Eötvös Loránd University
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Summary of Ph.D. Dissertation

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COMPETENCIES IN INCLUSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

– Blind and Low Vision Professional Musicians’, Music Students’ and Their Teachers’ Beliefs on Inclusion, Teacher Competencies and Their Development
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INTRODUCTION

Music and playing music is an integral part of our mental picture of blindness and blind people. There have always been renowned and acknowledged blind musicians, such as Francesco Landini (1325-1397) Italian organist, composer and poet, John Stanley (1712-1786) English organist and composer, Joaquín Rodrigo (1901-1999) Spanish composer and pianist. Several blind children’s parents hope that music will be their children’s future profession.

In the school year of 2016/2017 at the School of the Blind, I started to teach Braille music reading and notation to talented blind students who wish to continue their studies in a music secondary school, therefore, various arguments in favour of and against a musical career gain major importance. Blind and low vision music students’ and their teachers’ narratives of challenges and difficulties of learning/teaching music in mainstream educational settings play a significant role in considering the dilemma. As an active, though, non-professional musician and insider researcher, I am convinced that exploring the roots of difficulties and challenges may add new aspects to teaching music to blind students in secondary and higher education and to preparing music teachers to teach blind and low vision students.
1. THE RESEARCH TOPIC

1.1. Relevance of the research

The topic of the research is exploring Hungarian blind and low vision professional classical musicians’, music students’ and their sighted teachers’ beliefs on teaching music at secondary and higher education, and introducing the history and methodology of teaching music to blind people in Hungary.

The research is a dialogue between past and present, so it is strongly bound to the determining factors of past and present narratives, i.e. the stereotypes, the “black sheep of social sciences” (Schneider, 2004, 1). The research intends to shed light on stereotypes related to blind persons, their nature in historical dimension and with regard to the relation between blindness and music.

1.2. The paradigm, strategy and methods of the research

As an insider researcher, we may analyze one segment of the observed “pedagogical reality” (Falus, 2004, 11) from the disabled researcher’s new aspect. This is a qualitative, descriptive, exploratory research (Szabolcs, 2001; Szokolszky, 2004; Falus, 2004), its applied scientific approach is cultural disability studies which is entirely based on analyzing lived experience. Cultural disability studies has grown an independent discipline from the broader field of disability studies, which made
the passive, segregated group of persons with disabilities active, „science-forming” participants of the society (Marton – Könczei, 2009; Könczei – Hernádi, 2015). This new discourse makes it possible to depict various ways of perceiving the world in the context of lived experience which resulted in new, inclusive research methodologies (Katona, 2014). Inclusive research is carried out mainly either in collaboration with (participative) or under the direction of (emancipatory) marginalized groups (Marton – Könczei, 2009; Heiszer et al, 2014; Katona, 2014). In case of emancipatory research disabled researchers decide on the research topic, formulate the research questions and conduct the research (Marton – Könczei, 2009).

Visually impaired persons often emphasize that they think their lived experience and the findings of research they are involved in greatly differ. This phenomenon is generally valid for a large amount of research (Falus – Ollé 2008), therefore, we synchronized the research paradigm, strategy and methodology. Firstly, we applied qualitative primary and secondary source analysis to explore the history of teaching music to blind people and to discuss methodological issues, secondly, we collected data by making semi-structured interviews and we used qualitative content analysis to process data.
1.3. The criteria of selecting research participants

Selecting the target group and sampling were based on well-defined criteria. Our starting point was to decide whether the information on the target group is relevant for the topic of the research (Babbie, 2001). We applied the convenience/availability sampling method to select the research participants. We reached and asked to participate in the research approximately 50% of music students of secondary and higher education in the academic years of 2015/2016 and 2016/2017, and music teachers who graduated between 1967 and 2015. There is no secondary music school student among the participants.

The participants are grouped as follows:

a) Present and former blind and low vision students of secondary and higher music education (11 persons: aged between 20-75)

b) Sighted teachers of present and former blind students in secondary and higher music education (8 persons: aged between 35-90)

In the course of the research 40 hours of material was recorded, 20 semi-structured interviews were made, 19 with musicians and one with a Braille music transcriber.

