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Music Education for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder in a Full-Inclusion Context

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Abstract

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore the experiences of two students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a full-inclusion music education context and how those experiences aligned with stakeholder perspectives regarding the role of music education for this population. Three themes emerged from the data: The Not-So-Atypical Benefits, A Focus on Strengths, and A Culture of Inclusivity. Factors related to the educators and school community had impact on these students' experiences and are further explored through the lens of an ethic of hospitality. Documenting educational practices and elucidating the beliefs of stakeholders (including music educators, the special education team, administration, and parents) regarding music education for students with ASD in an inclusion setting may offer insights into best practices while interrogating perceptions regarding unique benefits for this population.

Keywords

students with disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, inclusive music education, multiple-case study, ethic of hospitality

As the first graders come filing into the room for general music, Elise Schneider begins to chant. The students join her as they find their way to a circle on the floor. Luke moves with purpose to Elise's side to tell her—as he does each Tuesday—that

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"It's double music day!" because he has his viola lesson today after music class. He then moves carefully to his spot and sits quietly with his legs crossed. Malik comes into the room with the last few students. His paraprofessional, Amelia, trails behind him, allowing Malik to find his own path to the circle. He takes the long route, and eventually his friend Tegan quietly calls to him and pats the ground next to her spot to indicate where he should sit. Elise starts to sing "Oh, My" and the class echoes. Malik's face lights up as he enthusiastically joins Elise, singing, "No more pie." He knows every word and after a couple of lines called together, Elise drops out and lets Malik lead the song. The class easily switches to following Malik's lead. He stumbles on a line, and Elise gently primes the lyrics for him. Malik picks up the cue and completes the song. The focus of the class returns to Elise as she thanks Malik for helping her lead the song. Elise chants, "Personal space, please, at a slow pace," and the class recognizes the cue to move into personal spaces in the room for a movement activity. As the opening strains of Saint Saën's "The Swan" from *Carnival of the Animals* begin, Luke assumes a serious face and raises his arms much like a conductor on a podium. He follows the movements Elise suggests while occasionally providing his own interpretation as if he were leading the lines of the cello. Elise notes "how musical" Luke is moving and encourages his classmates to follow some of his examples.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that results in impairments of social communication and interaction as well as the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) reported that 1 in 59 children in the United States is on the autism spectrum (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Due to the prevalence of this neurodevelopmental disorder, it is likely that most educators will have students with autism in their classrooms. While the music classroom is often one of the first inclusion placements for students with disabilities (Adamek & Darrow, 2018), preservice music teacher education program may not prepare teachers for working with this population adequately (Salvador, 2010; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b). Scholars have contributed practitioner literature (e.g., Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Hammel & Hourigan, 2020), offering suggestions and strategies for teaching students with ASD, but empirical evidence of what music educators are doing in practice is largely missing from the literature (Salvador, 2015). Further, in their book, *Music in Special Education*, Adamek and Darrow (2018) indicated that the purpose for the participation of students with ASD and other diagnoses in music classes may be social or musical, yet there is a lack of research illuminating the beliefs about this among critical stakeholders.

To address these gaps, this study examined the experiences of two students with ASD in their school-based music education programs and how those experiences aligned with stakeholder perspectives regarding the role of music education for this population. Documenting educational practices and elucidating the beliefs of stakeholders (including music educators, the special education team, the administration, and parents) regarding music education for students with ASD in an inclusion setting offers insights into best practices and interrogates perceptions regarding unique

benefits for this population. This study provides insight for music teacher preparation and professional development pertaining to work with students with ASD.

Review of Literature

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a key piece of legislation that guarantees a free, appropriate public education and ensures special education and related services for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Another tenet of this legislation mandates students should be educated in the least restrictive environment, which means that to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities should be educated with peers without a disability. In a review examining music research in inclusive settings since the passage of this legislation in 1975, Jellison and Draper (2015) identified just 22 studies, only 11 of which were conducted in music classrooms.[1] These researchers defined inclusive school settings as "environments in public or private schools (e.g., classrooms, school grounds) where students with disabilities and typically developing students of the same or different age come into direct contact with one another" (Jellison & Draper, 2015, p. 327). In another review related to IDEA since 1975, Jones (2015) noted only five studies had examined the experiences of the students with disabilities in those music classrooms. Most of the research in the field has focused on areas peripheral to the education of students with disabilities, examining preservice preparation for teaching this population (Grimsby, 2019; Salvador, 2010; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b; Whipple & VanWeelden, 2012), the perceptions of preservice (Bartolome, 2013, 2017; Hourigan, 2009; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2005, 2007) and in-service music educators (Darrow, 1999; Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Scott et al., 2007; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014a), and the perceptions of and impact on typically developing peers (Darrow & Johnson, 1994; Jellison, 2002; Jellison et al., 1984).

In the first study in the field of music education to investigate instructional techniques in integrated music classrooms, Jellison et al. (1984) found that experiences in a music classroom contributed to positive social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Researchers in subsequent studies examined the inclusion of students with disabilities in preschool (Humpal, 1991), the on-task behavior of one student with a mild cognitive disability in music classes and music therapy sessions (Jellison & Gainer, 1995), the impact on the on-task behavior of typically developing peers (Jellison, 2002), and the use of music technology to enhance the musical creativity for a student with a cognitive disability (McCord, 2004).

Salvador (2015) conducted a case study of one music educator's practice with students with cognitive impairments in an inclusion and a self-contained setting. The teacher's practice and goals for the two students changed depending on the context to balance their social and academic needs. Salvador documented the benefits of the curricular choices and class modifications and concluded that modification of musical activities in inclusion settings may have greater benefits for this population than unmodified social inclusion as it allowed for student success both academically and socially. Salvador posed, "Is the purpose of music education in elementary schools

to operate as an arena for socialization with age peers, or to increase the musical skills and abilities of each individual student?" (p. 170). With only six studies in 36 years pertaining to the experiences of students with disabilities in music classrooms, there is little empirical evidence of what is happening in practice to help answer that question. Further, no research to date has examined experiences specific to students with ASD.

