

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX COMMUNICATION NEEDS IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM: BENEFITS AND OBSTACLES TO MUSIC EDUCATOR COLLABORATION WITH SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS

Over the past 20 years, researchers have described structural challenges that music educators face as they seek to better support students with disabilities (Bernard, 2019; Grimsby, 2020; Hammel & Hourigan, 2024). First, while accessible music education practices are receiving more attention, music educators describe a lack of training in working with students with disabilities, including communication disabilities, in their pre-service education and professional development (Bernard, 2019; McCord & Watts, 2010).

Bernard (2019) reported that music educators consistently report a lack of pre-service training and difficulty locating appropriate continuing education opportunities. Culp and Salvador (2021) completed a study in which only 36.5% of respondents reported that a music-specific course on teaching students within exceptional populations/with disabilities was a required part of their undergraduate program, and that only 10.2% of graduate programs indicated the same.

Furthermore, music educators are among school-based staff least likely to have opportunities to collaborate with colleagues (Battersby, 2019). Thus, music educators may begin teaching jobs unprepared to support students with higher needs while also lacking opportunities to collaborate to do so.

Despite these concerns, music educators may teach students with communication disabilities, including students with complex communication needs (CCNs). Students with CCNs do not rely on speech as their primary means of communication and may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). AAC supports augmented or replaced speech and can include gestures, picture symbols, voice output technology, or text (Balandin, 2002).

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, n.d.), 11% to 12% of students who receive special education services via an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan need AAC. Music educators could gain support in using AAC with students by collaborating with speech-language pathologists (SLPs), but little is known about music educator/SLP collaboration experiences.

Examining music educator/SLP collaboration experiences

In 2024, I set out to understand how music educators and SLPs may be collaborating and, if they are not, what obstacles exist (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025). I interviewed three

music educators and four SLPs about topics pertinent to their training and professional lives.

In this article, I describe four of the ten emerging themes from my investigation that have specific implications for music educators: (a) music educators' training to work with disabled students, (b) implementing communication supports in the music classroom, (c) collaboration beliefs and experiences, and (d) obstacles to collaboration. Then, I provide ideas for practice based on my findings. Although my study was not intended to be generalizable, some music teachers may see that their experiences are shared by others.

Music educators' training to work with disabled students

Music educators in my investigation reported receiving very little to no pre-service education in supporting students with disabilities in the music classroom and having difficulties finding relevant continuing education opportunities (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025).

Two participants reported having one pre-service course on disability in schools that focused on the historical and legal aspects but did not address pedagogy or music education at all. The third music educator, who did not pursue a traditional path to becoming a music teacher, reported gaining knowledge from working as a paraprofessional and substitute teacher in substantially separate classes for students with high support needs. All three reported continued frustration locating relevant continuing education opportunities.

Further, all music educators reported that they received no formal training in AAC either as part of their pre-service education or as continuing education/professional development. The music educator that had worked in the substantially separate classes reported that he learned to use communication supports from his SLP colleagues and classroom teachers during that experience.

Implementing communication supports in music classrooms for students with CCNs

All three music educators in my study reported finding ways to incorporate AAC into their classroom activities (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025). Examples included using visual schedules and picture-based visual supports to (a) provide students with vocabulary relevant to the music room, (b) allow students to make song and instrument choices, and (c)

show students the sequence of activities for the class period. Two music teachers reported that some students bring speech generating devices to class, which the students used to request songs, label items in the music classroom and comment on class activities. Such incorporation was often made possible by the presence of paraprofessionals or ABA specialists who accompanied students to music class.

Collaboration beliefs and experiences

All interviewees expressed the desire for increased collaboration but reported not having opportunities to do so due to schedule complications and lack of time (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025). The music educators reported that they were more likely to engage in collaborative activities with paraprofessionals and ABA specialists because those professionals accompanied students to the music classroom. SLPs reported some interactions with arts educators, such as asking for advice on materials and activities, but did not have opportunities to do more.

