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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry aimed to re-story the experiences of Paulina, a blind music education major, as she navigated her degree program at a large university. While scholars have begun to document the experiences of students who are blind or visually impaired in both PK-12 settings and during student teaching, no known study has explored the experience of a blind preservice student during their music education coursework. Utilizing critical disability studies as a lens, this narrative inquiry utilized the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place to highlight Paulina’s experience. Data included interviews, memos from all three researchers, emails and texts, conversations at a research conference, and informal conversations. Paulina’s story centered around three themes: sight is mandatory here; the hope, promise, and failure of support; and the emotional toll and physical consequences. Implications from this study may inform preservice preparation programs as well as offer insights regarding combating ableism in any musical space.

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music education, music teacher preparation, visual impairment, critical disability studies, Braille

The field of music education has increasingly called for a more diverse teacher workforce. While scholars regularly advocate for diversity in terms of race, gender, or ethnicity (e.g., Abramo & Bernard, 2020; Robison et al., 2020), limited scholarship focuses on disability-related teacher diversity. Becoming a music educator is a challenging task for anyone, but those people who have a disability may find preservice program requirements to be untenable. In particular, music education degree programs revolve around materials that are designed for able-bodied users. People who are blind or visually impaired (BVI) are often unable to successfully traverse such an ocularcentric environment (Abramo, 2014). This study explored the experiences of Paulina,¹ a BVI student, as she participated in music education coursework to understand how she navigated her disability while preparing to become a music teacher.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Students with disabilities face structural and social barriers in higher educational settings. Despite increases in campus resources in recent years, students still report multiple challenges, including poor quality of support from faculty and staff (Hong, 2015), challenges related to peer relationships (Moriña, 2017; Smith et al., 2019), and frustration over mandatory self-advocacy and forced disclosure of disability status (Cinarbas & Hos, 2020; Sokal et al., 2017). In particular, students commented that their most significant obstacle to success in college was negative faculty attitudes, including a perceived unwillingness by teachers to adapt materials (e.g., Coriale et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2019). Similar to students with other disabilities (Cinarbas & Hos, 2020; Sokal et al., 2017), BVI college students expressed negative feelings around forced disclosure of their disability and mandatory self-advocacy. In addition, BVI students have reported specific challenges navigating admissions processes (Holden & Kitchen, 2018), feeling a lack of social, cultural, and economic capital (Croft, 2020, 2021), and barriers in infrastructure, study materials, and classroom learning experiences (Abdullah & Waheed, 2023).

Attendance and graduation from college can make a difference in employment rates over the course of a person's career. While BVI students attend college at similar rates to their sighted peers (including those with other disabilities), they do not achieve comparable academic outcomes or graduate at the same rate (Schuck et al., 2019). As many as 70% of students at two-year institutions and 46% at four-year institutions did not graduate within 150% of the standard 4-year time of their sighted peers (National Center for Educational Research, 2017). BVI people experience higher rates of unemployment than people with other disabilities and often face hiring discrimination

in the workplace (Bach, 2018). In a recent study of secondary data sets, only 44% of the U.S. BVI adult population is employed compared to over two-thirds of people with other disabilities (McDonnall & Sui, 2019). In particular, the field of education is disproportionately able-bodied (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), and the number of BVI teachers is unknown.

While scholars often research students with disabilities, there is minimal information on teachers with disabilities (Neca et al., 2022). Only 4.6% of U.S. teachers report having a disability, although the exact number could be higher due to purposeful underreporting (Stanley et al., 2011). In a review of literature on teachers with a variety of disabilities, Neca et al. (2022) noted that educators most often reported experiencing challenges in their work (and educational environments) related to a lack of resources, lowered expectations from others, fear of disclosure, and proving their competence. Indeed, Sokal et al. (2017) highlighted that one of the reasons teachers with disabilities often do not disclose their status to administrators is because they fear they will not be viewed as competent as colleagues or be stigmatized because of their disability.

Social stigma is a continuing challenge for persons with disabilities (e.g., Selepe & Molelemane, 2022), and BVI people in particular (e.g., Croft, 2020, 2021; McDonnall & Sui, 2019). The stigma of possessing a physical, visible difference causes others (through implicit and explicit bias) to deem this difference as inferior or aberrant, rendering them less than others (Goffman, 1963; Love, 2015). This often requires the stigmatized person to have to unnecessarily self-advocate and put in extra effort to be considered equal to a non-disabled person, especially in the teacher workforce (Neca et al., 2022). Additionally, many people with disabilities hold the belief that outing themselves will have negative rather than positive consequences at work (Kattari, 2015).

Music education research on blind and visually impaired people is limited. With what does exist, scholars have historically focused on the perceptions of music educators working with BVI students in PK-12 settings (e.g., Pino, 2022; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014) rather than BVI teachers. A few scholars have also considered teaching BVI students in other musicking spaces, including private instruction (Power & McCormack, 2012), a school for the blind (Abramo & Pierce, 2013), and as adult musicians (Baker & Green, 2016). No known information exists about the experiences and perspectives of BVI music teachers, and information on BVI teachers outside of music education is limited (Duquette, 2000; Lee et al., 2011; Lima & Ivy, 2017). We located one study in music education from the perspective of BVI preservice music teachers during their student teaching placement (Parker & Draves, 2017). In Parker and Draves (2017), a visually impaired and a blind preservice teacher each noted challenges associated with accessibility, individuals' negative attitudes toward them, and negative perceptions of effective teaching, which mirrored the small BVI preservice teacher research outside of music education (Cinarbas & Hos, 2020; Oren & McLeod, 2011). Neither student teacher ended up teaching music in a PK-12 setting (Parker & Draves, 2017). No known research has explored the experiences of BVI preservice

music students before student teaching began to consider how they navigated their undergraduate coursework.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