To address this, the purpose of this multiple-case study (Yin, 2018) was to explore the experiences of two students with ASD in a full-inclusion music education context. The following questions guided this research: (1) What are the music education experiences of these two students with ASD? (2) What do music educators, special education teachers, administrators, and parents perceive as the role of music education for students with ASD in a full-inclusion context? and (3) How does the approach to inclusive learning among the faculty and staff at this school contribute to the music education of students with ASD?

Theoretical Framework

An ethic of hospitality (Ruitenberg, 2011) is an ethical frame based on the work of Jacques Derrida that posits that *hospitality* occurs when a host gives an unconditional gift: welcoming a guest into their home (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000). The host prepares a place in their home for the guest without any plan for arrival. Derrida expounded, "The other may come, or he may not. I don't want to programme him, but rather to leave a place for him to come if he comes. It is the ethic of hospitality" (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001, p. 83). In traditional notions of hospitality, a guest is indebted to their host for the gift of welcome. Derrida countered that it is the host who is indebted to the guest because without their arrival, there would be no gift to give.

Ruitenberg (2011) connected this theory to education, stating,

> In every educational situation a teacher is confronted with a student who is fundamentally ungraspable, and the ethical challenge is to respond to this student in a way that lets her or him be in otherness, that does not seek to recognize or otherwise close the gap with this singular other. (p. 32)

Ruitenberg made a distinction between an ethic of hospitality and traditional notions of inclusion, which assume a majority "whole" into which students with disabilities must assimilate. Ruitenberg continued that in contrast, hospitality accepts that the arrival of these guests (students with disabilities) may change the space into which they are received. It is not enough to prepare for the arrival of the guest; the gift of hospitality is in welcoming the guest and their differences without attempting to assimilate them toward a norm.

Early in data analysis, emergent findings aligned with this idea. I applied an ethic of hospitality as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which educational stakeholders were well poised to offer hospitality and how the arrival of

students with ASD and other diagnoses influenced and expanded the school and musical community.

Site and Context

Tower Elementary is a full-inclusion K–5 school that offers general music, choir, and a strings/orchestra program before and during the school day for all students beginning in first grade.[2] The school is in a small suburban community in the Midwest. Most of the students and their families live in the surrounding neighborhood. Tower has just over 450 students in Grades K–5, of which approximately 8% receive free or reduced-price lunch.[3] Eighty-five students have a 504 plan or individualized education program (IEP), and five have a diagnosis of ASD. As a full-inclusion school, Tower has no self-contained special education classrooms. All students with IEPs are included in classrooms with peers without disabilities for the majority of the school day. The team of school professionals charged with developing the students' IEPs determined this to be the least restrictive environment for these students.

General music is offered for all students beginning in first grade at Tower Elementary. Additionally, any child who is interested can participate in choir and begin on a string instrument starting that same year. The school has both a beginning and an advanced orchestra that students may participate in after developing their skills in individual and small-group lessons. A similar model is used for students who wish to learn to play a band instrument beginning in fourth grade.

In 2019, the school district was nationally recognized for the second time by the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) as one of the Best Communities for Music Education in the country, a designation honoring the district's "exceptionally high commitment and access to music education." The wealth of available musical opportunities starting in first grade reflects this commitment. While some of the ensembles require more advanced musicianship, there is a place for any student who wishes to participate in music regardless of ability. Many of the students participate in multiple choirs in combination with the strings program and band.

There are three choirs at Tower that meet for 30 min before the school day begins (Monday, Tuesdays, and Thursdays): Gioso, a preparatory choir for any students in Grades 1 to 5; Concert Choir, an advanced ensemble for students in Grades 3 to 5 who have sung previously in Gioso and have demonstrated musicianship and strong leadership skills; and Comunità, an inclusive choir that was modeled after a local reverse-inclusion high school choir. In communication with parents, Comunità (pronounced "co-mu-ni-Ta," Italian for "community") is described as

> a strong community of joyful voices where everyone is welcome. Students sing and use movement, instruments, and other materials to work together towards a common goal. Students take ownership by helping to decide which songs will be performed in concert. (E. Schneider, personal communication, April, 2019)

In a reverse-inclusion ensemble, the goals and activities are tailored to fit the needs of the students with disabilities (Lapka, 2015). Typically developing peers participate

as mentors providing musical and social support. In Comunità, membership is drawn from all grade levels and abilities and includes students with disabilities, students who present with social or behavioral challenges in school, and typically developing peers. At the start of the school year, each student in the ensemble is matched with a peer buddy. Some students are drawn together naturally, and some students are paired based on the director's knowledge of the students and who she feels "would be a good match." Although many of the students with disabilities were paired with a typically developing peer, the director also nurtured preexisting relationships. She explained, "It was definitely more about who they clicked with. It changes from year to year and evolves as I see who is in the group and what their needs are."

In the 2018–2019 school year, both Malik and Luke were in first grade. Malik is a charismatic and enthusiastic musician who loves to sing, dance, and lead songs in general music class and with Comunità. In his first-grade year, Malik's verbal communication was limited and at times he needed redirection to stay focused on class activities. He was supported by paraprofessional Amelia Nicholas throughout the school day, including in music class and before-school Comunità rehearsals. Luke is quiet and exact. He enjoys musical movement and conducting and began playing viola in the Tower strings program at the start of his first-grade year. Luke did not require additional assistance in the general classroom or in music. Both Malik and Luke have a diagnosis of ASD and were served that year by a special education team led by Sylvia Bennett, a learning behavior specialist. The boys' first-grade class was cotaught by Sylvia and the first-grade teacher to support the learning needs of both students.