The insider researcher position proved to be advantageous for being an active musician and concert organiser, and due to the small population
concerned, reaching the participants caused no difficulty as most blind musicians know each other. Participants were informed that we intended to examine blind persons’ mainstream music education and its perspectives from both students’ and teachers’ points of view.

2. THE RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF ITS AIMS, QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

The research examines the relation of blindness and music from various aspects. It focuses on blind music teachers’, blind classical music students’ and their sighted teachers’ narratives recorded in semi-structured interviews since this is one of the most authentic methods to “understand the complex, controversial and diverse nature of the human world” (Szokolszky, 2004, 291).

2.1. Our aim is to discover blind and low vision professional musicians’, music students’ and their teachers’ beliefs on inclusion, teacher competencies and their development.

The respondents’ experiences reflect that the presence of stereotypes as influential components of beliefs and narrowing factors of possibilities, similarly to the 1960s and 1970s, can still be detected in Hungarian secondary and higher music education. This is proven by the fact that blind students may almost exclusively continue their music studies in secondary or higher education in case, after successful entrance examinations, one of the
teachers of the institution is willing to teach them. Student and teacher participants emphasize that teachers taking blind students are open and enthusiastic, have positive attitudes, positive beliefs and have no prejudices towards blind students.

Blind students state that they experience prejudice and stereotypical behaviour only with a few of their teachers, though, almost each blind respondent feels their teachers’ uncertainty in teaching blind music students. Sighted teacher participants also report their uncertainty and unpreparedness for teaching blind students, they intend to compensate their lack of disability-related knowledge with openness and disposition. Creativity (e.g. new, inclusive methodological solutions applied in score reading classes), innovative, flexible and self-reflective thinking motivate teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge to teach music to disabled students. Sighted respondents claim that in order to develop their competencies they would participate in lectures or courses on the diverse nature of disability, they even show increasing interest in Braille music notation and learning techniques most frequently used by blind musicians.

Although sighted teachers do their utmost to help their blind students be professional musicians and find jobs as music teachers or performing artists, all sighted and blind participants’ responses show pessimism with regard to qualified blind people’s possibilities as musicians. It is a thought-provoking aspect that participants think being talented generally does not guarantee a career as a music
teacher or a performing artist. Students presently continuing their musical studies in higher education express a certain level of optimism and hope that their talent and persistence will help their dreams come true. Qualified young blind musicians, however, find it almost impossible to establish their career as music teachers or performing artists in the society. The respondents’ pessimism may well be attributed to social prejudices and stereotypes related to disabilities for thousands of years. This fact underpins the participants’ statement that in teacher education it is necessary to launch disability awareness courses and modules to prepare teachers to teach students with various disabilities.

2.2. The aim of the research is to introduce the history and methodology of teaching music to blind people in Hungary.

This aim proves relevant as music teacher education does not offer courses to prepare teachers to teach blind students. The analyzed sources may be included in the curriculum due to their methodological significance. The research provides a detailed description of the methodology of music teaching, Braille music notation and the inclusive nature of singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra.

The historical overview reveals the tendencies of blind people’s music education which, due to various education policies and economic reasons has gradually lost its importance. Imre Ungár, Hungarian blind internationally renowned pianist, pointed out in 1960 that “the number
of music lessons has been dramatically reduced in the School of the Blind” (Ungár, 1960). Supposedly, this tendency resulted in the ceasing of blind people’s acknowledged ensembles, the choir (Homérosz Kórus) and the orchestra (Berindán László Zenekar) as well as the decreasing number of students in the school choir.

Increasing the number of music lessons, due to the “pervasive” nature of music (Straus, 2011), would have a positive impact on blind primary school students’ concentration and learning abilities. From the insider researcher’s point of view disregarding blind students’ music education deprives them from several possibilities and lifetime experiences.