We framed this study through the lens of critical disability studies (CDS) (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). CDS developed as an outgrowth of the social model of disability and in response to scholars' assertions that the social model of disability failed to capture other elements of ableism in society outside of socioeconomic-related concerns (Goodley, 2013). CDS scholars argue that disability is not solely an individual medical condition, nor is it only a materialistic condition focused on the production of bodies fit for labor, but it is also a product of social, cultural, and political forces that shape how individuals are perceived, treated, valued, and included in society (e.g., Davis, 2002; Shildrick, 2009). Furthermore, CDS researchers critique the dominant narrative that individuals with disabilities are inferior or abnormal and instead recognize the diversity and complexity of disability identity and experience (Davis, 2002). They challenge beliefs about normality and able-bodiedness (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2013) and advocate for the rights and voices of individuals in all aspects of society (Shildrick, 2009). In addition to critiquing dominant social narratives and advocating for rights, CDS emphasizes centering perspectives of individuals within research, policy, and activism, as well as forwards the belief that people with disabilities belong in all aspects of society (Goodley, 2013).

METHOD

Using purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), Erika contacted Paulina, a blind student attending the same music education program where Erika teaches, to inquire about participation. Paulina was immediately interested in sharing her story. Together, we decided the best method to present her experience was through narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiries focus on the lived experience of participants through telling life stories and then reflecting on the meaning of those stories, something Clandinin (2006) calls re-storying. In narrative inquiry, scholars often group participants life stories into one of three dimensions (known as commonplaces): temporality (past/present/future), sociality (personal and social experiences), and place (physical/digital spaces including situation and locale) (Clandinin, 2006).

Paulina's stories moved fluidly through the commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place, and her stories were difficult to isolate within a single dimension. While music education scholars have reported the stories of participants in narrative inquiries through the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place instead of thematically (e.g., Bond & Koops, 2014; Parker & Draves, 2017), Paulina's story was deeply intertwined across the commonplaces. As a result, we present her story

thematically. Similar to Nichols (2013), it would have misrepresented the nuance of Paulina's experience to separate sections of her story in such a way.

Researcher Positionality

Identifying one's positionality is critical in narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Nichols, 2016). Erika is a sighted person and teaches at a large music education program in the United States. They specialize in research on inclusive practice and SWD. During their career in PK-12 and higher education, Erika has worked with many SWD, but this was the first time they had interacted with a blind student. Julianna is also a sighted person and was a graduate student at the same institution where Erika taught and Paulina attended. Before their graduate work, Julianna taught high school choir for seven years. During that time, they worked with multiple SWD, including a student with a visual impairment. Paulina is blind, and at the time of the study, Paulina was a sophomore music education major. She was actively involved in the BVI community at the university and spent a great deal of time learning about and participating in disability advocacy.

Data Collection

Paulina was initially in Erika's elementary methods class, so after making initial contact to gauge Paulina's interest, we waited until IRB was secured before proceeding with any data collection.² After securing IRB exemption, we collected data from September 2022 to February 2023 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data included weekly recorded conversations between the research team, Paulina's weekly recorded voice memos after attending music education classes, and written memos and reflections from Erika and Julianna. Additional data included emails and texts between all three researchers and conversations during and after a conference presentation in February 2023. A final data source included regular communications between Erika and Paulina via text and email, where they shared disability-related experiences or wonderings that resonated with something they had discussed or experienced outside interviews.

In an attempt to navigate potential power imbalances (Nichols, 2016), our first few weekly meetings involved establishing rapport and developing a shared understanding of Paulina's experiences. Paulina took the lead by setting her own boundaries about her disability and what information she did and did not want to share, which we respected. She also determined the timing, duration, and location of our meetings. Throughout the remaining meetings, we attended to a careful balance between asking questions and encouraging Paulina to lead the direction and flow of topics. Through these processes, we sought to create a symbiotic relationship between all authors, develop trust, and maintain the salience of Paulina's voice (Nichols, 2016). In every step of data collection, analysis, and writing, we met to complete member checks with Paulina to ensure the re-storying of her experience was representative of her perspective.

Analysis

After collecting all field texts, Erika and Julianna coded the data. Using an emergent coding scheme (Saldaña, 2016), we began by separately coding a single field text. Then, we met to discuss similarities and differences in our emergent codes and created a uniform set of codes. We then coded the rest of the data using this emergent coding scheme. Erika and Julianna met weekly to review and discuss our analysis throughout the coding process. We added emergent codes, reviewed each other's previously coded data, and collapsed codes as needed. For our second round of coding, we utilized focused coding to consider how our codes aligned with CDS literature and developed themes accordingly (Saldaña, 2016). Each of us memoed throughout the analysis phase and shared these memos during weekly meetings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

When the analysis was complete, the entire research team met to discuss emergent themes, and Paulina offered a member check of our findings, providing input and edits. As we talked through each theme, we collectively re-storied Paulina's experience yet again and used our collective understandings to increase the trustworthiness of our interpretation. Paulina provided input and nuance to our interpretations at every step of the analysis phase.

A final re-storying occurred when we presented our findings at a music education conference in February 2023. During that experience, Paulina presented her story to participants at a roundtable about her experience in the music education program and shared examples of each theme from her life stories. Participants asked questions and engaged in dialogue with Paulina. Erika and Julianna did very little talking and took notes on the experience, which we later discussed as a whole group. These conversations served as another avenue for Paulina to make meaning of her experience as well as for Erika and Julianna to confirm their interpretations of Paulina's experiences (Clandinin, 2006). All three authors collaborated throughout writing this narrative account. Below, we offer a narrative of Paulina's experiences growing up and then discuss the major themes of her collegiate experience, which include *sight is mandatory here; the hope, promise, and failure of support; and emotional toll and physical consequences*.