Malik and Luke attended a twice-weekly 30-min general music class with Elise Schneider, who has been at Tower Elementary since 2006. At the time of this study, Elise was in her 26th year of teaching, 15 of which were in elementary general and choral music. She is a trained Kodály teacher, and she uses the methods of John Feierabend.[4] Elise teaches general music for students in first through fifth grades and directs the three before-school choirs. She did not have any preservice training in teaching students with disabilities and admits that she has had limited experiences with this population—particularly students with ASD. What experiences Elise gained were largely through trial and error as more students with disabilities began enrolling at Tower Elementary. In 2017, she started Comunità in response to what she viewed as a need for an ensemble offering that encouraged participation for students with disabilities.

Each week, Luke had a 30-min viola lesson with one first-grade peer and another 30-min group lesson with five other beginning viola students. Ann Wachowski, his viola teacher, has more than 35 years of teaching experience and grew the orchestral program over her 32 years in the Tower School District. She is primarily a middle school orchestra director, but a retirement at the elementary school in 2018 gave her the opportunity to teach Suzuki strings at Tower Elementary part-time in the 2018–2019 school year. Ann is a certified Suzuki teacher who also did not have any preservice training in working with students with disabilities. She shared that she gained "vast experience" on the job teaching students with ASD throughout her years of

service. Ann related several stories about individual students with this diagnosis and how she learned that each was different, just like all her students. She explained, "String teaching is so individual that it doesn't really matter to me if a kid has anxiety, depression, or autism; you just take them where they are that day, and you try to push them to the next level."

Method

Case study is used for an in-depth investigation into a phenomenon within a real-world context (Yin, 2018). Multiple-case study is used to gain insight into one issue or question by selecting multiple cases to illustrate the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, two student participants with a primary diagnosis of ASD were selected as the cases. These two cases were selected because the boys were in the same classroom and had such similar music opportunities they were believed to be "literal replications" of the experiences of music education for students with ASD in this inclusive context (Yin, 2018). I was not aware of the school district's outstanding commitment to music education when choosing this site. It was chosen because of the receptiveness of administration to research with students with ASD; the willingness of faculty and parents to allow my observations of the teachers and students in music class, lessons, and ensembles; and an openness among all participants to be interviewed. I focused this study on the students' experiences and their stakeholders' perceptions, allowing for the collection of extensive details about the individuals and the site for the study of the particularity and complexity of the case (Stake, 1995).

A primary diagnosis of ASD was required for participation in this study, so both Malik and Luke were recruited by school personnel prior to my contact with their families to protect confidentiality. During the 2018–2019 school year, I spent 27 weeks (30 hr) observing the two students in general music classes, viola lessons, choral rehearsals, and ensemble performances (Spradley, 2016b).[5] I conducted eight semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 2016a) for a total of 209 min with the music educators, the principal, the special education team, the two students, and their families (see Table 1). I interviewed Elise Schneider, both students' general music educator, three times: in the first semester of observations, at the end of the school year, and following data collection during the later stages of analysis. Initially, I focused on developing an understanding of Elise's experience with teaching students with ASD and her expectations for these two students. In follow-up interviews, I inquired into questions that arose in observations and discussed emergent themes from iterative data analyses. I also conducted interviews with Ann Wachowski, Luke's viola teacher, and Maggie Anderson, the school principal. Per the request of the school district administration, I interviewed Sylvia Bennett, the boys' learning behavior specialist, and Malik's primary paraprofessional, Amelia Nicholas, together. Both of Malik's parents, Ahmed and Neima Taleb, were interviewed with Malik. Luke declined to be formally interviewed but was present and offered some input when I interviewed his mother, Melissa Jenkins. I also collected material culture, including curriculum materials, lesson plans, email communication with Elise, and concert programs.

Table 1. Tower Elementary School Participants and Interview Count.

Participant	Number of interviews	Number of minutes
Malik Taleb, first-grade student	1	33
Ahmed and Neima Taleb, Malik's parents		
Amelia Nicholas, Malik's paraprofessional		
Sylvia Bennett		
Malik's and Luke's learning behavior specialist	1	35
Elise Schneider	3	Interview 1: 31
Malik's and Luke's general music educator		Interview 2: 30
		Interview 3: 33
Maggie Anderson	1	32
Tower Elementary principal		
Luke Jenkins, first-grade student[a]	1	
Melissa Jenkins, Luke's mother		20 min
Ann Wachowski, Luke's viola teacher	1	28 min

[a]Luke declined to be formally interviewed but was present and contributed during the interview with his mother.

Analysis took the form of open and closed coding (Miles et al., 2014), and the full data set was read repeatedly to identify emergent themes. I first examined data related to each participant, completing descriptive and in vivo coding (Miles et al., 2014) on family interview data and field notes pertaining to the students. The second round of coding utilized the same processes on the full data set of interview transcripts, field texts, and material culture. I used a code map to visualize and examine the list of emergent codes and cluster them into themes (Emerson et al., 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Last, to achieve focused coding, I reviewed the full data set again to extract emergent themes and identify evidence to support my interpretations.

Trustworthiness

To increase trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2017), my primary validation strategy was prolonged engagement and observation in the field. I completed fieldwork in the school for the duration of the 2018–2019 academic year. In doing this, I became a regular fixture in weekly general music classes, which allowed me to develop rapport with participants and minimized behavior changes due to the novelty of my presence. I utilized member checking throughout analysis to determine the "accuracy and credibility" of the emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 261), and I asked teachers, parents, and the administrator to confirm, challenge, and extend my interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data sources in multiple rounds of coding and repeated cycles through data from interviews, observations, and material culture analyses. I also sought feedback from peer debriefers who were familiar with music education for students with disabilities as I attempted to represent the experiences of

these students in this music program and interpret stakeholder understandings and beliefs about those experiences. This research was reviewed and approved by the Northwestern University Institutional Review Board.

