

“Can I Student Teach Here?!”: Preservice Music Teachers’ Field-Observations at a School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

Early field experiences are a common element of music teacher education programs and have been identified as important in the identity development of preservice music teachers (Albert, 2016; Haston & Russell, 2012; Hourigan & Scheib, 2009). In considering the contexts in which we might situate these observations, music education research consistently indicates that music educators often receive little preparation in teaching students with disabilities (Culp & Salvador, 2021; Grimsby, 2020; Hammel & Hourigan, 2011; Salvador & Pasiali, 2017). Research addressing early field-observation experiences in music classrooms that center students with disabilities may provide valuable insight for preservice music teacher education (Marsh & Strasheim, 2022).

The purpose of this instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) was to examine field-observation experiences of preservice music teachers at a school for the blind and visually impaired. The “grand tour” question guiding this study was, how do preservice music teachers enrolled in a course designed to prepare them to work with students with disabilities make meaning of their observations in music classrooms comprised solely of students who are blind or have visual impairments? Using a framework for teacher identity development that includes both psychological and sociological components (Pishghadam et al., 2022), I sought to address the following subquestions:

1. What do preservice music teachers notice during these field observations?
2. In what ways, if any, do they draw connections between their teacher identities and what they notice during these observations?
3. How do they negotiate the aspects of their observations that conflict with or disrupt their teacher identities?

Participants were first-year preservice music teachers (N = 7) enrolled in a music teacher education program at a Medium, private university in the midwestern United States. All participants observed two music classes at a school for the blind and visually impaired, (1) a fifth-grade general music class and (2) a high-school piano class. Data were collected through class assignments, individual semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and researcher fieldnotes. Using a multi-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2021), the data currently are being analyzed to identify themes.

Emergent themes include the nature of teacher-student communication, curricular connections and considerations, and accessibility through Universal Design for Learning. Participants also experienced disruptions to the deficit mindset about disability. Through an examination of these findings, music teacher educators may be better equipped to create standalone coursework or embedded experiences across the curriculum that empower preservice music teachers to prioritize accessibility and inclusivity.

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