PAULINA'S STORY

Paulina was born visually impaired. She recalled many positive musical experiences as a child and participated in music at home and in school. Paulina joined the school choir in eighth grade and learned most of her music by ear. For some music, she utilized enlarged scores, which required her to squint and strain her eyes to use what little vision she had. As a result of the continued strain on her eyes across all her schoolwork, Paulina reported that most of the vision she had left was gone by her sophomore year of high school. At that point, Paulina decided to stop straining her eyes and began using braille, screen readers, and other assistive devices. The only place she

did not use such support was in choir, where she still squinted to see the scores, damaging her remaining vision.

Coming to Terms with Her Disability

Paulina's experience with, understanding, and acceptance of her disability shifted as she matured. She recalled that, as a child, she did not consider herself disabled, stating, "I didn't know anything about my disability. I just knew, 'I'm Paulina, and Paulina can't see.' That was kind of what defined me." Throughout her childhood, she recalled feeling pressure from adults to minimize her disability and to behave as if she were able-bodied. Despite being legally blind and having tools to assist her with vision, Paulina's teachers repeatedly told her to use her remaining vision. "I was very much expected to live the way a sighted person would...and I was expected to use what vision I had to the fullest extent." Paulina discussed that while teachers knew of her disability and the accommodations available to support her, "there was no addressing my disability." She felt as if it was never talked about, especially with her.

Paulina believed many of her experiences growing up contributed to internalized ableism. For example, she recalled her resistance to using her walking cane as a child:

I didn't enjoy using it because I had not come to terms with my disability. Essentially, and this was my own internalized ableism, I thought, 'I am not one of *those* blind people.' You know what I mean? I am fine. But it came to me that I am not fine, and I have a tool that can help me.

Once Paulina began utilizing tools at her disposal, such as a cane and a screen reader, she said, "I found myself much more relaxed and comfortable. Using the 'blind things' isn't bad and I'm actually happier now." She discussed her emotional transition as she came to terms with her disability and her process of embracing her blindness. "I began to peel away the shame and reluctance to share and be open about my disability." However, Paulina expressed that, in high school, she still did not know how to address her disability with her teachers or advocate for the accommodations she needed, especially when something was not working or negatively affecting her remaining vision.

As Paulina matured, her sense of identity around her disability transformed from shame to pride: "I'm proud of being blind." Recalling social stigmas she used to worry about with peers, she declared, "I used to worry that using the tools would make me look uncool or a little less normal. But then I started going, 'Forget normal. Screw normal. No one needs that.'" As her comfort with herself and her disability grew, so did her sense of belonging in high school, and she felt the most accepted in choir. Eventually, she decided to pursue music education in college, with the goal of teaching high school choir. She reflected,

I never set out to do a bunch of work with disabled kids. I feel like that's the expectation. A disabled person goes through [the program] and gets a degree or a job to help more disabled people. I want to make it clear, I just set out to be a choir

director, and I very much expected to get a job teaching at a gen[eral] ed[ucation] school.

As a result of her growing awareness of her disability and decision to pursue music, Paulina began learning braille music in preparation for college music courses. When asked about her reasoning, she remarked, “I first started learning it for fun. But then I started to think it would be a support, as a backup. Use your sight first. If all else fails, you’ve got braille.”

Sight is Mandatory Here

Paulina entered the music program with high hopes of accessibility and support. She based this expectation on the university’s reputation within the BVI community as a supportive environment and her positive experience during her audition. However, she was met with disappointment from the outset.

When I first got into the music ed[ucation] program, there was a part of me that thought, ‘Everything will be accessible. I’m going to be able to access everything [since] I am on a bigger scale. I’m going to have more support.’ From day one, [it] was made clear to me that that was not the case.

Paulina mentioned experiencing struggles ranging from granular things, such as inaccurate or missing braille signs in buildings or construction that made crossing streets dangerous, to more considerable structural difficulties, like her perception of instructor and peer attitudes and inaccuracy and inaccessibility of braille materials for her coursework. She felt as if all parties, including herself, were unprepared for the amount of support needed to assist a blind student in a collegiate music program. “I had no idea it would take that much [work]. I didn’t know, my teachers didn’t know. Even the ODS (Office of Disability Services) didn’t know.”

Required Self-Advocacy

Paulina’s experience was saturated with instances where she felt forced to fight for an accessible education. Like many other music students, Paulina entered the music education program because of her passion for music and desire to teach others. However, the constant struggle to get necessary accommodations overshadowed her education and any joy she derived from making music:

I feel like with all this disability advocacy, and all of this, you know, trying to fight for...basic accommodations. I feel like I don’t even get a chance to make music anymore. I don’t even get a chance to learn. I’m just trying to get by.

Despite Paulina’s work to advocate for herself, she shared that she knew these efforts might not yield positive results. Although she discussed experiences advocating for herself during high school, she commented that she perceived a “stark difference” in the College of Music. Even when following the correct procedures to receive accommodations from the university and professors, Paulina felt like she had another step to navigate: proving herself worthy of help, something she did not experience in

high school. “It almost feels like you have to convince people, ‘Hey, I am worth accommodating. I am worth paying attention to and considering’...it shouldn’t be that way, but it is.” Paulina explained how her fight to prove herself worthy had had a profound impact on her self-image.

I don’t mind the advocacy. It’s the dehumanization, I think, that’s getting to me. And the idea of...I’m working towards a goal. Whereas, here, at the College of Music, I feel like I’m just trying to keep my head above the water.