Limitations

The nature of this qualitative study limits its generalizability to naturalistic transfers (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I made every effort to include rich descriptions so readers may make logical connections as to how the findings might transfer to other contexts. It is important that I acknowledge my positionality as a former elementary general music educator for students with ASD. Although this could have affected my focus of attention in observations and interpretation of the data, I utilized member checking throughout the research process to limit my biases from influencing my interpretations.

While my regular attendance in general music classes lessened the novelty of my presence, it may have influenced Elise's teaching and the students' participation. Luke was extraordinarily focused and seemed unfazed by my being in class, rarely taking notice of me throughout the data collection period. Malik, however, was particularly interested in my presence and would look to me when reacting to class events and occasionally break away from activities to try to talk with me. To overcome this, I established a routine to welcome him into the classroom and to say goodbye at the end of class as well as a nonverbal cue to redirect his attention to the teacher when needed.

It is important to me to work collaboratively on research with individuals with disabilities. However, Luke declined a request to be interviewed, and Malik had limitations with verbal communication, so their direct contributions as stakeholders are minimal. I have included their voices when possible and provide observational data related to their experiences throughout the findings in an effort to include their perspectives within this document. Despite these limitations, my persistence in the field enabled me to build and maintain a strong and enduring relationship with the participants. This gives me confidence that the student participation was authentic and that participants were open and honest in sharing their perspectives.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis: The Not-So-Atypical Benefits, A Focus on Strengths, and A Culture of Inclusivity. The first emergent theme highlights the perceived benefits of music education for Luke and Malik according to the various stakeholders. As I examined the role of music education for these two students, it became clear that factors related to the educators and school community had notable impact on their experiences. The second and third themes explore aspects of the teaching and learning environment that influenced the music education experiences of Luke and Malik. Factors related to the music educators' approaches are explored in A Focus on Strengths, while A Culture of Inclusivity and its subthemes examine the influence of the school community's philosophy toward inclusion. These themes

and their subthemes contribute to an understanding of how the experiences of these two students with ASD compare to their typically developing peers and the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding the role of music education for students with ASD in a full-inclusion context. These findings also highlight how the approaches of the educators and school community cultivated a musical environment where Malik and Luke were able to thrive alongside their typically developing peers.

The Not-So-Atypical Benefits

Stakeholders noted a variety of benefits of musical experiences for Malik and Luke. One of the first things all of Malik's family and teachers expressed was his love for music and singing. Malik shared, "I like to sing and jump and turn yourself around" (a reference to a dance in general music the week of our interview). Malik's father, Ahmed, spoke of how motivated Malik was to participate: "He loves it. It's kind of early to wake up in the morning, but for choir, he'll make the time." Amelia, Malik's paraprofessional, shared, "I noticed pretty early on that Malik loved music class and singing. Sometimes he was singing when he wasn't supposed to, so I encouraged Ms. Schneider [Malik's music teacher] to reach out to his parents so he could join Comunità." In addition to his structured music classes, Amelia used music with him throughout the day for relaxation, for motivation, and for the joy of singing together. Focus was another benefit for Malik. His father, Ahmed, explained, "When he's singing or listening to music, he's definitely focused. That's been one of his challenges in a lot of subjects: He has a hard time focusing and tends to be distracted very easily." Sylvia, the special education teacher, shared a story of Malik in a school assembly for a string ensemble: "The concert was long. Malik was in the front as far away from the doors as possible. Sitting still can be really hard for him, but he was fabulous. I mean you could just tell he loved it."

Similarly, when discussing benefits of his musical experiences, Luke's mother, Melissa, noted that the discipline and structure of learning the viola was motivating and appealed to Luke's nature. She laughed, saying, "I don't have to ask him to practice; he does it all on his own." Ann, Luke's viola instructor, highlighted Luke's pride and confidence: "When I say, 'Hey, could you play your latest song?' Luke will say, 'Of course!' He prides himself. I hope he never loses that confidence." Elise, Luke's general music teacher, noted his enthusiasm for music, pointing out that he always reminded her when he had a lesson. "That viola lesson is the highlight of his week," remarked Sylvia, his special education teacher.

For both of these students, the benefits identified by all the stakeholders were similar to benefits for any student in music: the joy and pleasure of the musical experience, confidence and pride in accomplishments, structure and discipline, motivation, and focus (Droscher, 2014). I observed little difference between the experiences of Malik and Luke and their peers. Both boys were given all the same opportunities, and expectations were differentiated for all the students across the various musical settings (general music, choir, and viola lessons). Both Elise and Ann were intentional in explaining that they perceived the benefits of music for Luke and Malik just as they do

the benefits of music for all their students. When asked about the value of music for students with ASD, Elise exclaimed, "It needs to be there, always and forever. But I guess that's true for all children."

The families of both students indicated that they valued music, identifying other family members with musical ties and shared enthusiasm and gratitude for their child's musical experiences in school. For these families, it may be that the expectations and beliefs about the benefits of music education for their children with ASD reflect how they feel about music more generally. This is in line with research examining musical engagement for children with hearing loss, in which families that valued and participated in music considered musical involvement for their children with hearing loss to be important (Driscoll et al., 2015; Looi et al., 2019). These families believed in music for music's sake and, as such, expected that music education for their children would have the same outcomes that it does for any child: the chance to be musical.