2.3. **Our aim is to reveal whether the sighted participants and literature proves the stereotype that blind people have extraordinary hearing and musical abilities.**

Sacks (2010) states “one third of the human cortex is concerned with vision, and if visual input is suddenly lost, very extensive reorganizations and remappings may occur in the cerebral cortex, with the development, sometimes, of intermodal sensations of all sorts” (Sacks, 2007, 163). These reorganizations may explain the differences between blind and sighted persons’ hearing. Straus’ (2011) statement is in accordance with that of blind students’ music teachers, who emphasize not all blind persons are “born musicians”. Our findings also reflect the results of the literature, as sighted participants report that their blind students’ hearing in several cases proves more from that of the
sighted ones. The sighted respondents claim, the fact that their blind students have an ear for music means a great help in lesson-planning and the practice applied. As far as blind participants are concerned in the research, out of the 11 persons 9 report to have absolute pitch (AP). This ability plays a significant role in blind students’ inclusion in music class activities and also promotes a certain kind of respectful attitude towards them.

2.4. One of our aims is to reveal the challenges blind music students and their sighted teachers face in learning and teaching music in secondary and higher education to work out programmes to develop inclusive music teachers’ competencies.

The research highlights music teachers’ positive attitude, beliefs and disposition, at the same time, it states teachers think they lack the knowledge to teach blind music students.

The problem of relaxed and flexible posture, hand, finger and body motions proves to be a reoccurring topic of almost each question in the interviews implying the complex nature of the problem. All the research participants emphasize they consider relaxed and flexible posture, free body motion and motion patterns the most difficult, challenging and the most problematic element to learn, understand, and feel, consequently, to teach them to blind singers and instrumentalists. Although, in most cases, certain motions are realized, they fail to support technical development and musical expression until they are automatized. Motions can be learned,
flexibility, relaxedness, impetus, and to feel how they help musical expressions, take a long time to acquire due to the lack of visual input.

In case of blind music students learning and teaching body motions requires touch, which is considered a natural characteristic feature of learning and teaching music when either the teacher or the student or both are blind. According to each respondent teaching music with the help of body contact is based upon fundamental confidence and trust. Sighted as well as blind teacher participants claim that body contact appears in teaching music to sighted students, too, though, it is applied less frequently. All the respondents emphasize that critical thinking, confidence and sincerity are the basic pillars of blind and sighted musicians’ cooperation in learning and teaching music, therefore, disability-related courses would definitely facilitate the cooperation between students and teachers.

2.5. We aimed to discover how secondary and higher education music teachers could prepare to teach blind or low vision students and where they could turn for help in methodological issues.

Participants state they could neither in the past, nor at present receive courses to teach music to blind and low vision students. Concerning methodology, sighted teachers claim they can solely rely on their own creativity, their experienced colleagues’ assistance or they can consult their blind students to gain information what kind of help students find necessary. In Hungary,
teaching music to blind students dates back almost to 1825, the year the first school of the blind was established. Secondary and higher education has always been in mainstream settings, still music teachers have not been offered courses to prepare for teaching disabled students. The new pedagogical paradigm facilitates the opportunity for students with various abilities to attend mainstream education which means an increasing number of disabled students at all levels of education. This tendency, however, requires a holistic attitude to teacher education.

2.6. *We aim to introduce a new discipline, cultural disability studies as one possible element of (music) teacher education in order to rethink disability-related stereotypes and prepare music teachers to teach students with various (dis)abilities.*

The blind respondents claim they find it their mission to change prejudices and people’s attitude towards persons with disabilities. They are convinced that high quality work is the most effective way to achieve that goal. From the viewpoint of an insider researcher, a concert organizer, an active musician and a teacher, not only do we share the blind participants’ viewpoint, but also try to find ways to make people rethink the culturally inherited stereotypes. One way for a researcher is to find a scientific basis. This is cultural disability studies which reflects disabled persons’ perceptions of and reactions to the world they live in. The discipline is built upon lived experiences, similarly to our research in which each
respondent participated to the best of their knowledge. We wish to call the attention to cultural disability studies as one alternative to rethink stereotypes and help teacher educators preparing teachers for students with various (dis)abilities.

2.7. Finally, our aim is to put forward recommendations for music teacher educators on the basis of the participants’ Responses to help them to prepare their students teach with various (dis)abilities.