Obstacles to collaboration

Participants described several obstacles to increased collaboration (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025). All participants reported time demands and class or caseload size as being the most significant obstacles to collaboration. The music educators taught 300-400 students per week and those working in large schools reported that they often did not know (a) which of their students received related services, (b) how to locate students' IEPs, or (c) who the SLPs were. One music teacher reported that she wished to talk more regularly with the classroom teachers but that the classroom teachers' preparation period was when she taught their students.

Ideas for practice

My findings may have implications for music educators. Music educators who wish to acquire more knowledge in accessible music education have several options. First, they can attend conferences and connect with organizations that focus on accessibility in the arts such as the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, Kennedy Center Office of Accessibility/VSA, and the International Society for Music Education Commission for Special Music Education and Music Therapy.

They can also read comprehensive and informative books, such as *Music in Special Education, Third Edition* (Adamek & Darrow, 2018); *Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities: A Label-Free Approach, Third Edition* (Hammel & Hourigan, 2024); and *Accessible Arts Education* (Bernard, 2025).

Teachers may also draw on my participants' practices to incorporate AAC into their classrooms, including using picture-based visual supports and purposefully incorporating speech generating devices.

To learn how to use AAC with students, music teachers may reach out to SLPs in their building for information about professional development. They can also seek trainings offered by their district and advocate to administrators to include training on AAC.

Music educators can also attend state and national speech-language-hearing association and assistive technology conferences to learn about different ideas. Training modules are available online, both for a fee and for free, that provide both an overview of AAC and a deeper dive into more specific topics. See Table 1 for suggested resources.

My participants reported professional isolation and a desire for collaboration, and scholars have suggested several solutions to alleviate isolation and increase collaboration, though little has been suggested or investigated to support collaborations between music educators and SLPs.

Music teachers could seek out or start professional learning communities (PLCs), communities of practice (Battersby, 2019; Grimsby, 2023), or study groups through professional associations (see Table 1). These groups can involve other music educators and/or SLPs and need only include fellow professionals with common interests in sharing experiences and learning more about collaboration.

Table 1
Suggested Resources for Learning about AAC and Accessible Music Education Practices

Organization	Link	Description
AssistiveWare (2026)	https://www.assistiveware.com/learn-aac/what-is-aac	Information and resources: Introduction to AAC
AAC Institute (2015-2026)	https://aacinstitute.org/introduction-to-aac/	Course: Introduction to AAC
Center for Literacy and Disability Studies, UNC-Chapel Hill (2026)	https://project-core.com/	Website: Research and practice of using Universal Core vocabulary to support students with CCNs
American Musicological Society (2026)	https://www.musicdisabilitystudies.org/	Study Group: Interdisciplinary scholars who share interests in music and disability studies
Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education (2026)	https://college.berklee.edu/BIAAE/professional-development	Study Group: Music educator professional development in accessible music education

Co-teaching dyads in which a more experienced music educator pairs with a novice teacher (Shaw, 2022) and university-school system partnerships (Bautista et al., 2021) may also be beneficial. While co-teaching allows for support with curricular and administrative challenges, university-school system partnerships may increase sharing research with school-based educators and foster the use of online technologies to connect educators (Bautista et al., 2021).

Finally, music educators can advocate at the school and district levels for structural supports that make collaboration more feasible, such as common planning time and cooperative professional development activities for arts educators and related service professionals.

Summary and conclusion

In this article, I provided implications for music educators based on findings from my previous investigation (Pierce-Goldstein, 2025). Despite a desire to collaborate, SLPs and music teachers in my study had few opportunities

to do so due to time and class size/caseload. Further, music educators in my study relied on their personal resourcefulness to address systemic challenges that interfere with needed professional development and potential collaborations.

However, a rich body of literature has developed to support music educators who teach students with disabilities, and several organizations dedicated to accessible arts education exist. These organizations sponsor conferences, study groups, and/or continuing education opportunities. Music educators can join or create their own communities of practice and PLCs to increase their knowledge, skills, and networks.

Finally, music educators can advocate at the national, state, and local levels for increased structural support to fos-

ter collaboration, such as common planning time and cooperative professional development opportunities.

Students with CCNs deserve to participate in robust and meaningful music education. Collaboration with SLPs may help music educators support their students with communication challenges by assisting them in understanding students' communication goals, building their knowledge of AAC, and incorporating supports and strategies.

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