A Focus on Strengths

Observations of Malik and Luke in general music class revealed a variety of ways in which Elise supported their strengths. Elise used Malik's love and enthusiasm for singing to encourage his participation in general music. She consistently gave him space to lead call-and-response songs and used his song requests as a motivational tool for his participation. Malik's special education team, Sylvia and Amelia, both shared that music was a place where Malik excelled and experienced success. Sylvia explained, "It is probably a part of his day where Malik feels more successful and probably a time when he looks most like his peers and he's included most like his peers." Luke was less motivated by singing but enjoyed the movement activities and opportunities for leadership. Elise supported this by giving him time to be "the conductor" of musical movement and to lead activities when the class played instruments.

At times Elise's lack of experience caused her uncertainty when presented with behaviors associated with a student's diagnosis. For example, during movement activities, Elise was initially unsure what to do when Malik would move around the room instead of participating from his assigned space. Amelia would redirect him, but it often limited his participation as his attention shifted away from the musical activity to wanting to move freely. Eventually, Elise tried drawing attention to his musical gestures and interacting with him while he moved around the room instead of requiring that he remain in his assigned spot. In this way, Malik remained focused on the activity and participated more fully.

Through similar processes of trial and error, Elise drew on her Kodály background for a variety of multimodal tools that she found to be successful for students with ASD. The experiential nature of her teaching approach created many avenues for participation. A typical 25-minute music class would include singing, movement, storytelling, and, occasionally, playing instruments. I observed that this variety allowed for all students to exhibit strengths at some point in the class. Malik excelled when singing but was less engaged by storytelling. Luke embraced opportunities for musical

movement and playing instruments but rarely sang unless prompted. For Elise, the variety of activities was one way she felt everyone in her class could participate. She explained, "If we do a movement activity, everyone can move. If they can't necessarily verbally express themselves, they absolutely can move to the music." I frequently observed Elise using a student's idea to adapt an activity or to intensify the challenge. She explained, "The thing I think about is making sure to give them opportunities for their strengths."

Luke's viola teacher, Ann Wachowski, echoed that supporting students' strengths was part of her philosophy. She spoke about all her students as individuals:

> I have specific goals and they're different for every child. It's about tapping into everybody's strengths. Everybody learns differently, thinks differently, can feel differently. I think it's making sure we're reaching all kids and I don't think it's exclusive to children that are on the spectrum.

Ann shared, "I find the Suzuki method for little kids is brilliant," noting that the playful and "loving" approach appealed to all young learners, including her students with ASD. By starting with the experience of playing the instrument, Ann had flexibility to tailor the lessons to the strengths of her students, building them toward music literacy in a developmentally appropriate way. She felt that strategies she used for one student were useful for many, regardless of a diagnosis.

Both Elise's and Ann's approaches to teaching are flexible and responsive to the students in their classes and lessons. These educators embrace an ability mindset toward their work, each remarking how they seek opportunities to support the strengths of their students. The principal, Maggie, indicated how she valued this for the Tower community:

> In a performance space, you can either perform or you can't. It sounds right or it sounds wrong. And I think music should just be a point of access for all kids. [Our music program] is really much more big picture, which is so much more accessible.

The mindset and approaches of these educators are cornerstones to a music education program that is developmentally appropriate and engaging to all of the students it serves. The various approaches that supported the strengths of Malik and Luke, such as multimodal activities and experiential music making before note reading, were also successful in supporting their peers. This concept is articulated as part of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework in which classroom environments, curriculum and instruction, and assessment are designed with customizable options that meet the needs of all students from the planning stages, requiring less adaptation in the moment (Meyer et al., 2014). These educators were not using UDL explicitly; however, elements of their approaches were reflective of the framework. Like many music educators (Salvador, 2010; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014b), both teachers indicated they had little preparation for working with students with ASD. Despite this, the strategies and techniques both Elise and Ann

collected "on the job" were useful for the same reason educators have found success with the UDL framework: By offering multiple points of access (or multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression in UDL terms), each student was welcomed into the learning through their strengths rather than being limited by a deficit.

A Culture of Inclusivity

Data related to the philosophical approach to inclusive learning among the faculty and administration of Tower Elementary revealed how the school's culture of inclusivity influenced the musical outcomes for both Luke and Malik. Findings clustered into two subthemes: Curricular Extracurriculars and Nurturing Peer Relationships.

Curricular Extracurriculars. The availability of musical opportunity starting in the first grade at Tower Elementary is part of what made this school district one of the best communities for music education in 2019 (NAMM Foundation, 2019). The school principal, Maggie, recognized that the opportunities for music so early in elementary school were valued by parents and set the district apart. Parents of students with ASD expressed how grateful they were because, as one parent noted to Elise, "there are so few opportunities for students with autism." Luke's mother, Melissa, shared, "The environment is so supportive. It's one of the reasons they're a top school district [for music]."

Particularly notable is the availability of the musical opportunities during the school day. All lessons, small-group instruction, and ensemble rehearsals take place before and during school hours. Amelia, Malik's paraprofessional, noted this had a unique benefit for students with ASD:

> For these families [of students with ASD], their extracurriculars are therapy. They go straight from [school] to hours of speech therapy, social groups, or academic support. They don't have the time after school to be in music extracurriculars. I think what Tower is doing by providing these services during or before the school day is really great for all these kids. Where maybe Malik would never have been a part of the choir, here he has the opportunity as a first grader. It's pretty cool.

For Luke and Malik, the additional musical opportunities provided them an avenue to grow musically. Ann, Luke's viola instructor, noted that Luke began to excel almost immediately in his viola lessons. In the time I observed his small-group lessons, he demonstrated consistent musical growth at a pace ahead of most of his peers and eagerly embraced opportunities to learn new musical skills. Each Tuesday as Luke walked into general music, he joyfully reminded Elise, "It's double music day!" Luke's eagerness in his lessons and his enthusiasm for sharing his joy about the experience highlight the value he had for this extracurricular opportunity.

