Perspectives of In-service Music Teachers with Disabilities

by

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A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Music

in Music Education

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Spring 2025

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Music in Music Education

Title: Perspectives of In-service Music Teachers with Disabilities

This qualitative study explores the narratives of four in-service music teachers with disabilities by addressing two research questions: (1) What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? (2) What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people? Within semi-structured interviews, three themes emerged: the complex terrain of disclosure, the power of representation, and the impact of the community. The complex terrain of disclosure showcases the disadvantages and benefits of disclosure, the power of representation presents how disability can be a tool to inspire change, and the impact of the community gives insight into how support systems and perception of disability impact the experiences of people with disabilities. Findings highlight the need for systemic reform that prioritizes disability inclusivity and increases institutional support within teacher education programs and public schools.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express gratitude for the committee, Professor Peña, Dr. Silveira, and Dr. Wiltshire, for their continued support throughout my education and throughout the preparation of this thesis. Thank you, Professor Peña, for the many years of support, for always believing in me, and for the hours of impactful conversations during our lessons. I am grateful for the in-depth guidance Dr. Silveira has given me throughout the final year of my master's program. A special thank you to Dr. Wiltshire for consistently challenging me and pushing me to reach heights I once feared were beyond my grasp. I would also like to thank researchers Parker and Draves for their scholarship on pre-service teachers with visual impairments. Their work not only laid out the foundation for this thesis but has allowed me to see a glimpse of myself represented within the field of music education.

I wish to dedicate this work to the disabled community–and to a younger version of myself who often felt as though they were navigating a world not built for them. I have written the paper I have searched many years for, without success. After years of advocacy and dedication to disability justice, this journey finally feels like I am making the impact I have always hoped for. To the children who are born disabled, and the people who become disabled: we deserve to be represented within academia. This community fights every day to be heard through screams of systemic ableism. We find joy and meaning in an existence many deem unworthy and lacking quality of life. We grieve our loss and share the harsh reality of living with a disability together and yet remain full of strength. Without the work of those who came before me–who partook in the Capital Crawl and fought for our rights–I would not have had the access or opportunity to write this thesis, let alone pursue a master's degree. To the whole of this community: I dedicate this work.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The history of people with disabilities in the United States dates to the beginning of American history. People with disabilities have always existed. Despite this, the amount of disability history that has been documented is proportional to the environments people with disabilities were often times forced to reside in. People with disabilities historically began their time in the United States being deemed unworthy for general society.

Starting in colonial times, individuals with disabilities, criminals, and "paupers" were typically held together under one dirty, under cared for, and mildly supervised facility (Meldon, n.d., paragraph 3). In the 1700s, much of Europe began to implement "moral treatment." "Moral treatment" was a medical practice that shifted away from physical restraints in desire for a greater focus on emotional well-being for patients (Meldon, n.d., paragraph 4). It would not be until the 1800s before the United States implemented "moral treatment" in American hospitals.

Throughout the 1900s, people with disabilities saw a shift from laws that forbid them from being in public in certain cities, to finally being granted a civil rights act in 1990. The timeline from the "Ugly laws" to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 showcases the vigilance, bravery, and strength of the disability community. This chapter highlights major moments in 20th century disability history and serves to tell the story of the disability community. The story of disability activist Judy Heumann, who was physically blocked from entering elementary school, to later being granted the right to obtain a teaching license, showcases the lived experiences of many teachers with disabilities.

In the 21st century, people with disabilities are still fighting generational, historical, and lasting stigmas against disability. This community of people is severely understudied. This thesis serves to help close this gap in knowledge, by retelling the narratives of three in-service music

teachers with disabilities. Chapter 1, A Brief Timeline of the History of Disability in the United States, serves to contextualize this research, by giving insight to how people with disabilities gained the right to enter society, receive accommodation, and become successful educators.

A Brief Timeline of the History of Disability in the United States

The First "Ugly Law"

The first "ugly law," titled, "Order No. 873. To Prohibit Street Begging, and to Restrain Certain Persons from Appearing in Streets and Public Places," was passed in San Francisco, California in 1867 (Schweik, 2009, pg. 24-25). Guidelines for violating this law were left unclear, as someone could violate it for simply being a "certain person." Laws that regulated who was permitted into the public continued to spread throughout the nation.

Cities like Chicago adopted even harsher "ugly laws" into their city codes. In 1881, the Chicago Council included in their city code the following:

> Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places in this city shall not therein or thereon expose himself or herself to public view under penalty of one dollar for each offense. On the conviction of any person for a violation of this section, if it shall seem proper and just, the fine provided for may be suspended, and such person detained at the police station, where he shall be well cared for, until he can be committed to the county poor house. (Coco, 2010, pg. 23)

The late nineteenth-century America saw a push in laws associated with the politics of identifying and controlling the 'ugly,' (Schweik, 2009). Comparable ordinances to Chicago's

city code could be found in the following cities: New Orleans, Louisiana (1879), Portland, Oregon (1881), Denver, Colorado (1886), Lincoln, Nebraska (1889), Columbus, Ohio (1894), Omaha, Nebraska (1890), New York, New York (1895, drafted but not enacted), Manila, Philippines (1902, under US jurisdiction), and Reno, Nevada (1905) (Robert, Schweik, & Wilson, 2015).

