through Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience plays a critical role in how music educators navigate the challenges of teaching special education students. Descriptive statistical analysis showed moderate levels of support for managing the emotional demands of teaching special education students. Results revealed average ratings of 3.14 for administrative support, 3.0 for planning/preparation time, and 3.26 for overall support, reflecting the need for stronger support systems. Educators shared varied emotional responses to teaching special education students, ranging from initial apprehension to feelings of powerlessness. One educator noted, "It made me nervous to have students with special needs and a variety of students with a variety of needs in my classroom." Despite these challenges, emotional resilience emerged as a key factor in effective teaching. Resilient educators exhibited greater flexibility, empathy, and patience. One participant emphasized, "Patience—working with students with disabilities requires teachers and support staff to be patient... Joy—remembering to find instances of joy when they complete a task!" The importance of supportive systems, such as collaborative networks, was also highlighted. One educator stated, "As a teacher, I often feel the need for emotional support, especially when dealing with the complex needs of my special education students." These relationships provided essential emotional support and helped educators navigate the challenges of special education.

Bridging Self-Efficacy with Equitable Access

The level of self-efficacy among music educators is closely tied to their perceived effectiveness in providing equitable access to education for special education students. Educators with higher self-efficacy were more likely to implement inclusive and adaptive strategies. They viewed equitable education as a fundamental aspect of their role and were committed to addressing barriers to access and participation. Participants emphasized the importance of professional development opportunities that enhance self-efficacy in implementing equitable practices. Training programs focused on inclusive teaching strategies, disability awareness, and collaboration with special education professionals were seen as instrumental in building confidence and competence. The qualitative findings underscored the importance of integrating self-efficacy enhancement strategies into professional development initiatives and equity training programs for music educators. By fostering educators' self-efficacy and advocacy skills, institutions can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for special education students.

In addition to formal training and institutional support, informal peer networks and professional learning communities emerged as vital elements for boosting educators' self-efficacy. Participants frequently highlighted the role of mentorship and collaboration with experienced colleagues as pivotal to their professional growth. Informal networks provided emotional reassurance, pedagogical advice, and practical insights into implementing adaptive teaching methods effectively. One respondent noted, 'Collaborating with other music educators has greatly increased my confidence and given me new ideas for engaging students with diverse abilities.' Such peer interactions underline the importance of cultivating robust professional networks to bolster teacher self-efficacy and inclusive practice.

In summary, the findings highlight the critical role of self-efficacy and emotional resilience in shaping music educators' approaches to providing equitable access and support for special education students. Enhanced training, support systems, and professional development are essential for empowering educators to effectively meet the diverse needs of all students.

Significance of the Study

The research explored the relationship between music educators' self-efficacy and their commitment to providing equitable access and support for special education students. Key areas included the impact of self-efficacy on inclusive teaching practices, the role of emotional resilience in overcoming educational challenges, and the link between educators' confidence and their effectiveness in ensuring equitable education. These themes highlight the complexity of teaching in special education and the importance of emotional competence, resilience, and a strong sense of self-efficacy in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Findings underscore the profound impact of emotional competencies, self-efficacy, and the identification of gaps in pre-service preparation on the teaching practices of music educators, especially in special education contexts. Enhanced emotional awareness, resilience, and empathy are crucial for developing adaptive and inclusive teaching strategies. These competencies enable educators to effectively address the diverse needs of students with special needs, fostering stronger teacher-student relationships and enhancing teaching efficacy. Integrating emotional intelligence into teaching practices and emphasizing soft skills in teacher education can significantly improve the effectiveness of music educators in special education settings. Addressing gaps in pre-service preparation by increasing awareness of implicit biases and integrating practical experiences with special education students can improve educators' self-efficacy and readiness to implement inclusive and equitable teaching strategies.

The results align with and extend existing literature on emotional competencies, self-efficacy, and teacher preparation. Emotional competencies enhance teaching efficacy, echoing research by Smith et al. (2019) and Jones et al. (2013). This study extends Fernandes et al. (2021) by detailing the specific emotional competencies critical in special education contexts. It confirms that self-efficacy is significantly enhanced by soft skills training, consistent with Maren et al. (2021) and Pachauri & Yadav (2014). The gaps identified in pre-service music teacher preparation align with Devine et al. (2012) and Staats (2016), highlighting the need for training programs to address implicit biases and foster equity. Emphasis on adaptive and inclusive teaching strategies is supported by Hargreaves (1998) and Pavlidou et al. (2022), illustrating the application of emotional competencies in music education. Additionally, the importance of ongoing professional development resonates with Darling-Hammond (2020) and Hattie (2003), who advocate for reflective and adaptive professional development practices.

Findings have practical implications for pre-service training programs, in-service professional development, and classroom practices in music education. Pre-service programs should integrate modules on emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and communication, alongside a mandatory focus on inclusive education. Workshops on teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptive thinking should be incorporated. Ongoing professional development should include workshops on emotional well-being, stress management, resilience, and specialized workshops on inclusive practices. Educators should be trained in adaptive teaching strategies, building emotional intelligence in students, and designing inclusive curriculums reflecting diverse musical genres and cultures. The findings also call attention to policy implications, underscoring the need for educational administrators and policymakers to prioritize resources and professional development focused explicitly on inclusion and emotional competencies. Policies emphasizing collaborative professional networks, targeted emotional support mechanisms, and structured, ongoing training can significantly elevate teaching efficacy and promote inclusive environments in music education.

Limitations of the study include a potentially non-representative sample, reliance on listservs for survey distribution, and the self-reported nature of the data. Future research should broaden the scope by involving educators from various regions, implementing longitudinal studies, and diversifying research methodologies to include qualitative approaches. Key areas for future research include exploring emotional factors in teaching special needs students, identifying gaps in pre-service preparation, and understanding the impact of personal and professional experiences on self-efficacy.

This research contributes significantly to understanding the factors influencing the effectiveness of music education for students with special needs. By emphasizing the importance of emotional competence, self-efficacy, and preparedness, the study contributes insights that may inform efforts to enhance inclusivity and impact in music education. These findings underscore the necessity of integrating emotional intelligence training, specialized instruction on inclusive teaching methods, and ongoing professional development into music education curricula. The implications extend to policy, practice, and future research, advocating for a holistic approach to teacher training and professional development to foster educational environments where every student can thrive.

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Appendix A
Qualitative Open-Ended Items from Survey Instrument

5. Reflecting on your experiences, describe any particular situations or challenges that significantly shaped your understanding and approach towards teaching students with special needs.

6. Considering your confidence, preparedness, and practical skills, describe your ability to teach students with special needs. Provide specific examples where possible.

11. What in-service or professional development topic(s) do you think would be most useful in improving music educators' work with students with special needs:

12. Based on all of your additional professional experiences, how would you describe your ability to teach students with special needs?

17. Describe any specific challenges you've encountered while trying to integrate accommodations or adaptations for students with special needs. How did these challenges impact the learning environment and your teaching approach?

19. Identify and elaborate on specific knowledge areas, skills, or strengths that you perceive to be vital when including students with special needs in your music classroom. Provide instances or scenarios where these competencies were particularly crucial.

20. Discuss any gaps or specific topics in pre-service preparation that, from your perspective, could further enhance a K-12 music educator's ability to support students with special needs.

21. Reflecting on your experiences, describe the types of training, support, or practices that could better equip music educators in accommodating and teaching students with special needs effectively.