Each participant of the research finds it necessary to introduce disability-related courses into music teacher education in order to facilitate their teaching practice when they meet blind students, or persons with various disabilities. Participants think one of the most effective way to help students to overcome their fear or inconvenience towards disabled people is to assist would-be music teachers to gain a deeper insight into different ways of perceiving the world.

Participants are convinced that lectures on the connection of music and disability could be held either by blind lecturers, blind researchers or teachers who are experienced in teaching music to blind students. Respondents emphasize they would be delighted to meet and discuss various aspects of playing music with blind musicians in the course of teacher education. “If there were classes on music and disability, it would be easier for both students and teachers,” concludes a renowned organist respondent.
Summing up the results, we could clearly state the research reflects beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and disposition related to blind students in secondary and higher education. These competencies are developed by the teachers concerned to help their blind students. Each respondent highlights the significance of disability-related courses in music teacher education as music is a special medium of social inclusion.

3. New Aspects of the Research

The research examines the inclusive role of music in blind people’s lives from a number of new aspects. The first new aspect is the topic of the research, as professional blind musicians’, blind music students’ and their music teachers’ attitudes and beliefs concerning learning and teaching music have not been researched in Hungary. We have to note, though, that the relation between music and disability has recently become a topic of interest of the international scientific discourse.

The second new aspect of the research is that we introduce cultural disability studies, through which disabled persons’ various ways of perception of the world can be known and understood. Research questions are examined and discussed in the discourse of this discipline.

The third aspect is the disabled insider researcher’s approach. Finally, the emancipatory nature of this research can be considered a new aspect.
4. FURTHER RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUSIC TEACHER EDUCATION

From the insider researcher’s point of view, this research may be considered a starting point to launch numerous further investigations. This current research on blind and low vision professional musicians’, music students’ and their teachers’ beliefs on inclusion and teacher competencies could be followed by research focusing on special and mainstream primary school music education of blind and low vision students. Comparing the results of the two research could help explore which components of music teachers’ competencies should be developed. The programmes, worked out on the basis of the findings of the research could promote inclusive education both in theory and practice. We would find relevant to carry out similar research related to teaching music to students with other disabilities.

In the course of research, a secondary theme, that of absolute pitch, emerged from the primary one. Out of the 11 blind and low vision participants 9 persons state they have AP, which, to a great extent, helps them in their studies and work. That high rate may indicate further research in the context of blindness, hearing and AP. In order to formulate consequences concerning the connection of blindness and AP, a large number of blind musicians’ and students’ hearing should be tested. The findings would be informative in several scientific fields including music education.
Finally, in accordance with the sighted and blind participants of the research we propose to introduce cultural disability studies courses in music teacher education not only to get acquainted with the various perceptions of the world, but also to see how disability appears in music. The material of courses would be based on the relation between music and disability, including outstanding persons of music history and representations of disability in music. The courses should be held by qualified blind music teachers and researchers having the pragmatic and situative knowledge and who could greatly contribute to the high standard of the course with authentic and relevant information. Together with blind musicians, teachers experienced in teaching blind and low vision students could share their methods with would-be teachers. After the courses follow-up research could most certainly reveal the paradigm shifting impact of rethinking stereotypes and prejudice against persons with disabilities.

Carrying out this insider research, we have come to the conclusion that cultural disability studies has its place within musicology and education. What we should do, though, is to make use of the interdisciplinarity of this new discipline and apply it for the benefit of accepting and respecting human diversity.
REFERENCES:


(Retrieved from: http://mek.oszk.hu/14900/14939/14939.pdf 01. 01. 2016., 15.15)


SELECTION OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE RESEARCH TOPIC


SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


FLAMICH, Mária – HOFFMANN, Rita: *Humanizing Stereotypes: Disabled Educators’ Role and Responsibility in (Teacher) Education. (Re)Imagining and (Re)Building) Education for All: Disability Studies in Education*, Christchurch, New Zealand, University of Canterbury, 2013 (webprezentáció)


FLAMICH, Mária – HOFFMANN, Rita: *Whose shame is it, anyway? – Contradictions of mainstreaming*, *The Inclusive Education Summit*, 2016, Christchurch, New Zealand, University of Canterbury (webprezentáció)