Eugenic Sterilization Laws

The societal mindset and effort associated with the politics of identifying and controlling the "ugly" (Schweik, 2009) found itself not only seeking to control where people could reside, but also who was permitted to have bodily autonomy. Beginning in 1905, the state of Indiana passed an act prohibiting marriage for people who are "an imbecile, epileptic, of sound mind, or within five years an inmate" (Indiana General Assembly, 1905, pg. 215-216). Following in the footsteps of other states such as Michigan and Pennsylvania who were debating enacting sterilization bills between 1895 and 1901 (Reilly, 2015), Indiana became the first state to put a sterilization bill into law. In 1907, Indiana Governor Hanly approved the first eugenic sterilization law. This act "prevented procreating of confirmed criminals, idiots, and imbecells'" (Indiana General Assembly, 1907, pg. 377).

In 1927, Supreme Court Case Buck vs. Bell (1927) found that enacting laws regarding forced sterilization were within the power of the State under the Fourteenth Amendment. Sterilization laws continue to spread across the United States. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the 2 states that have banned forced sterilization, the 20 states and territories with unclear laws, and the 31 states and territories with full legalization of forced sterilization.

Table 1

Forced Sterilization of People with Disabilities Laws by State

Level of legality	States and territories		
Forced sterilization is fully banned	Alaska as of 2022	North Carolina as of 2003	
Unclear or no specific laws about forced sterilization	Alabama Arizona Guam Louisiana Mississippi Missouri	Montana Nebraska New Mexico Ohio Oklahoma Puerto Rico	Rhode Island South Dakota Tennessee Texas Virgin Islands West Virginia Wisconsin
Forced sterilization is fully legal	Arkansas California Colorado Connecticut Delaware Florida Georgia Hawai'i Idaho Illinois Indiana	Iowa Kansas Kentucky Maine Maryland Massachusetts Michigan Minnesota Nevada New Hampshire New Jersey	New York North Dakota Oregon Pennsylvania South Carolina Utah Vermont Virginia Washington State Washington D.C. Wyoming

Note: This table is adapted from the National Women's Law Center's 2022 publication "Forced Sterilization Laws in Each State and Territory" (pg. 4-11).

Supreme Court Cases Begin to Fight for Students with Disabilities

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court Justice delivered the unanimous ruling in the civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (National Archives

and Records Administration, 2024). State-sanctioned segregation of public schools was deemed a violation of the fourteenth amendment, and unconstitutional. This ended the "separate but equal" ruling of Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson of 1896*. This was a landmark case, however, children with disabilities were still denied entry into public education until the 1970s. In 1972, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* both fought for the right to education for children with disabilities.

Dr. Gunnar Dybwad, the Executive Director of the National Association for Retarded Children, argued that the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Kansas* had enormous possibilities of children with developmental disabilities (Disability Justice, 2023, P.A.R.C. v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania). Supreme Court case *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children* (P.A.R.C.) *v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* argued that the denial of public education for children with developmental disabilities violated their rights under the Equal Protection clause and the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The ruling prevented denial of any child, up to age twenty-one, admission into a public education program.

Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia argued to expand the court's decision in *P.A.R.C. v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* to not just protect the right to public education to children with developmental disabilities, but to prevent denial into public education to any child with a mental, behavioral, physical, or emotional disability. This court decision prevented educational institutions from denying children with disabilities admission on the premise of insufficient funds, stating, "if sufficient funds are not available to finance all of the services and programs that are needed and desirable in the system, then the available funds must be expended

equitably in such a manner that no child is entirely excluded from a publicly supported education consistent with his needs and ability to benefit therefrom" (Disability Justice, 2023, *Mills v. Board of Education*).

The Social Security Act

In August of 1935, President Roosevelt signed into law the Social Security Act with a goal to create a "'comprehensive package of protection' against the 'hazards and vicissitudes of life'" (Social Security History, n.d., Major Provisions of the Act). In 1954 concerns about the requirements for receiving disability benefits was answered with a disability "freeze" being enacted. Under the freeze, disability would be defined as "the inability to engage in substantial gainful activity due to a medically determinable physical or mental impairment that could be expected to result in death or to be of long continued and indefinite duration" (Social Security, n.d., The 1954 Disability "Freeze"). Eligibility to receive disability was limited to only those whose disability lasted at least 6 months, or whose earnings record proved a recent and profitable connection to the workforce. Determinations would be made by the states under agreements with the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and reimbursed through the Social Security trust fund. While insurance for people with disabilities was originally on the initial proposed act in 1935, it would not be signed into effect until 1956 by President Eisenhower. The Amendment of the Social Security Act of 1956 ensured workers with disabilities aged 50-64 and "disabled adult children" (Social Security, n.d., Disability) would be provided benefits. Additionally, periods of disability would not result in an individual losing their retirement and survivor benefits.