Paulina shared how this constant feeling of dehumanization while navigating current coursework and planning ahead for the next semester became overwhelming, but she believed she did not have any other options. She explained: “If I don’t take charge, nobody else will.”

Double Standards

In addition to feeling overwhelmed by the amount of extra work it took to navigate her coursework, Paulina regularly discussed what she perceived to be double standards in relation to her disability and her musicianship. She recounted that during her audition, which was virtual due to COVID-19, she was “excused” from having to sightread, although it was a mandatory part of the audition for everyone else. She perceived that faculty and admissions had not considered what to do ahead of time, so they made an in-the-moment decision to eliminate the requirement for her. While she was not particularly bothered by that, she mentioned it was just one of many times people had not thought ahead about how to make things accessible.

A similar situation occurred during Paulina’s first semester of aural skills, a required class for all majors. The instructor excused her from dictation exercises because they told her they had no way to grade her work. Paulina shared, “There was kind of a bit of a standstill because my teachers cannot read what I write in braille. And I cannot write it down in print in a way that they’re going to understand.” Eventually, Paulina met with the instructor and an undergraduate advisor to discuss options, and Paulina recalled being told, “We’ll just give you a hundred or we’ll excuse you from that.” She was very frustrated by this response because she felt that the College was establishing a dangerous double standard. She challenged them on it:

I said, ‘If I were sighted, the expectations would be entirely different. Why aren’t my peers excused from it?’ And they said, ‘Oh, well, it’s necessary for them to learn it in order to be good musicians...’ And so I said, ‘Well now you have this double standard of either what you’re saying is untrue, and you have to admit that a third of your curriculum is busy work or you’re right and melodic dictation is essential to music education, and you’re ok with me not learning it and being a lesser musician simply because I am blind. Simply because I am too much work. Simply because you don’t understand me and never took the time to understand.’

Paulina’s experiences with double standards were not isolated to melodic dictation or aural skills. She regularly felt that, even for tasks she *could* complete without

accommodation, people expected less of her and, as a result, often neglected to provide basic accommodations that would ensure success or give her the same educational experiences as her sighted peers.

The Hope, Promise, and Failure of Support

Paulina regularly interacted with faculty members about her accommodations needs or worked with her ODS case worker to implement support. Time and time again, she described a cycle of hope, promises, and failure. At the beginning of her process to secure accommodations for a class, Paulina described being hopeful she would have a professor willing to work with her. She was assured by faculty and ODS alike that support would be available and music courses would be accessible. Nevertheless, Paulina believed the university and various stakeholders failed her each time, articulating that she felt as if she “fell through the cracks” of the system.

Dam in the Flow of Support

One of Paulina’s most significant challenges throughout her coursework was the implementation of intended support. Paulina was allowed to register for classes earlier than her peers, which afforded the ODS additional time to provide her with accessible course materials. After registering for class, ODS sent notices to faculty requesting access to all course materials, including textbooks, PowerPoints, worksheets, and anything else involving written text or music. Erika received such a request in May for a student in their course that began the following August. After receiving materials, the ODS outsourced more extensive and content-specific transcriptions (e.g., textbooks and sheet music) and sent smaller materials to be transcribed with the braille embosser in the campus library. Through the assistance of faculty members, the ODS intended to have required materials that were already accessible to sighted students transcribed into braille and braille music for Paulina by the start of the course.

Unfortunately, in Paulina’s experience, these efforts were not typically successful. Outsourcing the more extensive transcriptions meant the ODS had minimal control over processing times. For example, when we met with Paulina in the second week of November, she had still not received a single chapter of the textbook or music materials that a professor had submitted six months prior. More often than not, Paulina received materials for the first few weeks of the semester around the time of the final exam, months after she needed them, rendering these now accessible materials irrelevant. Paulina also shared that there were some semesters in which she *never* received accessible materials. In three semesters of applied voice lessons, she never received braille music and felt that “the expectation was that I learned the music on my own, and all I had to go off was YouTube...that’s not how it’s supposed to work.” Paulina’s frustration was palpable, and she said these types of experiences happened often.

Another common problem in Paulina’s experience was when her teachers decided to change the material for the day or made reflexive shifts regarding coursework. Reflexively pivoting content or instructional materials is commonly

accepted as a pedagogical “best practice.” However, this “best practice” had the opposite effect for Paulina, as her braille materials could not accurately reflect these quick changes. The presence of an embosser in the library on campus typically mitigated this challenge, but the embosser broke midway through Paulina’s first year. The ODS eventually replaced it but changed its location so that it was no longer public access. New protocols required Paulina to make formal requests for brief transcriptions, and once again, she faced additional delays outside her control. As Paulina reflected on these moments, she shared,

And then all my hard work and effort goes down the drain. And I’m back where I started, [perhaps] being in week 5, 6, 7, and just now getting the materials [for] week 3, oh yay. But [teachers say] ‘By the way, there’s only a couple weeks left of the semester. Do you think you can do all the homework from this entire semester in two weeks so I can grade it?’ Thanks for nothing.

Ultimately, the lack of timeliness regarding materials proved to be an insurmountable barrier to her ability to progress in her major.

Interactions with Faculty

Paulina felt the sting of failed support most acutely in her interactions with faculty at the College of Music. She carefully selected professors that had reputations of being helpful, and met with them months in advance to discuss her accommodation needs. She registered with ODS to receive support, and ODS gave advance notice to each of her faculty members about necessary accommodations. Nevertheless, Paulina perceived significant gaps in the professors’ knowledge and understanding of how to help her. Indeed, she believed most of the faculty were unclear on accommodation expectations and processes within their own university. Although she remained hopeful for an accessible course, she often had to self-advocate.

