

A reoccurring theme in inclusive education is the tension inherent in the spectrum from individualism to social context. A careful balance - between the acknowledgement of impairment as a fixed reality of a person's experience, and the social environment which can exert oppressive forces on those who have impairments - must be struck.

On the one hand, it is impossible to deny the individual and unique realities faced by the varying circumstances of persons who deal with their own collection of biases, personal truths, and physical/mental/social contexts. When Treweek et al. (2019) studied the personal experience of persons who have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, a core finding was that "the heterogeneous nature of the autistic spectrum was a key theme for many participants". Autism spectrum disorder is far from the only type of impairment that can have multiple modes of presenting in human beings, and much as the impairments people experience, the responses would seem to likewise need individualized care and acknowledgement. Both persons with an impairment and the individuals engaged in working with them report similar needs for experiences that address them as individuals within their larger social context. The 'Coffee House' environment reported by Mitchell (2019), emphasized in the reflective dialogue that their experiences allowed "each performer 'to be an individual and be that in front of other people.' The human needs for autonomy and togetherness are addressed..." These human beings, impaired or not, *require* an element of individual customization and opportunity in order to fully participate in the human experience.

To contrast the individual perspective, humans exist and interpret their being through the social lens in which they live. Those same social lenses often exert negative pressures on members of groups who do not partake of the dominant or privileged segments of the population. Too, the perspective of privilege often short-circuits any attempt to acknowledge and ameliorate the level of oppression: "studies have shown that actual behavior toward minoritized groups does not line up with dominant group beliefs about these interactions." (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) A particularly pointed example is that the Treweek et al. study referenced above - looking at personal experiences of people with autism spectrum disorder - is the first of its kind, with no research having been done on what people with ASD actually perceive to be the stereotypes and social stigmas of their own reality (Treweek et al., 2019)! When the steps are taken to actually address the social context in which these experiences take place, the results can be overwhelmingly positive. Mitchell's (2019) work with the Coffee House experience noted that "where participation, rather than aesthetic standard, defines success, anyone can participate and the atmosphere is undeniably supportive."

As educators of any kind, but especially music educators, we partake of social experiences. Music is an inherently social activity, reinforcing bonding experiences, allowing the brain to grow in more ways than the simple recognition of pitch, and even acting as a levelling of the existing power structures that encourage bias and oppression. Learning to see and interrogate the fabric of the social environment, in which we live and work, for its true self and working to address the problems seen there, whilst keeping in mind the incredible uniqueness of each person whom we work with, is the quintessential challenge of grappling with inclusive music education. Only by negotiating that minefield on a daily, monthly, and lifelong basis do we approach the kind of structural change that results in a better world for all.

References

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