

Autistic Music Teachers: A Review of the Literature

Keoni Smith

Background:

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a widely occurring developmental disability, affecting as many as 1 in 100 people worldwide. Research on the experiences of autistic individuals who become music educators is sparse, and they face unique challenges while navigating the sensory and social environments of music teaching.

What workplace accommodations would be helpful for an in-service music teacher with autism? What special considerations for autistic music teachers are to be accounted for to minimize discrimination upon disclosure of diagnosis? What autism-specific strengths do teachers bring to enhance music education?

Method: Literature Review

For this systematic review, conducted March through December 2024, the following search terms were used:

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Teacher education	disability	Music Teachers
In-service teacher	Autism	teaching
Autistic teachers	Teachers with disabilities	Developmental disability
	Disabled teachers	

Searches yielded 12 relevant articles, which were categorized into three broad groups based on which aspect of the autistic experience was covered the most, matching the above research questions:

Accommodations	6
Strengths and Advantages	4
Minimizing Discrimination	2

No articles found were specific to autistic music teachers.

Contact Me:
 Keoni E. Smith: keoniearlsmith@gmail.com

Findings:

Common themes of studies indicate a multitude of factors that negatively impact the quality of living for autistic music teachers, all contributing to the **phenomenon of autistic burnout**.

Studies show that there are often **misunderstandings from colleagues and administration** on specific support needs and experiences, challenges in navigating the auditory environment of school, **complications with disclosing disability status**, and co-occurring mental health complications from the consistency of stressors.

Despite the lack of music-context specific articles, **these challenges, especially the abundance of auditory stimuli in music, can greatly stifle access to being a music educator for many autistic individuals**.

Recommendations:

Recommendations and actions for creating access in music education for autistic educators can be divided into the three article categories:

Accommodations – Allowing and destigmatizing the use of noise cancelling equipment, creating schedules that are consistent and routine, multi-modal communication of information, and ample notification of changes where possible.

Leveraging Strengths – Allowing autistic music teachers to utilize their lived experiences to enhance the education of neurodivergent students, creating lasting opportunities for all autistic individuals, and allowing teachers to unmask their excitement in special interests to further engage these students.

Minimizing Discrimination – Creating trainings on neurodiversity and autism led by Autistic people to increase understanding of needs and differences, cultivating an environment of accepting neurodivergent teachers and students for their intrinsic value.

Selected Literature:

O'Neill, C., & Kenny, N. (2023). "I saw things through a different lens..." : An interpretative phenomenological study of the experiences of autistic teachers in the Irish Education System. *Educ. Sci.*, 13(670).
<https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/9vr2u>

Wood, R. (2023). Happier on the outside? discourses of exclusion, disempowerment and belonging from former Autistic School staff. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 24(1), 39–52.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12612>

Chen, Y., Jenkins, C. A., Charlton, R. A., Happé, F., Mandy, W., & Stewart, G. R. (2024). "utterly overwhelming"—a mixed-methods exploration of sensory processing differences and mental health experiences in middle-aged and older autistic adults. *Autism in Adulthood*.
<https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2024.0031>

Brown, L. (2011, August 4). *Identity-first language*. Autistic Self Advocacy Network.
<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>