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Patrick K. Freer

Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

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MEJ – September 2012
From the Academic Editor
by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

MUSICALLY COMPETENT IN THE EYES OF THEIR PEERS

“Teacher planning often focuses on musical materials, elements, or concepts. The actual teaching process, therefore, has the primary aim of illustrating the musical content of a lesson. In the interest of saving time, teachers often choose the children who receive private or school instrumental instruction to answer questions or perform musical accompaniments. A concomitant approach to planning and a contrasting teaching approach is necessary for groups that include mainstreamed children. Music educators need to provide opportunities for these children to appear musically competent in the eyes of their peers” (Betty Atterbury, *MEJ* March 1986, p. 36).

In her classic article about how music teachers might effectively engage students with special needs, Atterbury spoke plainly about the challenges and difficulties confronting teachers who work simultaneously with students representing a wide spectrum of abilities and needs. Atterbury wrote that effective instruction begins with understanding that a child’s view of success is dependent upon both “how well they do in school, and the acceptance and attitudes of their classmates” (p. 34). Though music classes are easily configured to provide successful in-school experiences for all students, Atterbury contended that the greater difficulty lies in addressing the attitudes and perceptions of peer learners. Atterbury’s text quickly moved from theoretical considerations to practical pedagogical techniques and musically grounded instructional activities. Atterbury closed by stating, “Becoming an assertive advocate for these children may help the music teacher survive and the mainstreamed child become a successful learner in musical situations” (p. 36).

Several articles in this issue of *MEJ* relate to special needs education. These articles were written independently, but at least three previous special focus issues of *MEJ* have attempted to offer comprehensive views of the subject: inclusion (January 2001), teaching special students (April 1982), and music in special education (April 1972). Though these issues were published long ago, many of the articles could appear today with only minor updating. The broad topics are familiar and their representation in *MEJ* has paralleled the development of legislation regarding disability and educational opportunity. For instance, Helen Folsom, a California music teacher, penned an impassioned letter to the editor following a pair of articles in the March 1971 *MEJ* that told of research efforts involving music and special needs students. Folsom cautioned against using deconstructed musical elements as “pleasant device[s] to be used only where [they] can promote the learning of important skills and behaviors” and toward helping all children become “healthy and creative individuals” by experiencing music in its fullest artistic sense (January 1973, pp. 12 & 15).

Of the specific topics addressed in this issue, epilepsy is the only one making a first appearance in the pages of *MEJ*. Dyslexia has been previously discussed in a single dedicated article (May 2004, pp. 27-31). In that article, author Kate O’Brien Vance

wrote from the perspective of a music teacher who is dyslexic: “I could very easily have slipped through the cracks of education, but my music teachers would not let me. When I learned of the cause of my problems, I realized that it was now my turn to find my own students with dyslexia and catch them before they fell. How many students can you catch?” (p. 31).

Another of this issue’s topics, students with emotional disturbances, has also been the focus of one other *MEJ* article. As part of the April 1972 special focus issue, the article opened with these sentences: “Drop dead, you S.O.B. I’m not going to that damned class” (p. 35). The authors were a team of researchers describing a music education program at the University of Northern Illinois designed for emotionally disturbed students. The current article by Brian Price opens with a similar attention-getting rhetorical device and proceeds toward helping readers understand and respond to the unique needs of these students.

This editor found it somewhat surprising that a majority of *MEJ* articles dealing with disabilities has concerned vision problems and instrumental music. Perhaps disabilities relating to vision and blindness are somewhat less threatening to music teachers than other types of disability. In his article, “Blind Children Need Training, Not Sympathy,” Muriel K. Mooney wrote, “Blindness is less of a handicap in the field of music than in many other areas of learning . . . The child without sight has a heightened sensitivity to sound that can place him on an equal footing in music with his classmates” (April 1972, pp. 57, 56).

Our focus in P-12 education often precludes us from remembering that music education occurs in multiple forms throughout the lifespan. And, primary-secondary music education needs to remain connected to ongoing educational activities—especially for adults with disabilities. One fine example is a fascinating 1945 article about music education for wounded soldiers who lost their eyesight during World War II battle. Corporal Ben Bernstein wrote, “personal participation in a well-planned music program is a powerful aid in helping the blinded GI’s to the ultimate realization that there is an entirely new and fascinatingly interesting life opening up to them (February-March 1945, p. 61).”

This issue also marks the first *MEJ* article by the influential music education philosopher, David J. Elliott. Consistent with the themes expressed in this issue’s articles about disabilities, Elliott writes that it is “for each of us to decide, revisit, and re-decide based on our critically reflective considerations of what we know, what we think we know, and, most importantly, what is most educative and ethical for our students” (pg. XX). It is the wish of the editors and authors that the present collection of articles contributes substance to this ongoing conversation.