Following the disability freeze of 1954, Social Security benefits expanded to become more accessible, leading to the Ticket to Work program in 1999. In 1960, the requirement that a worker must be at least 50 years old was eliminated, followed by the Medicare Law of 1965 being enacted in the Social Security Amendments of 1965. Twelve years later in 1972 Medicare coverage was extended to Disability insurance beneficiaries and the Supplemental Security Income program was established. To control spiraling Social Security program costs, a new benefit formula was introduced that "decouples" the cost-of-living adjustment from wage increases in 1977, followed by necessary periodic reviews and a cap being placed on family benefits to disabled workers in 1980. In 1984, a “medical review standard” is created for claims involving mental impairments. Finally, in 1999 the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 is enacted, giving disability beneficiaries the ability to seek employment services and other support services needed to help reduce dependence of government assistance. The Ticket to Work program gives providers a portion of the benefit that would have been payable to the beneficiary, giving employers an incentive to hire individuals with disabilities.

Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) of 1968

In 1968, the Department of Labor enacted the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA), serving as the first measure by Congress to ensure the accessibility of buildings for people with disabilities. The provision of this act applies to all buildings that are financed with Federal funds, are intended for use by the public, or which may result in the employment or residence therein of people with physical disabilities and be designed and constructed to ensure full accessibility to and usable by people with disabilities (Department of Labor, n.d., Section 603 Background). All

buildings designed, built, or altered with federal funds or leased by federal agencies after August 12, 1968, must be in compliance with ABA provisions.

When the Section 502 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was enacted, the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB) was created to enforce the requirements of the ABA. In 1983, the Secretary of Labor and the Executive Director of the ATBCB created a Memorandum of Agreement whereby the Department of Labor agreed to implement a Department of Labor-wide accessibility compliance system. Today, the four federal agencies that oversee ABA enforcements are the Department of Defense, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the General Services Administration, and the U.S. Postal Service. Under this act, buildings such as U.S. post offices, Veterans Affairs medical facilities, national parks, U.S. courthouses, federal prisons, public schools, public housing, and mass transit systems are required to be in compliance with the ABA (U.S. Access Board, n.d.).

Judy Heumann, The "Mother" of the Disability Rights Movement

Judy Heumann was born in 1947 in Brooklyn, New York, to parents Wener and Isle Heumann; German Jewish immigrants who escaped from Germany in the mid-1930s. Born during the polio epidemic, Heumann contracted polio at age two and lost her ability to walk. Upon trying to start kindergarten, the Heumann family was physically blocked from entering the school by the school principal, noting that Judy Heumann was a "fire hazard" (Rothberg, 2021). Due to her mother's and fathers' persistence in demanding access for Judy Heumann, she would eventually be allowed to attend a special school and a public high school. Post graduation, Heumann attended Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York. Here Judy began her persistent activism by organizing students to demand ramps for equal access to classrooms. Judy

Heumann graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Speech and Theater in 1969. She continued her education at the University of California at Berkeley and obtained her master's in public health in 1975. Throughout her career she was rewarded several honorary doctorate degrees from universities including New York University, Middlebury College, Smith College, University of Illinois, University of Pittsburgh, and University of Toledo (Judy Heumann, 2024).

After graduating from Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York in 1969, Judy Heumann was denied her teaching license due to her disability. She fought back by suing the Board of Education and won. From being denied entrance into kindergarten for being a "fire hazard", to becoming the first teacher who uses a wheelchair in the state of New York, Judy Heumann serves as a major figure for the disability civil rights movement. Her activism continued, involving acts from protest such as the famous 26-day sit-in at a Federal building in San Francisco, leading to the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Beaumon, 2023). Among many other roles, Judy Heumann has served as head of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, was the World Bank's first advisor on disability and development, was the first person with a disability to serve on the board of Human Rights Watch, and the first Special Advisor on International Disability Rights for the U.S. State Department. Her activism continued until her passing in March 2023.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

On September 26th, 1973, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed into law by President Nixon, permitting many qualitied individuals with disabilities to enter federal and federal contractor workforces for the first time (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d., Introduction). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 laid down the groundwork for

the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Sections 501 through 504, 508, and 510 pertain to the rights of individuals with disabilities.

Section 501 and Section 503 establish affirmative action and nondiscrimination in employment by Federal agencies of the executive branch (California Department of Rehabilitation, n.d., Resources & Compliance). Section 502 ensures the laws set in place by the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 are upheld, minimize architectural, transportation, communication, and attitudinal barriers, and promote accessibility throughout all segments of society (U.S. Access Board, n.d., Section 502 (The Access Board)). Section 508 requires all Federal agencies to ensure technology is accessible to employees and members of the public with disabilities. The Rehabilitation Act was amended with Section 510 in 2010 when President Barack Obama signed into law "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act." Section 510 requires all medical diagnostic equipment to be accessible for individuals with disabilities, ensuring equal access to proper diagnosis.

Section 504 has had a great impact in education, as it created the triggers for The Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975, and later the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990. Section 504 states,

> No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, (…) shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service. (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d., (a) Promulgation of rules and regulations)

Reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities, program accessibility, effective communication for individuals with sensory disorders, and accessible construction and alterations is all protected under Section 504.

The Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975 and The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990

After several landmark court cases like *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*, and the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) on November 29, 1975. EHA guaranteed a free and appropriate public education, to every child with a disability in every state across the country. Prior to EHA, stories like Judy Heumann's experience with being denied access to public education were widespread across the nation. Prior to EHA, only one in five children with a disability received access to public education, with many states having active laws that excluded certain students who were deaf, blind, "emotionally disturbed", or had an intellectual disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

In 1986, EHA was reauthorized to address early intervention. This required that individual states provided services to families of children with disabilities from the time they are born. Later in 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. Under IDEA, more disabilities were recognized as qualifying for services such as traumatic brain injury and autism. IDEA also implemented Individualized Education Programs and an Individual Transition Plan to help students with disabilities transition to post-secondary life (U.S. Department of Education, 2024,

1980s and 1990s, including the introduction of early intervention). The reauthorization in 1997, sought to ensure that students with disabilities had access to the general curriculum, and to expand the "developmental delay" definition to also include students up to age nine. Following the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, IDEA was reauthorized again in 2004. This reauthorization expanded early intervention for students who were not identified as needing special education, but who needed additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in a general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2024, 2000s and 2010s).

The U.S. Department of Education reports that since the passing of EHA in 1975, significant progress has been made towards creating effective programs and services for early intervention, special education, and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). From nearly 1.8 million children with disabilities being excluded from education prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the Department of Education reports that in the 2022-2023 school year, more than 8 million children with disabilities receive services that provide them individualized access to education (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

The Disability Civil Rights Movement and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

After an uproar in protests throughout the nation, President John F. Kennedy proposed the most comprehensive civil rights legislation to date in June of 1963. He stated the United States, "will not be fully free until all of its citizens are free" (A&E Television Networks, 2024, Lead-up to the Civil Rights Act). Following President Kennedy's assassination in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued to push for the cause. After being passed by the House, the Civil Rights Bill moved to the U.S. Senate, where there was a 75-day filibuster. The bill was signed into law on July 2nd, 1964, by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act was a

major step forward in creating equality for all. Title II, SEC. 201. (a), of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states:

> All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin. (Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1964)

Title VII of The Civil Rights Act also prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, religion, national origin, and gender by employers and labor unions, and created an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (History.com Editors, 2010, What Is the Civil Rights Act?).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a turning point in American history for minority communities, but individuals with disabilities would not see a civil rights bill pertaining to the rights of individuals with disabilities until the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). People like Judy Heumann, Justin Dart, Johnnie Lacy, and Joyce Ardell Jackson fought for the rights of individuals with disabilities with acts of protests and advocacy. Regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 would not be signed into law until 1977. Without regulations, the rights of people with disabilities had no guidance for how they would be enforced. After a group of around 100 people with varying disabilities staged a month-long-sit-in as part of a national protest (Eveland, 2024), the Regulations on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was finally starting to be enforced.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 ensured the rights for individuals with disabilities in government programs like in places of public education and federal buildings, but did not protect individuals with disabilities from facing discrimination in everyday life. In 1990, people with disabilities were still facing many barriers to society, transportation, communication, and more.

Many regard the Wheel of Justice Campaign and Capital Crawl as the most influential protests in support of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Crowley, 2024). In the early morning of March 12, 1990, over 700 people with disabilities started the "Wheels of Justice" in a mile long march to the United States Capitol shouting demands to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. Following the speeches, 60 people with disabilities removed themselves from their mobility aids and began their crawl up the capitol steps, including the then eight-year-old Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins who was in her second year of disability activism (Little, 2020). After being told to take her time, Jennifer responded, "I'll take all night if I have to" as she used her chin to maintain her balance as she dragged her knees up the steps (SPCOUTA, 2020, 8:44).

After several more days of sit ins and a several revisions and amendments, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. The ADA consists of five titles. Title I: Employment prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment, from the hiring process to job conditions. Title II: Public Services ensures all state and local government programs and services are accessible to all individuals with disabilities. Title III: Public Accommodation provides equal access to all businesses open to the public, including private businesses, hotels, restaurants, and more. Title IV: Telecommunications require all telephone and internet services to be made accessible to individuals with hearing and speech disabilities. Finally, Title V: Miscellaneous Provisions includes provisions related to the ADA's enforcement and relationship to other laws (Coates, 2023). The ADA is the primary law ensuring equal access to employment for all individuals with disabilities.

Need for Study

As seen in this chapter, the history of people with disabilities is full of trials and tribulations. While protections for people with disabilities has been granted in federal buildings and positions, it was not fully guaranteed until 1990. Stated in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 1210 Findings and purpose (Americans with Disabilities Act, As Amended, 2008), individuals with disabilities have historically been isolated and segregated by society, leading to discrimination in critical areas as employment, public accommodations, education, communication, and access to public services.

