

Challenges of Teaching in Specialized Music Education: Are Trombone Teachers Prepared to Receive a Student with Special Educational Needs?

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SUMMARY

This article presents an exploratory study on the preparation of trombone teachers in specialized music education in Portugal to teach students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The research stems from a master's dissertation developed at Instituto Piaget de Viseu (2018/2019–2019/2020) and aimed to understand the extent to which initial and continuing training includes special education content, to identify reported teaching difficulties, and to reflect on implications for pedagogical practice.

An online questionnaire was administered to trombone teachers from specialized music schools, yielding 16 valid responses. Results indicate that most teachers did not attend any curricular units on Special Education during their academic training and that continuing education opportunities in this field are scarce. Nevertheless, most respondents reported having taught students with SEN and identified difficulties mainly related to attention and concentration. A contradiction emerged between the recognition of these difficulties and the perceived need for training, which was not always acknowledged by participants.

It is concluded that trombone teachers' training should integrate Special Education content and that greater availability of continuing education opportunities is required, as a key condition for fostering more inclusive music education.

Keywords: Music Education; Trombone; Special Educational Needs; Inclusion; Teacher Training

INTRODUCTION

Music education in the context of compulsory schooling and specialized instruction has, in recent decades, been called upon to address the challenges of inclusive schooling. In Portugal, as in other countries, the presence of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in instrumental classes places additional demands on teachers, both in terms of pedagogical and didactic knowledge and in terms of specific training to deal with heterogeneous learning profiles. Among wind instruments, the trombone presents technical and physical particularities (breathing, embouchure, coordination, rhythmic and melodic reading) that can intensify these demands when barriers to participation and learning are at stake.

Based on this framework, the present article is part of a master's research project and focuses on trombone teachers' perceived preparation to welcome and teach students with SEN in specialized music education in Portugal. It aims to understand to what extent initial and continuing training of these teachers includes (or not) special education content, identify potential gaps, and map areas of difficulty reported in classroom practice. This issue is consistent with international and national guidelines supporting inclusive education, which call for pedagogical practices adapted to students' needs.

The study adopts an exploratory design, suitable when systematic knowledge about a phenomenon is scarce and when the aim is to clarify questions and hypotheses for future research. An online questionnaire was administered to trombone teachers from specialized music schools in mainland Portugal, with data collected between December 2019 and January 2020. The sampling was by convenience, with 16 valid responses. The instrument gathered sociodemographic and academic information, as well as perceptions of special education training and experiences with SEN students. Procedures respected confidentiality and anonymity.

This article addresses the research question: “Are trombone teachers prepared to receive and teach students with SEN in specialized music education?” To guide it, the following objectives were defined: (i) to characterize initial training and participation in continuing education in special education among these teachers; (ii) to identify occurrences of teaching SEN students and the reported pedagogical difficulties; (iii) to discuss implications for instrumental teacher training and the organization of more inclusive learning contexts.

The article is structured as follows: after this introduction, a synthetic conceptual framework on music education and inclusion is presented; the method (participants, instrument, and procedures) is described; the questionnaire results and discussion follow; finally, conclusions, limitations, and proposals for future work are presented.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as an exploratory descriptive investigation, suitable when available knowledge about a phenomenon is scarce and the aim is to clarify questions and raise hypotheses for future research (Ponte, 1994; Yin, 2001).

In educational research, methodological choices must be consistent with research objectives. Quantitative approaches emphasize measurement and statistical analysis, while qualitative approaches focus on meanings and contexts. Despite differences, both share fundamental concerns such as data validity, scientific rigor, and transparency (Bryman, 2012).

In this case, a questionnaire survey with descriptive analysis was chosen, complemented by qualitative interpretation of open-ended responses. This combination allowed the identification of patterns in trombone teachers’ training and experience regarding teaching students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), as well as reflection on the main reported difficulties.

Study Design

The central aim was to identify trombone teachers’ perceptions regarding their preparation to teach SEN students and to map difficulties experienced in practice.

Participants

In the 2019/2020 school year, there were 54 officially recognized specialized music schools in mainland Portugal. However, only 44 offered trombone in their curricula, which constituted the reference universe for this study.

All these institutions were contacted by email, addressed to pedagogical boards and, whenever possible, directly to trombone teachers. In total, six schools confirmed not having a trombone teacher on staff.

Data collection yielded 16 valid responses to the online questionnaire. Although numerically small, this sample should be analyzed in light of the available universe, representing a significant fraction of active teachers.

Respondents’ age distribution was as follows: 18.8% under 30, 43.8% between 31 and 40, 31.3% between 41 and 50, and 12.5% between 51 and 60. Regarding academic qualifications, 62.5% held a master’s in music education and 37.5% a bachelor’s degree.

This profile indicates a relatively young group of teachers, with high academic qualifications and accumulated experience in instrumental teaching, characteristics that support the relevance of the collected data for reflecting on inclusion in trombone teaching.

Data Collection Instrument

An online questionnaire, called TRB, was designed with three sections:

Sociodemographic and academic characterization (age, qualifications, institution of training);

Training path in Special Education (curricular and/or extracurricular);

Experience with SEN students (occurrence, reported difficulties, training needs).

Questions included closed items (multiple choice, yes/no) and some open items for detail. The script ensured anonymity and confidentiality, explained the research purpose, and requested informed consent.

Procedures

The questionnaire was available via Google Forms between December 2019 and January 2020. The link was emailed to school boards and, whenever possible, directly to trombone teachers. Internal forwarding to teachers was requested.

At the end of the collection period, 16 valid responses were obtained. Data were exported to a digital file and processed in a spreadsheet for descriptive analysis of frequencies and percentages.