Paulina often felt she had to educate her teachers on accessibility and her own accommodation needs, which caused resentment. “If I don’t go and take charge...it ends up where I’m like, oh, okay, well now I’m stuck with a professor that doesn’t want to work with me.” She found that even well-intentioned faculty often created prohibitive experiences.

I think what makes that so hard is that I know that I can prep and I can do all of the extra work in the world. I can sign up for classes as soon as possible. I can talk to professors, and them being really nice upfront. But then when it comes time actually to do something and I say, “Hey, you need to make this accessible,” [they] just completely shut me down.

She shared that if a teacher did not shut her down, they often gave up or shifted the responsibility for her accommodations back onto the ODS or Paulina herself.

Shifting Responsibilities

Paulina felt strongly that multiple parties refused to take responsibility for her accommodation needs. She described a typical conversation with professors: “The

conversation would go something like, ‘Oh, you should contact the [ODS] and see what they can help you with.’ And I’m like, ‘The [ODS] is aware.’” Similarly, when she went to ODS with her concerns, she would get, “Have you talked to your teacher about this?” Paulina perceived that both the instructors and ODS would place the responsibility on the other to implement the actual support, and she felt caught in the middle while receiving help from neither. When we asked why she believed her professors responded in these ways, she said,

‘There’s this idea of ‘Okay. I’m not going to have a disabled kid in my class. And if I do have a disabled kid in my class, I won’t be expected to take care of them. There will be somebody else that’s expected to take care of their every need.’ Again, there’s that assumption that ... someone else is in charge of the problem.’

Paulina felt frustrated and believed instructors never considered the possibility of teaching a student in the BVI community. She discussed the many resources that could be easily implemented to support her. “The resources are out there. The technology is out there. All of it is out there, but nobody ever thought for a second, ‘I might have a blind student.’” Paulina felt caught between the faculty and ODS and believed both put the responsibility back on her.

As a result, Paulina felt as though she did not receive the appropriate accommodations to succeed. Instead, *she* had to develop specific teaching strategies for her professors to use. The responsibility of teaching her professors how to teach a student in the BVI community, in addition to her coursework, became an unnecessary added stressor and emotional burden.

It always felt a little awkward to have to do all this extra stuff, and it always felt like an extra thing on top of me. I knew that I had to stay on top of it because that is just what my life is as a disabled person.

Despite being used to managing “extra stuff,” Paulina felt it was not her job to teach professors how to help her, and she expressed frustration with the systems that put her in that position.

Oversight of Implementation Across Levels of the Institution

Paulina believed the underlying problem was a lack of oversight with regard to faculty implementation of support. While faculty were required to follow from the ODS, no specific timelines were mandated or explained:

It’s completely up to the professors. There’s nothing that [tells faculty], ‘you have to have it in by this time’ or ‘you have to do it by X amount of weeks.’ There’s no sort of deadline, which means I could start as early as physically possible and still wind up with ‘Oh, I forgot’ this entire time, and now it’s the Monday of class. Or ‘Okay, well, I’ll decide in a week and send that in.’

Furthermore, while resources were available that could assist faculty in supporting students with disabilities, the responsibility fell to the faculty to seek out these resources. As a result, Paulina consistently did not receive the materials she needed to be

successful. Her frustration grew as this repeatedly happened with each of her music courses. She did not believe there was malicious intent on the part of the faculty or university but rather a combination of several elements: a lack of training on accommodations, a lack of anticipation that musical materials may be inaccessible, a lack of faculty belief that they would actually have a disabled student in their class, and a paucity of university oversight when it came to the unique and specific needs of a music student.

The Emotional Toll and Physical Consequences

A powerful theme throughout Paulina's story was the deeply emotional experience of navigating a disabled body in a musical space. She often talked of the physical difficulty of getting through day-to-day experiences, her loss of autonomy, and the particular irony that the physical tool of braille music, meant to help her, was just another barrier in her way.

Deep Emotions

Paulina's re-storying of her experiences conjured powerful feelings. Similarly, she reported regularly feeling overwhelmed and exhausted about the number of times she had to counteract ableism just to get through each day. Interactions with peers seemed particularly stressful for her due to a lack of interaction with her sighted peers, misunderstandings around her disability, or what she called "unnecessary infantilization." Throughout these types of interactions, Paulina reported feeling an array of emotions ranging from anger and frustration to fear, shame, and sadness. Other times, she seemed defeated and expressed hopelessness about her experiences in the College of Music, remarking that she did not believe things would ever change. "I'm no stranger to this feeling that things are outside of my control. And it's scary, and it's infuriating. But the part that makes it so infuriating is the fact that it doesn't have to be [this way]."

As Paulina shared her experiences, she felt angry and frustrated about being forced into roles she did not seek out. She reported that many of her interactions with others pushed her into an advocate role for the entire BVI community, a position that she was proud of but ultimately came to resent. "I was constantly being called a pioneer, but I didn't want to be a pioneer; I just wanted to go to college, to get an education." Being cast in that role felt exhausting, and she reported that it negatively affected her mental health. "I shouldn't have to do all this extra stuff, it's so overwhelming. I'm just trying to finish classes and prepare for the next ones, and I already have to think [so far] ahead with them."

Paulina displayed the most emotional intensity when she discussed her loss of autonomy. Whether it was waiting to receive materials, having to rely on faculty to follow through in a timely manner (or at all), or simply errors in the implementation of resources, Paulina asserted that a lack of control over her own life was the most frustrating part of her experience in college.

