

Music education and individuals with special needs

My area of interest is music education and individuals with special needs. I studied special needs education some years ago, and issues related to this have been with me ever since.

When I was to do my masters I could choose between doing it in special needs education and music education. I also considered masters in music therapy. Having the most education in music and education, I chose music education. I also chose it because I think the combination of special needs education and music *in* music education is interesting. Many have asked me why I didn't just go for music therapy. The reason, I think, is because it was not exactly what I was looking for. I am interested in how music education can be available for everyone, and how music educators can adapt their teaching so that all pupils are given equal rights to develop their musical skills. Music therapy is not far away, and the borders are hard to define in this area. Hence, my question is: *What kind of responsibility does music education have when it comes to individuals with special needs?* (I limit myself to Norway)

The approach I have ended up with is rather theoretical. I will approach this issue by studying written texts, and I am still struggling with clearly defining my method of approach. I will be doing document analysis, but I am also very inspired by discourse analysis. Influenced by Alvesson and Sköldbørgs (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 1994, s. 286) comments on discourse analysis, I will study the texts, bearing in mind that they can "tell" me something on three levels:

1. The level of discourse: Studying the use of language and terminology
2. The level of conception: Studying (and/or interpreting) text with the aim of finding conceptions, beliefs, attitudes etc.
3. The level of action: - Finding out something about "what is happening"
- Occurrences, actions, relations, social patterns etc.

Derived from this, research questions like these can be asked:

1. The level of discourse: *In what way are matters concerning individuals with special needs written about in research and literature in music education?*
2. *What attitudes and presumptions can be found amongst music educators concerning individuals with special needs?*
3. The level of action: *How is music education organized when it comes to individuals with special needs? and: What research and literature is available/being produced in the field of music education when it comes to individuals with special needs?*

The level of action

Starting with the “level of action” I will give examples considering music as a subject in school and music education in the “culture school”. In Norwegian schools, music is a compulsory subject for 10 years. Norwegian schools are mixed-ability schools. In any class one can meet pupils with physical handicaps, Downs syndrome, social and emotional problems, ADHD, to mention a few. As a teacher one is obliged to accommodate the education according to the abilities and prerequisites of the individual pupil.

(Kunnskapsdepartementet, 1998, 2008, ss. §1-2). However, Brynjulf Stige, in 1995, pointed out that in spite of the principle of inclusion in school being far from new, there was still a great deal of insecurity amongst the teachers:

“They are uncertain about what to do, why and how. (...) When the teacher meet students with poor motoric skills, insufficient language, cognitive problems etc. the traditional ways of teaching often come short.” (Stige, 1995, s. 18)

Stige also reveals that pupils with special needs often miss out on the music lesson:

“When pupils are taken out of ordinary lessons for special lessons in Norwegian or maths, it is not seldom that one chooses to do so in a subject/class such as music.” (Stige, 1995, s. 24)

My other example concerns the “culture school”. This is where most of the instrumental education is happening. It is not part of the school, though recommended to follow the same general regulations. Many Norwegian culture schools are proud to pronounce that they offer music education adjusted to any individual need. However, the ways of approach vary greatly. One website I visited presented the options as follows:

“The culture school has at this time the following education on offer: Piano, keyboard, guitar, violin, chello, clarinet, flute, saxophone, trumpet, vocal, drawing, painting and adapted music education (tilpasset musikkoppl ring).”

What does this tell us about what options pupils with special needs really have? If one has special needs can one not choose to get lessons on the clarinet? Nils-Oddvar Merkesvik (1997) wrote about his experiences working as a music therapist in a culture school:

“What often happens now is that when it turns out that pupils that are in the culture school are in need of a specially adjusted approach, they are “placed” with the music therapist. I am of the opinion that we need to get a better routine to this.(...) The music therapist can’t possibly be good at everything. It is not possible to get expert-competence on flute, accordion and piano all at once” (Merkesvik, 1997, s. 17)

I think this gives a picture of a sort of organizing where music education and music educators are shoving all the responsibility of individuals with special needs over to the music

therapists. It can also be seen as saying something about the attitudes of the administrators in the field.

The level of conception

This brings us to the “level of conception”. Again I will use Stige as a reference:

“many music educators that are reluctant to teach students with various difficulties, legitimate this with claiming that they are not educated to do therapy.” (Stige, 1995, s. 19)

This tells us something important about many music educators’ attitudes towards pupils with special needs as well as the teachers’ responsibility. This also reflects some of the general mechanisms of exclusion in our society. As Stige writes:

“the tendency to classify education as therapy only because the student has a disability, can be said to be part of the society’s stigmatization and exclusion of these people” (Stige, 1995, s. 19)

Stige also points out that it is correct that music educators are not educated to do therapy, but that they are educated to work in a school and a society that give all pupils the right to education. (ibid).

There seems to be a tendency of linking music education to music therapy as soon as it comes to individuals with special needs. How come? One reason is of course that this is a great part of the work of the music therapists. Music education is often used as a method in music therapy, and many of the clients a music therapist have will not be found in the classes of a music educator. Still, as we have seen, there is also a need for music educators to be able to teach pupils with special needs. We cannot expect a music therapist to come running every time there is a pupil with special needs in our class. Why is it that so many music educators does not define teaching pupils with special needs their responsibility? Maybe one of the answers can be found in the way we write about special needs in music education literature?

This leads us to the “level of discourse” but with a detour through another perspective of the “level of action”: *What information and literature is available within the field of music education when it comes to individuals with special needs?* Most central books on music didactics does not mention special needs or “adjusted education” at all. Stiges book, on the other hand, is about exactly this. It is even written as a book in music education, but looking into different curriculums in higher education, I have so far only found it in music therapy educations. The term “inclusive music education” as defined by Stige does not seem to have become established within the field of music education.

The level of discourse

Looking further into central literature used in music education, issues related to individuals with special needs is far from absent. However, there seems to be a tendency of addressing this in a chapter having to do with music therapy. As much as I endorse information on music therapy in the field of music education, I am questioning this as the main entry towards discussing pupils with special needs. I think we *also* need to focus more on special needs from *within* the field of music education. It should be possible to discuss it with concerns and terminology from our field. When we argue for the importance of music education as part of the compulsory curriculum, these arguments also apply to pupils with special needs. Through didactical thinking/reflection we already have a way of discussing the student's predispositions in relation to other aspects of the learning situation. Music therapy is an endless source of competence and inspiration on this area but we still need to see more ownership on the part of music education.

Maybe we need special terms to better pinpoint our responsibilities? Special terms will always bear the risk of stigmatization¹, but maybe it is necessary? I believe that the way in which special needs is addressed within the field of music education will be of importance to whether music educators will be willing to take responsibility or not. When we use terminology and arguments from music therapy, many music educators will look the other way, thinking this does not concern them. The ideal would of course be an inclusive music education where "special needs" was a normalized and expected part of the music educators' life-world, but it does not seem like we are there yet.

References

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¹ It is important to remember that special needs always is a result of the combination of the individual and the environment. Hence the way we teach can lead to many or few special needs when it comes to the possibility of fully part-taking in the class.