Data Analysis

Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies), complemented by qualitative interpretation of open-ended responses. This approach allowed the identification of training patterns, teaching experiences with SEN students, and areas of greatest difficulty.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were informed of the objectives and academic use of the data. No personal data allowing direct identification of respondents were collected.

RESULTS

Sixteen trombone teachers from specialized music schools responded to the questionnaire, forming the study's valid sample. The main results are presented below.

Participant Profile

Table 1 shows the age distribution. Most respondents were aged between 31–40 years (43.8%) and 41–50 years (31.3%).

Table 1 – Age distribution of respondents

Age range	Responses	%
< 30	3	18,8
31–40	7	43,8
41–50	5	31,3
51–60	2	12,5
> 60	0	0

Regarding academic qualifications, 10 teachers (62.5%) had a master's degree in music education, and 6 (37.5%) only a bachelor's degree.

Training in Special Education

When asked about the presence of curricular units related to Special Education during initial training, 62.5% (n=10) said they had none, while 37.5% (n=6) reported having attended some. Reported subjects included: Special Educational Needs, Inclusive Education, and Education and Special Needs.

Regarding complementary training outside academic courses, only 2 teachers (14.3%) reported participation in such activities, one of them holding a postgraduate degree in Special Education.

Experience with SEN Students

Most respondents, 68.8% (n=11), had already taught SEN students. Of these, 75% (n=9) reported having difficulties in the teaching process. The most frequently reported difficulties were:

Attention – 4 teachers (50% of open responses);

Attention/Rhythmic reading – 1 teacher (12.5%);

Concentration – 1 teacher (12.5%);

Reading – 1 teacher (12.5%);

Reading and attention – 1 teacher (12.5%).

These data reveal that attention and concentration were the most problematic factors in experiences with SEN students.

Training Needs

Asked about the need to deepen Special Education content in their academic training, 53.3% (n=8) answered they did not feel this need, while 46.7% (n=7) said yes.

Regarding active search for specific training, 43.8% (n=7) had already tried, but 71.4% (n=5) of them did not find available offers.

DISCUSSION

The results allow reflection on trombone teachers' preparation in specialized music education in Portugal to teach students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Insufficient Initial Training

Most respondents did not attend curricular units related to Special Education during academic training (62.5%). This shows a significant gap in instrumental teachers' initial training. As Rodrigues (2006) argues, inclusive education requires that future teachers engage early with pedagogical foundations that enable them to understand and respond to diversity. The absence of such preparation can result in intuitive practices, more dependent on personal experience than on scientific references.

Practical Experience with SEN Students

Despite the lack of formal training, 68.8% of respondents had already taught SEN students. This confirms Correia's (2008) observation that student diversity is a structural feature of contemporary schooling, not an exception. In this study, trombone teachers mainly faced difficulties related to attention and concentration, aspects often identified in the literature as barriers to musical learning among students with specific needs (Ockelford, 2013). These challenges require differentiated strategies, greater flexibility, and pedagogical sensitivity—competences that, according to Freire (1992), do not arise spontaneously but result from continuous formative work.

Contradiction Between Difficulties and Training Needs

A paradox emerges: although most teachers reported difficulties in teaching SEN students, 53.3% stated they did not feel the need to deepen their knowledge of Special Education. This contradiction can be interpreted in two ways. First, teachers may feel that practical experience allowed them to find ad hoc strategies, without recognizing the importance of more consistent theoretical frameworks. Second, there may be a perception that Special Education is peripheral to instrumental practice, contrary to international guidelines on inclusion (UNESCO, 1994; UN General Assembly, 1948).

Continuing Education and Limited Opportunities

Although 43.8% of participants sought specific training, most did not find available opportunities. This highlights a gap not only in initial but also in continuing training. As Silva et al. (2016) argue, building an inclusive school depends on training policies covering teachers of all areas, including artistic and musical education. The absence of such opportunities reflects an undervaluation of the field, confirming Miles and Singal's (2010) analysis of the gap between Education for All policies and the effective operationalization of inclusion.

Implications for Music Education

The study suggests that trombone teachers, despite showing confidence in dealing with diversity, are operating within a framework of insufficient training. Confidence may reflect resilience and adaptability but does not replace the need for theoretical and methodological foundations to ensure greater pedagogical effectiveness and consistency (Bryman, 2012; Neri de Souza et al., 2016).

Thus, the data reinforce the relevance of integrating at least one curricular unit on Special Education applied to music teaching into academic curricula, as advocated by Pires (2007) and Formosinho (1996), ensuring that future teachers have a minimum set of references to deal with increasingly frequent situations.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study identified significant gaps in trombone teachers' preparation for teaching students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in specialized music education in Portugal. Most respondents did not engage with curricular units on Special Education during initial training, and continuing training opportunities are scarce.

Despite this insufficiency, results show that many teachers have taught SEN students and, although they report difficulties—mainly related to attention and concentration—they do not always recognize the need to deepen their training. This contradiction confirms the urgency of raising awareness of the importance of inclusion, reinforcing the idea that practical experience alone does not replace systematic, well-founded training.

It is therefore necessary to integrate Special Education content into music education curricula and to provide specific continuing education opportunities. Only then can teachers be effectively prepared to respond to diversity, promoting inclusive and equitable music education aligned with national and international guidelines on education for all.

Finally, limitations related to the exploratory nature and small sample size are acknowledged. Future research could expand to other instrumental areas, involve a more representative sample, and use mixed methods to deepen understanding of this phenomenon.

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supervision of Professor Dr. Alexandre Andrade.

Declaration on the Use of AI-Assisted Technologies

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT, by OpenAI) were used solely to support text revision, organization, and translation. All ideas, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions presented are the sole responsibility of the author.

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