Malik's family recognized the positive impact his involvement in Comunità had on his musical development. His father, Ahmed, shared,

> He really hasn't had any other music outside of school. Choir was the first time he had any sort of additional structured music activity. [Malik] has always been musically attuned. From a very young age we'd find him singing and now that he has [Comunità] he loves to sing all day long. I'm pretty pleased because he's getting exposure to music at a very early age, and he's got a lot of opportunities here.

I observed that Malik typically enjoyed general music, but he seemed to delight especially in his time in Comunità. The rehearsals were a playful mix of singing, musical games, and movement activities that were geared toward encouraging participation and the making of musical choices while nurturing social interaction between ensemble members. A typical rehearsal included between 8 and 10 songs. Malik would sing each one in tune at full voice then ask to sing another, a request Elise was often happy to oblige. In the interview with him and his family, Malik performed several of his favorite songs from choir for us. His parents shared that he enjoyed recording them at home as well. When I asked him about Comunità, Malik exclaimed, "I love choir! I look forward to it." The interactive and participatory nature of Comunità allowed Elise to encourage Malik's love of singing while giving him some musical agency.

Providing music typically viewed as "extracurricular" during the school day allowed both students to take advantage of opportunities afforded to their peers and flourish musically. I observed notable musical gains for both boys over the course of the study. This approach to scheduling removed a barrier to access for students with ASD who otherwise may have needed to prioritize therapeutic interventions in their time outside the school day. Researchers have documented a lack of opportunities for and access to in-school music education for students with disabilities (A. Draper & Bartolome, 2021; Hourigan, 2015). Tower Elementary is an illustration of how school music programs can prioritize access and promote musical growth for all students.

Nurturing peer relationships. The successes that Luke and Malik experienced in music may also be due, in part, to the approach toward peer relationships that Tower has taken as a full-inclusion school. I noticed early on in my observations of Malik that he had a friendship with Tegan, another first-grade student in his class. Malik liked sitting next to her in the music circle and occasionally would look to her for cues about what to do in a transition or activity. Tegan could be seen offering nonverbal cues to sit in the circle or modeling ways to creatively move to a listening piece. Malik's paraprofessional, Amelia, allowed time for these interactions to support Malik in class before stepping in. Elise noted that Tegan could be off task at times, but it seemed that her friendship with Malik encouraged her to be more of a role model. This friendship had reciprocal benefits for both students: Malik had a more discreet form of support in a peer, and Tegan developed as a class role model.

Although these peer relationships were very evident for Malik in general music, they were less present for Luke. Luke was described by most as a rule follower, and I observed him to be self-directed and almost always on task. He was less in need of peer support but did serve frequently as a peer model in the music classroom. He eagerly volunteered for leadership roles in music, although he occasionally would

express frustration when his classmates were talking or not following directions. Elise was aware of this and kept a watchful eye for opportunities to encourage positive peer interactions for him.

Luke declined to be interviewed, but when I spoke with his mother, Melissa, he interrupted to inform me he played "viola, *not* violin" and to share that he was one of six viola players in first grade but "the only one in [his teacher's] class." His viola teacher, Ann, shared with a smile, "Viola players tend to have this identity—I'm a viola player, so I get it—but Luke is *really* like that." Luke seemed to form closer peer relationships with the other viola players in first grade, and Ann nurtured this through interactive activities and games. When observing Luke in his lessons, he laughed and talked more readily while exhibiting friendly competition with the musicians. For example, as he started to learn note names, he especially enjoyed helping his peers practice this skill and playing games where he could demonstrate how to play each note. The lack of a peer from his viola ensemble in his first-grade class may have contributed to his limited peer interactions within general music class. His lessons appeared to be a space where he had more in common with his peers and interacted more freely with them.

At Tower, the friendships that organically developed among students were nurtured and supported to ensure that all students had a positive association with school. Maggie, the school's principal, explained,

> It's intentional. When we do sectioning, for every single kid we're thinking, "When a student walks in the classroom on the first day of school, is there at least one person that they're going to be like, 'That kid is here! This is gonna be a great year!'?"[6]

This was also true, she said, for the students with disabilities in the school. She noted, "For our students on the spectrum or any special need, we have that same mantra. We want to make sure that there is somebody there who is truly not just patient but genuinely friendly with them."

It was because of this approach that Malik and Tegan were placed in the same first-grade class, as their friendship had started to bud at the end of their kindergarten year. When observing in Comunità, I noted a similar friendship between two fourth-grade students, one of whom had a diagnosis of ASD. Elise informed me they had been placed in the same class every year until fourth grade. At that point, the teachers felt that both students would benefit from nurturing additional friendships, so they were placed in separate fourth-grade sections. Elise recognized the importance of this friendship for both students, so she paired them as peer buddies in Comunità.

In recent years, there has been an increase in students with disabilities enrolling at Tower Elementary, and it became apparent to the faculty and administration that changes were needed to support these learners socially as well as academically. The principal, Maggie, explained,

> It came out of our special education teachers [recognizing] we had some students who did not typically go to Tower and whose needs were very different. So we tried to figure out how to destigmatize it and really make it a part of the culture.

To support this, the special education team in collaboration with the administration instituted disability awareness programs, like Circle of Friends and Best Buddies International, to develop an accepting school culture.[7] Through these programs, students and faculty were educated about diagnoses like ASD and were provided tools and language for advocacy. Additionally, both programs provide structures to promote friendships among students with and without a disability. According to administration, these programs have had a positive impact on the students of Tower. Maggie described a situation in which the Circle of Friends training empowered the students to advocate for a friend who did not communicate verbally:

> The students shared with us, "Sometimes kids laugh at her and they're not laughing with her. And you talk to her, all the teachers, the adults, talk to her like she's a baby." And I was [taken aback] when they brought that to me.