Since the passing of the ADA in 1990, the percentage of people with disabilities entering the workforce has been ever-growing. In 2023, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) found that 22.5% of people with a disability were employed, with this being the highest recorded percentage since data were first collected in 2008. With more people with disabilities entering the workforce, understanding their narratives can give teacher education programs, public education, and the greater community the tools necessary to ensure individuals with disabilities are welcomed and supported. This study sought to answer two questions: what are the perspectives of in-service music teachers with disabilities, and what can teacher education programs, public education, and the greater community learn from these narratives to better support this growing community of people?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Disability

Disability as a concept has evolved over time, especially when taking into consideration the history of people with disabilities. People with disabilities often find community, both within their own diagnosis, such as a Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, and as the greater disabled community. But what is disability? When searching for a definition, the term is defined differently depending on the subject, and who you ask.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as someone who: "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn)" (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d., The ADA Protects People with Disabilities). This definition encompasses the types of impairments people have, what they effect, the longevity of the impairment, and the social aspect of disability.

The medical definition of disability, as stated by the U.S. National Library of Medicine, is, "when limitations related to a medical condition arise and begin to have a negative effect on essential life functions, such as walking, talking, seeing, hearing, or working (functions often referred to as "Activities of Daily Living" a person is said to have a disability (2005, II. Understanding Disability). This definition is more specific to the individual. The medical perspective of disability recognizes that any person can become disabled at any time, as illness, impairments, and injury are not specific to any one identity or period of life. The U.S. National Library of Medicine continues:

> No one is immune from the potential onset of a disability: An infant can be born with profound deafness; a child can become paralyzed from a playground injury; a young adult can develop depression and drug abuse; a woman in her early 30s can be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; a man in midlife can develop Type II diabetes; and an older adult can lose vision because of glaucoma. (2005, II. Understanding Disability)

Disability rights, activism, and awareness do not impact only the current community of people with disabilities but also impact the future community of people with disabilities. Disability awareness is not just for our grandmother with a poor back, but also for the neighbor who was recently injured in a car accident, or the baby who was born prematurely.

People with disabilities have developed terms to better express disability related identities. Some individuals with disabilities prefer "disabled person", while other prefer "an individual with disability." For people who are non-disabled, terms like "able-bodied," or a new trending term, "pre-disabled," are used. "Pre-disabled" has become a term popularized by the disabled influencers like Lucy Dawson (@luuudaw on Instagram), Susan (@the.chronic.wanderer on Instagram), and Logan Adams (@thatdyingguy on Instagram) to better represent the concept that disability affects everyone and can happen at any time. These terms stem from both the ADA's definition of disability and the medical definition of disability. These terms are not just used in English spheres and in the United States, but also in other languages and around the world.

Both the ADA and the U.S. National Library of Medine's definition of disability recognize that the disability is present once an individual with an impairment interacts with the environment around them. To better understand how to interact with disability, and who is

responsible for accommodating the individual with a disability, the medical and social model of disability was created.

Disability Language and the Medical vs. Social Model of Disability

The overall concept of disability is interpreted differently depending on the subject and individual. Disability language is presented as either identity-first language (IFL), or person-first language (PFL). The idea of what makes a person disabled and how others view and interact with people with disabilities can be defined as the social model of disability and medical model of disability.

The National Institutes of Health's Style Guide (2024) states person-first language (PFL) is a way to emphasize the person, and only view the disorder, disease, condition, or disability as only one part of the person. Some people with disabilities feel that some characteristics of their disability are inseparable parts of their identity and therefore use identity-first language. An example of PFL would be "person with a disability." Terms such as "dis/abled," "dis-abled," "differently abled," and more have been created to separate the disability and the individual. These terms focus not on what the individual cannot do, but on what the individual can do. For many individuals with disabilities, these terms feel inclusive, politically correct, and as though the individual is not looked down on for having a disability, but rather on how they are overcoming the disability.

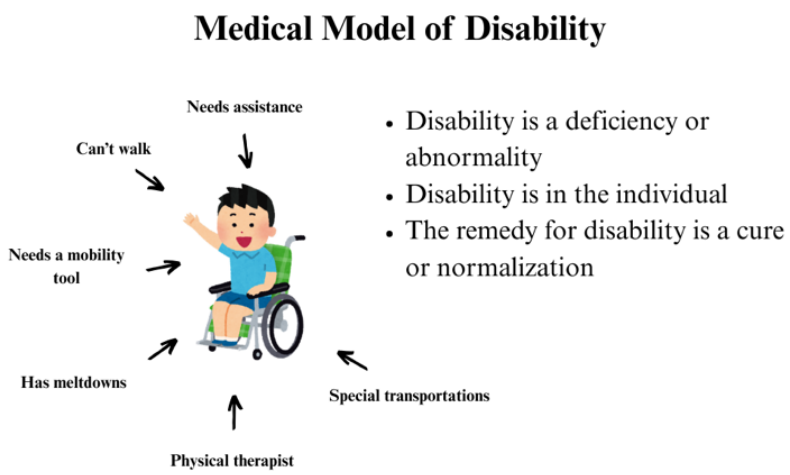
In identity-first language (IFL), terms like "disabled person" are used. Many individuals who use IFL want to show pride in their disability and who they are, as well as express membership in a community of similar people (National Institute of Health, 2024). IFL does not summarize the individual to their disability but rather places the disability as a part of their