All of my accommodations [are] in the hands of sighted people. I don't have the power. The ability to hold people accountable on a larger scale...that's up to somebody else. I have to hope and pray that they care enough. And again, when things are not accessible, whether that's deliberately or just out of carelessness, it's taking away the autonomy of a blind person or a disabled person in general. It's saying, 'No, if you want to do this thing, you have to rely on somebody else. You have to hope that you have somebody around that you are able to rely upon because we didn't care enough to make this with you in mind so that you could rely on yourself.'

In her mind, the behavior of others, which she believed stemmed from a place of fear, was the true disability she had to overcome.

Loss of Autonomy

Paulina drew correlations between her deep frustration with her loss of autonomy and her beliefs about societal fears around disability, and blindness in particular. "I think this is part of what makes inaccessibility so infuriating [for me], but also what makes blindness so scary to sighted people... this idea that you will have to rely on a sighted person and, in general, somebody other than yourself." She felt this acutely when navigating the difficulties surrounding braille and braille music materials.

Navigating Braille

A common thread throughout Paulina's experience was her frustration surrounding braille music resources, and the fact that the very tool meant to help her was yet another obstacle. As mentioned earlier, Paulina experienced significant delays while waiting for music to be transcribed. When presenting her story at a research conference, Paulina explained that each form of written music (e.g., music theory, solo piano, solo vocal, choral octavos) has a slightly different braille music system, something most of her teachers did not realize (us included). The lack of codification of the braille music system created additional hurdles as she struggled to learn and read braille music that was different across her coursework.

Yes, there's a different system for piano versus...voice. So anytime I would do choir, that was a very different system. If I was doing, for example, my string methods or woodwinds or anything like that, that would have a different system, which is different [from] the systems that are used for theory and analyzing and looking at chord progressions and things like that. All of that was different.

Paulina continued to explain that braille music did not necessarily aim to create a system that makes sense, but instead to provide the closest transcription to what a sighted person would look at when they read sheet music (see representative examples in Figure 1 on next page).

And all of that was used, not because it was useful to me, not because it was actually effective...but because that was essentially what I was expected to be as a musician. It was essentially, "How do we equate you to a sighted musician?" Not, "How do we help you make music? How do we give you the equivalent of a sighted musician with no regard to the actual usefulness or effectiveness?"

One of the other hurdles she experienced was that there was no way to check the accuracy of the transcription to braille music because the computer program used to create the music was not screen reader-friendly. Therefore, only a sighted person who also read braille music could double-check for accuracy on Paulina's behalf, and no such person existed at her university. The cyclical nature of being stuck in that position "infuriated" her. Paulina shared that when a sighted person attempted to help her with the embosser and transcription, she often got frustrated with them because "This doesn't have any consequences for them if they mess up. I'm the one who has to deal with those consequences if the music is wrong."

Figure 1

On the left is a sample of an instrumental version of the Star-Spangled Banner. On the right is a "translation" of the same excerpt into braille music. A musician using braille music must decode these numbers and letters into music, including decoding the staff, note names, rhythms, and all relevant markings.

<p>Andante (♩=96)</p>	<p>3/4 th=96 Andante</p> <p>arstlF5h3and thedou 46nf3z th5edersh rhh 46ed3eth tij ththou edthkv ederou rgf wheder qer ed3eth tij thedersh rou arPoco riit3 ththdj owowow whgfed tharrit3 whh th3efg rde er3gwh arrit3 n3ghk</p>
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Changing Her Path

During data collection, Paulina changed majors and left music education and music altogether for a major in digital retailing. When we met with Paulina to discuss her decision to leave music education, she was adamant she wanted to continue to tell her story, as she believed it was more important than ever that others understood the reasons behind the change. Paulina was disappointed to leave music education and admitted she was still "coming to terms" with exiting the program, but ultimately, she felt as if she had no choice. "I want to be clear that I am not quitting; the system has failed me." Her experiences leading up to this moment were "emotionally exhausting and overwhelming." By the time Paulina left music education, she had failed many of her classes and, as a result, had lost her financial aid package. She firmly articulated that she was not failing due to a lack of effort or musical ability. She felt the system, not necessarily individual stakeholders, had failed her because accessible supports either were not provided or not provided in time to be of use, resulting in the failure of courses. She believed her experience highlighted "cracks in the system." She was emotionally, mentally, and financially unable to go on fighting.

We met again about a month after Paulina switched majors, and she seemed like a completely different person. Paulina lit up when she entered the room, and the ease with which she carried herself demonstrated a significant stress reduction. When asked how she was doing, she responded, “Amazing! I love my new classes and teachers, and you know what? The most amazing part is that things are accessible! I can hardly believe it.” She discussed her perception that when removing the barrier of written music, coupled with faculty who were both well-versed in using technology to support her and willing to do so, she felt as if she had a chance of success. While she shared that not all barriers were gone, especially regarding perceptions of ability and peer interactions, she did not feel as if she was constantly fighting a losing battle to prove herself worthy of support.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Paulina’s experience highlights many of the same struggles experienced by BVI students attending college with other majors, including negative faculty perceptions and insufficient student support services (e.g., Francis et al., 2019; Hong, 2015). However, her story, especially as it contrasted with her experiences in a different major, points specifically to the problem of sight-mandatory materials in music coursework that coupled with competing definitions of what it means to be a “successful” musician. Additionally, Paulina’s story highlights a lack of oversight and support for individual faculty members and enduring issues of stigma surrounding disability, and BVI people in particular.