Maggie and the team worked with the students to devise a plan to educate the staff and students. She noted, "It gave them a chance to advocate. It was awesome."

As more students with disabilities enrolled in the school, Elise recognized a need for musical opportunities that supported these peer relationships, so she started Comunità. Fundamental to this inclusive choir are the peer buddies, which Elise explained ensures that "everyone has one or two people they can connect with." The ensemble is more focused on building community and friendships than preparing multiple pieces for performance. The students sing and do musical activities together to connect and develop their social emotional skills. These friendships carry over into the rest of the school day. Amelia shared,

> There are three of [Malik's] classmates in the choir with him, and I think it's good to foster those friendships. There is a fourth grader also named Malik, and when we see him in the hallway, he'll be like, "Hi Malik!" and Malik will say, "Hi!"

As a full-inclusion school, students with a diagnosis of ASD are educated for the majority of the school day with their peers without a diagnosis. The teachers and administrators were deliberate about providing awareness education for the students and staff, which helped equip students with the tools and language to advocate for one another, and they created classroom communities that encouraged and supported peer relationships. This resulted in a culture of inclusivity in which friendships flourished, benefiting students with and without diagnoses.

Social and academic benefits of peer-mediated instruction and peer mentoring for students with ASD and typically developing peers have been identified in educational research (e.g., R. Bradley, 2016; Carter et al., 2017) and for students with severe disabilities in inclusive music settings (E. Draper et al., 2019). Although specific peer-mediated interventions were not being used in this program, the intentional nurturing of the peer relationships appeared to have positive benefits for Malik and Luke as well as their peers.

The Tower Elementary School community exhibited a culture of inclusivity by providing in-school access to musical opportunities and fostering relationships

between students with and without a diagnosis. For Malik and Luke, this contributed to musical growth and skill development beyond what would be typical in general music alone. Naturally evolving friendships were honored and paired with disability education for the school community, which contributed to musical environments in which these students with ASD were supported and welcomed as equals to their peers.

An Expansive School Culture: Adopting an Ethic of Hospitality

When I began this study, I bound the cases by the students in an effort to understand their experiences and the perspectives of those who made critical decisions about their music education. Unexpectedly, it became clear early on that much of the success of these two students in music education could be attributed to the philosophical approach held by the educational team at Tower Elementary. Malik and Luke were welcomed into musical spaces as individuals by the entire school community. I suggest that, rather than inclusive, the space was expansive and allowed for students to "be in otherness" (Ruitenberg, 2011, p. 32). This phenomenon can be explored through the lens of an ethic of hospitality (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000; Ruitenberg, 2011).

The music program at Tower Elementary was uniquely poised to be hospitable for students with disabilities because of the multitude of available musical options (general music, choir, and strings/orchestra) starting in first grade and the opportunities for participation during school hours for all musical offerings. In this way, Tower was prepared "for a guest without any plan for arrival" (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001). Further, Elise's and Ann's experiential teaching methods, their strengths-based approaches, and their philosophical beliefs about student ability made them ready to welcome any student (guest) who entered their classrooms (home). In this way, the host's home (school programming, administrators, teachers) was prepared to welcome a guest (student with disabilities). An ethic of hospitality, however, requires the arrival of a guest to welcome.

With the influx of students with disabilities enrolling at Tower Elementary, it became apparent to the educational team that changes were needed to support these learners socially as well as academically. They were confronted with a decision regarding how best to welcome these guests into their home. Rather than force the students with disabilities to fit into a school culture, the staff coordinated disability awareness and peer mentoring programs to cultivate an environment where the students were given space to be themselves and accepted as members of the community. Peers without disabilities developed new understandings about students with disabilities and formed genuine friendships that were mutually beneficial. Through this lens, Tower Elementary ushered in an ethic of hospitality by expanding the culture of the school through an openness to the different ways of being that students with disabilities contributed to the community. As such, Malik, Luke, and, likely, other students with disabilities in this school were able to benefit from the gifts of this music education program in ways that were equitable to their peers without a diagnosis. The Tower community is indebted to their guests (the students with disabilities), as it was their

arrival that helped this host to realize ways in which they could expand their thinking to change and grow into an expansive community of learners.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of two students with ASD in an inclusive music education context to determine if there were unique benefits for this population. For these two students, their musical opportunities and experiences were remarkably similar to those of their typically developing peers. While researchers in music therapy have provided ample evidence of the therapeutic benefits of music for individuals with ASD (e.g., Geretsegger et al., 2014), interestingly, the social and therapeutic outcomes were not considered primary purposes of music education for these two students by stakeholders. This is likely due in part to the nature of a full-inclusion school. Students with ASD in self-contained classrooms often are placed in general education contexts, such as a music classroom, for social interactions with peers in order to meet social IEP goals. In a full-inclusion school, like Tower Elementary, there are no self-contained classrooms, so the music room did not need to serve as a singular space to provide socialization for students with ASD. The intentionality with which Tower Elementary approached nurturing the inclusivity of the environment further contributed to these social needs being met throughout the school day. Malik and Luke attended music classes just like their peers without a diagnosis and were perceived to benefit in the same ways. In this regard, the experiences that I observed and benefits identified by stakeholders were not unique to students with ASD or even for students with disabilities.

