Beginning of chapter 1 discusses the inequalities among students due to differences in school demographics, recent legislative decisions, and pressures on schools to do well on standardized tests. However, schools have recently started moving towards inclusion by helping students with disabilities participate in mainstream classes. Nevertheless, many teachers, even paraprofessionals, are still struggling to meet the needs of each of their students due to a rise in class sizes and students with disabilities who need individualized education plans.

Vignette 1.2 discusses the story of one special education teacher and her daily routine working with students with moderate disabilities. Reading this vignette is like an emotional roller coaster, shedding light on the daily trials of special education teachers and their assistants. I was most shocked that the teacher said that she only has two assistants for 12 students, and yet they still struggle to manage the behavior of the students and balance that with the activities and paperwork for each individual child. I was also surprised to learn that some students are taught life skills, such as social and community interaction (such as going shopping or getting a haircut), doing laundry, and daily grooming. These are not activities that I imagine a teacher would ever have to teach a student in mainstream classes, and the vast amount of behavior issues mentioned in the vignette is shocking. I have interacted with no more than one or two students with disabilities in a classroom at a time, and that alone can be enough to challenge a teacher. Despite only having 12 students in her class, each student seemed to need the attention of 30. Communication and teamwork among a child’s team – including paraprofessionals, teachers, friends, and family – are crucial to fulfilling the needs of a student with a disability.

While wealthier school districts tend to provide better and more available services for students with disabilities and their families, many public school systems are still underfunded and understaffed. As a result, many of the expenses fall on the families themselves, and some may even have to commute long distances to get adequate care for their child. Music educators who encounter students with disabilities in their classroom must understand that these families and the student may be under enormous financial and emotional stress, and that communication with the student’s team is essential. Traveling to band competitions, purchasing or renting an instrument, or even reading sheet music or being in a loud environment can all cause undue stress on the child and his family. Therefore, accommodations must be thought of in advance to help the child be successful and have a meaningful music experience.

The rest of the chapter discusses the label-free approach to assisting students with special needs. Rather than discussing specific disabilities listed in IDEA, the chapter breaks it down into five disability domains: cognitive, communication, behavioral, and emotional, physical, and sensory. These categories and the provided examples of how to document and understand the categories after reading a student’s IEP will help me assist my students quickly and efficiently rather than worrying about their specific disability and creating preconceived notions about the child’s ability, knowledge, and behavior.

Many music educators are underprepared or unaware of how to instruct and include students with special needs in their classrooms. While some of this information is given to us in beginning methods courses or educational psychology courses, it is largely glossed over or flat out ignored. Chapter three discusses ways to gain experience and knowledge on how to appropriately instruct students with disabilities through the means of fieldwork and engagement in self-contained environments.

One of the most accessible ways for music educators to gain knowledge and experience is through mere observation. At Ball State University, music education students are required in almost all of their MUSE methods courses to observe or teach in a public school environment. Observing should first be done with the intent to understand a student’s needs, followed by appropriate placement into activities and classrooms. Serving as a one-on-one aid is also helpful, as it can help teachers and future teachers understand how to interact with a student with a disability in a way that is unique to the student. Reflecting on experiences and interactions as well as meeting with professionals and members of a child’s team can also be beneficial. While my field experiences have provided me with a taste of what it’s like to interact with a student with special needs in a mainstream classroom, I do not yet feel fully prepared to instruct these students effectively. Observation and interactions with current teaching professionals outside of what is required of me at BSU can help me develop a better understanding of how to best serve all students I encounter in my classroom.

The chapter continues to discuss different types of fieldwork, such as fieldwork in self-contained classrooms and how students are grouped based on their needs. In addition, fieldwork may be done in resource rooms, inclusive classrooms, summer enrichment programs, and therapy environments. The chapter also goes on to discuss how to implement these fieldwork experiences into the college curriculum as well as the benefits of these experiences. While this half of the chapter is mostly designed for the music teacher educator, it is also useful for pre-service music educators because it helps us become aware of what opportunities are available not only for our students, but for ourselves may we wish to observe and further serve our students.