Sight Mandatory Materials

This narrative highlights a persistent question about the necessity of sight-mandatory written notation as a primary marker of “good musicianship.” Paulina only attempted to utilize braille music as she perceived she needed to engage with the written musical system, not because she felt it enhanced her theoretical or practical musical skills. Music in higher education relies heavily on Western classical notation-based systems as the primary source for learning music (Kivijärvi & Väkevä, 2020), and much coursework is dedicated to learning and mastering this visual system (Abramo, 2014). However, multiple other forms of musical literacy exist, and scholars increasingly advocate for their inclusion in preservice education (e.g., Draper et al., 2010; May et al., 2020).

Paulina’s struggle offers a critique of over-relying on one system within a music education coursework program at the expense of others. Specifically, when considering the essential functions necessary to become a music teacher, one specific form of literacy (visual) cannot be the sole marker of capability (Abramo, 2014). For example, children are no less musical because they can vocally improvise and not write it down. Similarly, a composer who uses iconic representations rather than traditional musical staff would not suddenly be deemed unworthy. We argue that Paulina would have been

no less qualified as a teacher if she could have dictated what she heard rather than writing it down and that an ocularcentric approach not only did not serve her (Abramo, 2014) but also positioned her as being less than her sighted peers (Sokal et al., 2017). Perhaps reframing the fact that she could complete the task without written notation as a strength in her musicianship could expand perceptions of how other students might display their specific and unique strengths in preparation programs.

This is not to say that students should not learn a system of notation if it serves them, and notation systems are a form of communication that many musicians rely on in their daily practice. Indeed, some BVI students may succeed with braille music (Park & Kim, 2014). Instead, we question the validity of saying a particular system is the only marker of success rather than seeing it for simply what it is: a tool. Reading and writing music on a traditional 5-line staff is one of many available tools to demonstrate musicianship. Therefore, it seems counterproductive to prioritize a visual form of musical literacy over another or declare one more important than others when designing coursework (Abramo, 2014). Likewise, if a specific system does not serve a student with diverse needs, preparation programs might seek out ways to be flexible in presenting content through a system that *would* meet their needs.

Some may argue for the consistency of a program and that all who are classified as music educators must have a similar set of skills. Such thoughts are what fuels the existence of accreditation programs such as NASM. However, this could not be farther from the truth of what happens in a music program, where students specialize in many ways, whether instrument type, age range, or subspecialty. Likewise, more and more programs recognize the importance of skills outside the Western canon. Therefore, to create a seemingly arbitrary barrier of written Western notational literacy using a traditional staff as the only metric in some coursework seems both elitist and ableist.

Enduring Stigmas and Forced Disclosure

Paulina navigates the world without the option of choosing when and with whom to disclose her blindness and, as a result, is continually confronted with embedded societal bias and stigma from peers and faculty alike. She felt these stigmas contributed to others' perceptions of her deservingness of support and even her value as a musician. Social stigma continues to permeate interpersonal relationships for persons with disabilities and has been shown to have an even greater impact on individuals who are unable to "pass" in everyday life (Goffman, 1963). Visible signifiers (e.g., a cane or guide dog) prevent many BVI people, including Paulina, from obscuring their impairment in the same way individuals with hidden disabilities could.

People with highly noticeable disabilities do not have the privilege of choosing or declining disclosure, as evidence of difference cannot be displaced by those who notice them (Cinarbas & Hos, 2020). For example, sighted people might feel unsettled when interacting with a BVI person who fails to direct their eyes or face toward them and then direct fault or displace their discomfort onto the disabled person (Monceri,

2014). Paulina worked extremely hard in her interactions with faculty and peers to mitigate their discomfort to avoid negatively impacting these relationships. She intentionally focused her eyes on the sound of the other person's voice when engaging in conversation, but in that process, caused her body further stress and undue pain. Additionally, she found it very irritating to have to "play along." Goffman (1963) supports Paulina's anecdotal experience; he explains that stigmatized individuals are required to act as though they are not burdened or that their impairment(s) has made them different from those showcasing a typical, perfect body (Monceri, 2014). Furthermore, stigmatized individuals are put in positions to have to take away the discomfort of others. Paulina often went about this through self-deprecating humor to mitigate a situation before it became negative or before someone would make a judgment call about her worth. However, the irony was not lost on her that the very thing she could not do—see—was the same thing that others used to determine her value.

Supporting All Students... And the Faculty

Paulina regularly said, "Things don't have to be this way," in reference to her accessibility issues. She often cited resources, materials, and technology-related tools that are successful in other academic settings and could easily have been implemented to support her and other BVI students in music (McNicholl et al., 2021). As we discussed ideas, it became clear that many of her suggestions could also help students who were not BVI. Suggestions included flexibility in assignment formats, closed captioning in videos, and slide decks that could be accessed as an audiobook. Not all students may need these resources, but they are not harmed if teachers use them. What stood out to us, however, was the lack of faculty support, training, and oversight to ensure these strategies were implemented. Scholars have emphasized that faculty feel unprepared to provide accommodations, and the support they receive is insufficient to care for students with disabilities (e.g., Francis et al., 2019; Hong, 2015). Often, university-provided training on accommodations is a one-off experience that has a limited impact on teacher practice (Belt & Lowenthal, 2020). In contrast, faculty need content-specific and ongoing mentorship as they work to implement new accommodation strategies (Humphrey et al., 2011; Moraña, 2017).

I (Erika) have felt acutely challenged when trying to support some students with disabilities in my coursework in the past. I have taken multiple one-on-one training sessions with the ODS staff to learn new technologies or ensure I could utilize accommodations within a content-specific set of coursework and still felt under-equipped on a regular basis. However, my biggest takeaway was that the onus was on me to seek appropriate training and successfully implement procedures. Furthermore, I felt the tension between wanting to do what was right for my students, the time it would take, and the lack of support I felt from the institutional systems supposed to help, such as the ODS. Paulina perceived that many other faculty members in the College of Music were unwilling to take these extra steps, and other scholars have

documented that faculty reticence (perceived or real) contributes to student challenges (Coriale et al., 2012).