Salvador (2015) questioned whether the purpose of music education for students with disabilities should be social or musical, and findings from that study suggested context may influence the answer. Future research should examine the experiences of students with ASD in partial-inclusion and self-contained contexts to determine if music education practices focus more on social or musical outcomes for this population in those settings. Given the practice of placing students with ASD in music classrooms primarily to meet social IEP goals, it may be that various stakeholders (special education teams, parents, administration, and music educators) have differing beliefs and understandings regarding music education for this population, and further research should consider those perspectives in these additional contexts.

This study does provide evidence of stakeholders' value of music for music's sake, and music educators should continue seeking to provide curriculum and instruction that support musical outcomes for their students with ASD. To promote this, music educators can include experiential instructional approaches that allow for a variety of ways in which students with ASD can enter into music learning. The approaches to teaching that were observed included elements that reflect the framework of Universal Design for Learning (Meyer et al., 2014). Teachers may find UDL useful in planning to effectively meet the musical learning needs of all students in their classes. The pillars of UDL encourage teachers to consider providing multiple means of (a) engagement, (b) representation, and (c) action and expression, which allows students to approach educational

experiences in the ways they best learn. Practitioner literature (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Hammel & Hourigan, 2017, 2020) has advocated for the use of this framework to support musical learning for students with disabilities, but research examining its efficacy in practice has not been identified. Studies examining UDL in music education would be informative for the field and would contribute to the body of research that supports UDL in other learning contexts (Crevecoeur et al., 2014).

Music educators may consider reverse-inclusion ensembles, like *Comunità*, as a way to make the music program more expansive. Key to these ensembles are the peer buddies who support the student with disabilities both socially and musically. Educational researchers (e.g., R. Bradley, 2016; Carter et al., 2017) have identified social and academic benefits of peer interventions for students with ASD. R. Bradley (2016) developed a peer mentoring program in which students with and without ASD served as mentors. In addition to the target social gains for the students with ASD, findings suggested that the experience positively influenced their sense of being included in the school. The program also helped the students with ASD to see themselves as a source of support for their peers. Future research might consider adopting this two-way mentoring approach in an ensemble setting. Implementing peer buddies and cultivating peer communities could be a way for music educators to support multiple levels of learning while also encouraging social connections.

Examining the community of Tower Elementary through an ethic of hospitality highlighted the reciprocal benefits of this school's approach to inclusion. A small amount of music education research has included a framework of hospitality (Sullivan, 2017; West & Cremata, 2016), but this is the first example of its application to music for students with disabilities. The culture of the school was not the focus of this study but emerged as a significant finding related to the experiences of music education for these two students with ASD. Future research may consider exploring schools and music programs that explicitly demonstrate an ethic of hospitality with regard to students with disabilities.

Music education research pertaining to students with ASD is notably absent in the field. This study contributes evidence of two music educators' practices related to students with ASD, but the benefits identified by stakeholders are not specific to this population, which is perhaps due to the nature of a full-inclusion school community. Individuals with ASD may have exceptional musical potential (Heaton, 2005, 2009; Stanutz et al., 2014), but as indicated by Heaton (2009), this musical ability will likely not develop without instruction. Therefore, it is critical that the dearth of research in this area be addressed. A continued effort to highlight the music-teaching practices regarding students with ASD will be informative for preservice and in-service teachers.

I made every attempt to include both Malik and Luke in interviews; however, their direct contributions are largely absent from this report. Frequently, research regarding students with ASD is done *to* them and reported *about* them (Goodall, 2018), and it is imperative that future research seek out these critical voices to be included in the discourse. Documentation of firsthand experiences of students with ASD in the music classroom may highlight additional barriers to participation

as well as serve to shift teacher mindsets toward a paradigm of ability. During the completion of this manuscript, I became aware of alternative interview techniques developed by educational researchers that include multiple ways of engaging a student with ASD and a variety of ways they can respond (e.g., K. Bradley & Male, 2017). It would be useful for music education researchers interested in these topics to explore these methods of data collection that provide a greater degree of accessibility to individuals with ASD.

The distinctive aspects of the music program at Tower Elementary offered Luke and Malik the opportunity to experience music education in the same way as their typically developing peers. Stakeholders perceived no difference between the role of music education for these two students and their peers and believed that the boys benefited in the same ways. As a result of the community's work toward understanding the variance in all their learners, Malik and Luke were welcomed not in spite of their differences but because of them. The teachers identified their areas of strength and supported their musical learning from a position of ability. Music educators are uniquely positioned to offer the gift of hospitality, extending to students with ASD an unconditional welcome into our music learning spaces. In being open to their gift of arrival, we stand to learn as much as we hope to teach.

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Notes

1. Nine studies were in general education settings (mostly preschool), nine studies were in elementary music classrooms, two case studies pertained to an individual child with disabilities in regular music and special music classes, one study was in a tutorial session, and one study was conducted on a school bus.
2. Pseudonyms were used for the name of the school and all participants.
3. The Tower Elementary School community comprises White (58%), Asian (24%), Hispanic (9%), Bi- or Multiracial (8%), and Black (1%) students.
4. See Organization of American Kodály Educators at https://www.oake.org and Feierabend Association for Music Education at https://www.feierabendmusic.org.
5. Observations included 21.5 hr in general music; 5.5 hr in the inclusive choir, *Comunità*; 2 hr in individual viola lessons; and 1.5 hr of performances.
6. *Sectioning* refers to the process of assigning students to one of multiple sections of an elementary grade level.

7. Circle of Friends (https://www.circleofriends.org) is a school inclusion program that promotes friendships between students with disabilities and typically developing peers. The program encourages self-awareness and social skills for students with disabilities and awareness and advocacy for their peers. Best Buddies International (https://www.bestbuddies.org) is a program that supports one-to-one friendships between people with and without disabilities. The friendship program begins in middle school; however, Tower Elementary used this program as a resource for disability awareness.

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