identity. For some individuals, IFL helps tell others how one should interact with them, such as when a blind person asks for verbal directions instead of being pointed towards something visually. Some disabled people who use IFL desire to normalize and destigmatize disability terms. Autistic writer Ly (Lydia) Xīnzhèn Zhǎngsūn Brown published an article for the Autistic Self Advocacy Network titled "Identity-First Language" where they urge autistic people to consider using IFL. Brown writes, "It is impossible to affirm the value and worth of an Autistic person without recognizing his or her identity as an Autistic person. Referring to me as "a person with autism," or "an individual with ASD" demeans who I am because it denies who I am" (Brown, n.d., paragraph 16).

Outside of how one chooses to express one's identity, the medical model of disability and social model of disability are how others view and react to people with disabilities. Many universities (i.e., University of Arizona, n.d., University of Oregon, n.d., University of Washington, n.d.) believe that models of disability can be helpful in providing a framework for understanding society's perceptions and actions towards individuals with disabilities, and that the social model is designed to remove barriers on individuals with disabilities in society, rather than cure the individual. The medical model, the model primarily used in the medical field and to justify special education programs, views disability as a result from an individual person's physical or mental limitations and is not connected to the social or geographical environments. The medical model focuses on finding a 'cure' or making a person more 'normal'" (Gill, 1994). Figure 1 shows an image of a young wheelchair user with different aspects of the medical model of disability pointed towards the child. This representation is meant to show how the medical model of disability is centered around the individual with a disability being the core of the "problem" to be solved.

Figure 1

The Medical Model of Disability



Note: The medical model of disability is represented with a young boy who uses a wheelchair with different aspects of disability being pointed towards the individual, representing the individual as the root of disability.

Inspired by the 1960s and 1970s civil rights movements in both the United States of America and the United Kingdom, people with disabilities started to question their life experiences and why people with disabilities were excluded from society (McCourt, 2022). From this activism the social model of disability emerged. University of Oregon Accessible Education Center (n.d.) describes the social model of disability as a consequence of environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that may prevent an individual with a disability from fully participating in society. Figure 2 shows an image of a male guide dog user with different aspects of the social model of disability pointed away from the individual. This representation is meant to show how the social model of disability views the outside environment as the basis for a disability, with barriers being the cause of disability related problems.

Figure 2

The Social Model of Disability



Note: The social model of disability is represented with a male guide dog user with different aspects of disability being pointed away the individual, representing the environment and external barriers as the root of disability.

The medical model of disability prioritizes finding a "cure" or "normalization" of the individual with a disability, with the agent of remedy being the professional who affects the arrangements between the individual and society (Gill, 1994). Additionally, the individual may be tasked with self-accommodation to ensure inclusion. The social model of disability counters this with the individual not being disabled because of their impairment or medical condition, but rather the individual has an impairment, and society is the one who disables them. The remedy for disability-related problems would be a change in the interaction between the individual and society, where the individual, an advocate, or anyone who effects the arrangements between the individual and society can remove these barriers (Gill, 1994). In education, an example of the medical model would be an educator requiring a student with a hearing disability move closer to the teacher so they can read lips, whereas the social model accommodation would be to provide

the individual with an American Sign Language interpreter. Universal design learning is one-way educators are using the social model of disability to accommodate many types of learners and students with disabilities.

Universal Design for Learning

Instead of trying to accommodate one individual at a time as suggested in the medical model of disability, universal design learning (UDL) focuses on the social model and aims to create a learning environment where all students are represented in education. UDL addresses different learning styles (i.e., auditory, visual, kinesthetic, reading/writing), the impact of the environment, and being culturally responsive. Armes, Harry, and Grimsby (2022) found there are three core principles to UDL: (1) multiple means of engagement, (2) multiple means of representation, and (3) multiple means of action and expression. Educators following UDL can not only remove barriers for individuals with disabilities, but also remove barriers for students learning English, low socioeconomic families, and be culturally responsive.

Armes, Harry, and Grimsby (2022) suggest that for content to have multiple means of engagement it needs to be culturally and socially relevant, create co-design learning goals, and minimize sensory stimulation and environmental distraction. Engaging with students in each learning method, such as visually, aurally, kinesthetically, and reading/writing, will create multiple means of representation. Lastly, creating multiple means of action and expression allows students to have multiple ways of achieving their goals and retaining the content, as well as gives the students full autonomy over themselves and their education. UDL provides everyone, regardless of ability, the chance to be represented and succeed in the classroom, in a way that is inclusive and not isolating.

Experiences of Special Education Teachers with Disabilities

Special education program requirements and experiences differ state to state, district to district, and even individual to individual. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act serves as the federal guideline for special education programs, and each state has their own set of laws and regulations. This variety in laws between states leads to the experiences of students with disabilities differing from one another. For individuals with disabilities who choose to major in education, this experience can lead to differences in their level of comfort with teaching, level of comfort coming out of the "disability closet," and ability to either self-accommodate or advocate for their own accommodations.