Universities must begin to find ways to support faculty in expanding their perspectives on SWD and implement consistent and comprehensive structures that aid in delivering accommodations. Although Paulina's perceptions may not have matched how faculty felt about their efforts, willingness is only one component of faculty implementing accommodations. It is likely that many are willing but feel the tension of being able to navigate accommodations successfully, as well as a lack of time to devote to it amidst their other job responsibilities. However, the perception of support from the institution can strongly affect a faculty member's effort toward accommodations (McCarron, 2020). It is not enough for universities to inform faculty members that they must provide accommodations for a student or to tell them about available resources. Training and support must be mandatory and ongoing to create comprehensive and up-to-date accommodations that are university-wide and not dependent on finding a "willing" professor. Furthermore, timelines for implementation must be clear, and universities must implement oversight to ensure faculty comply, both at the beginning and throughout the semester.

Challenges Remain

Even if a comprehensive system for accommodations were in place, all faculty were willing, and the tensions between institutional policy and inclusive practice were removed, challenges still remain for BVI students (Parker & Draves, 2017). First, there is an inherent tension between the ability to prepare appropriate accommodations ahead of time and teacher reflexive practice. Successful educators rely on their ability to respond to their students' needs and pivot instruction accordingly. In Paulina's case, teacher reflexivity often rendered her materials useless because when faculty changed their lessons on short notice, there was not enough time to adapt materials. While some might argue a teacher should not have the autonomy to adjust at the last moment, teacher autonomy strongly correlates with job satisfaction and less attrition (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). For BVI students, who often need materials in alternative formats, there must be faster and more accessible options for faculty and students to access or create their materials to provide accommodations while simultaneously preserving teacher reflexivity.

Additional challenges exist regarding faculty and peer perception of and bias towards SWD in postsecondary settings (e.g., Hazen, 2012; Wilson et al., 2018). As in other studies (e.g., Herbert et al., 2020; Katsiyannis et al., 2009), faculty need greater exposure to or personal experience with SWD and to begin to acknowledge that more and more students with diverse learning needs will be a part of their classrooms. Additionally, faculty need to take the time to learn about university-specific policies/resources because SWD may face challenges in knowing how to advocate for themselves, especially if they are unaccustomed to navigating their disability without the

assistance of their families (Francis et al., 2019). Both universities and individual faculty can work to mitigate these challenges by offering more one-on-one support to SWD from the outset, including awareness of campus resources, peer support opportunities, and individual ongoing mentorship that begins upon admission.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations to this study. First, Paulina's experiences were unique to her. Another BVI student may have had a completely different experience. Future researchers might benefit from collecting the experiences of several BVI students within a single program or across several different music education programs to consider the broader experience of BVI students. Documenting students' experiences with different types of disabilities may provide a richer understanding of navigating disability in a music education program. Similar to the students in Parker and Draves (2017), Paulina did not end up teaching music in a PK-12 public school. Understanding the experiences of BVI in-service music educators who have successfully navigated a music education program might inform how faculty and music education programs might better serve BVI students in their respective programs. However, such literature does not yet exist.

Another limitation of this narrative was that it only offered Paulina's perspective. While she had strong opinions of the beliefs and behaviors of faculty and stakeholders at the university, their perspectives were intentionally not a part of this study. Historically, scholars have spent more time seeking to understand teachers' perceptions (e.g., Pino, 2022; VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014) than students. The goal of this study was *only* Paulina's lived experience. It would be valuable to put student and faculty perceptions in conversation with one another, potentially supporting both sides in dispelling misconceptions or misunderstandings.

CONCLUSION

While Paulina ultimately left her music teacher education program, there is much to be learned from her experience. Music teacher educators (MTE) need to reevaluate how we teach those with diverse bodies, what we consider excellent musicianship, and who we consider worthy of teaching. Paulina said it best:

If we are really going to start to make things accessible, the view of what a musician is, what music is, has to shift. It has to change, and it has to be malleable. That's not to say sheet music is bad or that it is in any way ineffective, but it's not the only way of making music. It's not the only way of learning music. And it's not the only way to be a good musician.

Paulina's words serve as a call to action for universities and MTE to reevaluate their preparation programs to determine if they are creating an inclusive space that welcomes diverse bodies, learners, and forms of musicianship or if they maintaining the status quo. MTE must consider the possibility that their programs continue to push out bodies

who do not conform and respond accordingly. Simultaneously, universities need to consider how they are supporting faculty in these efforts rather than merely adding more to their workload without paired support.

Endnotes

¹ Paulina chose to use her real name in this paper and did not want to be anonymized. This was Paulina's choice; she was adamant that she both wanted to be named and a named author, as it aligned with her future goals as a researcher. Nichols (2016) discussed at length the challenges of navigating institutional and reviewer concerns while respecting the wishes of their participant to be named, and others have highlighted the problematic nature of anonymization when presenting perspectives of marginalized populations (Akuffo, 2023). Paulina's decision aligns with CDS literature on centering the voices and experiences of those marginalized from research, and we agreed that anonymizing her would be akin to silencing her unique voice and perspective.

² IRB had no concerns with Paulina being in Erika's class based on the parameters we set forth for conducting the research. Specifically, Erika uses "ungrading," whereby students receive only qualitative feedback and complete activities as credit/no credit. Additionally, because of the challenges that we describe in the findings, Paulina dropped out of all music classes two weeks into data collection. As such, any potential power differential between Erika and Paulina disappeared at the beginning stages of the study.

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