A qualitative study by Ferri, Keefe, and Gregg (2001) shined a light on the experience of two special education teachers who went through special education as students. While both special education teachers went through their education prior to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, their experiences are still informative for how American educators look at special education today. This study found three main themes between the participants: the effects of the "push in, pull out" model; the participants' current teaching philosophies were influenced by their desire to counteract the low expectations placed upon them; and the participants' transformation from silence to voiced (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001).

The "push in, pull out" model is used to support students with disabilities and English language learners where a specialist either pushes into a general education classroom, or pulls a student out of their general education classroom for extra support. Each participant was frequently pulled from their classes to be accommodated once their education conflicted with their disability. If a lesson posed a challenge due to their disability, the student was then isolated and given another task, and once the educator felt the time was right the student would return to

class, and the cycle would continue. Both participants expressed feeling isolated and outcast by this system. Participants also expressed their feelings of disempowerment by their educators, as many teachers saw the students' disability as a barrier they could not overcome, and therefore did not push them to achieve. These experiences heavily influenced each individual's teaching philosophy, and led to their going from being silenced, to finding their voice. Each participant utilized their disability to connect with their students, push them to overcome their disability and achieve past what others may have expected from them (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001).

Ethical Dilemmas with "Coming Out" of the Disability Closet

While it is estimated that as many 28.7% of Americans have a disability, data have not been collected of the number of teachers who report having a disability. Researchers (i.e., Neca, Borges, & Pinto, 2022, Parker & Draves, 2016, Parker & Draves, 2017, Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky, 2019) have found that there is not sufficient disability representation among primary and secondary school educators.

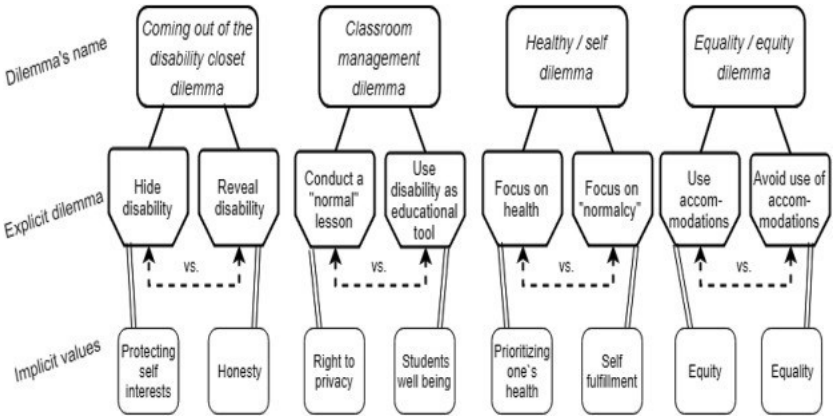
Disabilities can be either visible, meaning outwardly presenting, or invisible, meaning unnoticeable by appearance. The way a disability presents, either visible or invisible, can change due to a variety of reasons such as the clothing one wears or the fluctuation of one's symptoms throughout the day. Motor disabilities, such as paralysis, tend to be obvious to the observer, however some motor disabilities are invisible, such as an amputee using a prosthetic leg hiding their disability with their clothing choices (Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky, 2019). Health disabilities tend to be invisible, but devices like a heart monitor can make these disabilities more visible. Some disabilities, like sensory disabilities, fluctuate between being visible and invisible depending on the situation and environment. For example, someone who uses hearing aids or a

white mobility cane may have these tools hidden and appear able-bodied, but once the device is detectable, the disability becomes more present. Additionally, disabilities such as sensory disabilities or learning disabilities may be invisible but can be easily noticed during close interactions or conversations (Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky, 2019).

Some individuals have the choice of hiding their disability from their employer, their students, and even society, while others who have visible disabilities are forced to "come out" of the disability closet even if they may not want to. A study by Tal–Alon and Shapira–Lishchinsky (2019) interviewed 20 teachers with disabilities and found that teachers with disabilities face four main ethical dilemmas: the "coming out of the disability closet" dilemma, the classroom management dilemma, the equality/equity dilemma, and the healthy/self-dilemma. Figure 3 from Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky (2019) shows the breakdown of each dilemma. "Coming out" of the disability closet allows a person with a disability to utilize their disability in their teaching and philosophy but also can lead to one's privacy being invaded. The dilemma with classroom management focuses on one's option to either teach a "normal" looking lesson where their disability is not present in the classroom or use it as an educational tool. The healthy/self-dilemma presents the question of whether one should focus on their health and wellbeing, or their right to appear "normal" without the stigma attached to disability. Finally, the equality/equity dilemma presents the conundrum of if a person is willing to "out" themselves as having a disability so they may receive accommodations or keeping that part of themselves private and forfeiting their right to accommodations.

Figure 3

A Multifaceted Model of Ethical Dilemmas Among Teachers with Disabilities



Note: Reprinted from Tal–Alon, N., & Shapira–Lishchinsky, O. (2019). Ethical dilemmas among teachers with disabilities: A multifaceted approach. Teaching and teacher education, 86, 102881. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102881

Many teachers with disabilities fear being judged unfairly because of their disability due to the negative stereotypes attached to disability (Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky, 2019). While the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) states that 28.7% of Americans have a disability, these dilemmas may be the cause for why there is a lack of disability representation in education. The fears of the negative labels attached to disability, the fear of not being respected among students and peers, and the right to privacy can all lead to an educator choosing not "come out" of the disability closet.

Experiences of Preservice Music Teachers with a Disability

While limited research has been conducted on in-service music educators with disabilities, perspectives of music education majors and preservice music teachers allow us to gain insight into the potential experiences of educators with disabilities in academia. A study by Parker, Spears, and Draves (2018) retold the experiences of two blind music education majors.

Two major themes found among the students were their need to continually reveal their impairment and their desire to reach beyond the impairment. Both candidates, one an undergraduate student and the other a graduate student, found themselves needing to reveal the nature of their impairments in every new environment. Fears of educators not understanding the nature of their impairment, and what was needed to accommodate them in the classroom, served as a stressor for one candidate, as they knew their success was reliant on the understanding of their professors (Parker, Spears, & Draves, 2018). Additionally, candidates expressed that they felt as though they existed only in the realm of their disability. One candidate felt as though she was not listened to fully until she was a graduate student and "more on an even playing field of (...) contributing something" (Parker, Spears, & Draves, 2018, p. 189). These experiences echo the feeling of needing to be overqualified to feel equal many people with disabilities express feeling.

An earlier study by Parker and Draves (2017) followed two visually impaired preservice music teachers during their time student teaching. While one candidate, named Lindsay, completed her student teaching and later went on to graduate school, the other candidate named Antoine completed his degree without obtaining his teaching license. The experiences of Lindsay and Antoine show the importance and magnitude of influence teacher educators have over the success of their students with disabilities. While Lindsay received braille scores in advance, found success with the use of a classroom aide, and received support from her professors, Antoine had a vastly different experience. Antoine did not receive braille scores in a timely manner and was pushed outside his comfort and was forced to use a classroom aide, which impacted his feelings of perceived competence in the classroom (Parker & Draves, 2017). These access barriers and disregard shown by Antoine's professors ultimately led to his decision to

finish his degree without obtaining his teaching license. After analyzing both candidates' stories, Parker and Draves recognized where there may be a deficiency in teacher educator preparation to teach the emerging population of preservice music teachers with a disability.

A Growing Population and Need for Study

In 2023, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) found that 22.5% of people with a disability were employed, with this being the highest recorded percentage since data were first collected in 2008. The percentage of individuals with disabilities going into higher education is also on the rise. In the 2019–2020 academic year, 21% of undergraduate and 11% of postbaccalaureate students in the United States reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This percentage was an increase from the 2011–2012 academic year that reported 11% of undergraduate and 5% of postbaccalaureate students reporting having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

More individuals with disabilities are entering university and therefore the workforce. While federal statistics are not published on the demographics of teachers in public education, using the number of teachers in education and the percentage of people with a disability, we can create an educated guess. In the 2022–2023 school year, there were 3,224,967 teachers in primary and secondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) found that in 2022, 28.7% of Americans have a disability.

Multiplying the percentage of people with disabilities in the United States (28.7%) by the percentage of people with disabilities who are employed (22.5%) and then by the number of teachers in primary and secondary education (3,224,967), results in roughly 208,252 teachers

with disabilities (0.287 x 0.225 x 3,224,967 = 208,252). Looking back in 2010, 18.7% of people had a disability (Brault, 2012), 18.6% of people with disabilities were employed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), and there was a total population of teachers in primary and secondary education of 3,633,000 people (Snyder, 2011), resulting in roughly 126,363 teachers with disabilities (0.187 x 0.186 x 3,633,000 = 126,363). From 2010 to 2022, there has been a growth of teachers with disabilities of roughly 81,889 people (208,252 - 126,363 = 81,889).

While a limited amount of research has been conducted on in-service teachers with disabilities, with even less research on in-service music teachers with disabilities, perspectives of music education majors and preservice teachers have given insight into the work that can be done to better support this growing population (Parker, & Draves, 2016, Parker, & Draves, 2017). This study seeks to bridge this gap in resource and knowledge by analyzing and sharing the narrative of four in-service music teachers with disabilities. Within this population of in-service music teachers, perspectives from visible, invisible, physical and neurodivergent disabilities are shared to help answer two leading research questions. What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Research Design Overview

The purpose of this study was to share the narratives of in-service music teachers with disabilities. The interviews with participants sought to answer the following questions: What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people?

Researcher Description

Prior to signing the informed consent document, all participants were informed of my background and potential biases. I was born disabled with a visual impairment. After puberty, in my teen years, I became further disabled with physical and medical disabilities that would later be diagnosed in my early 20s. I am a service dog handler, white mobility cane user, am both visibly and invisibly disabled, and prefer identity-first language.

Disability is a topic I hold close. I feel as though I live with my disability more than it lives with me, as my every day is impacted by either my vision impairment, heart condition, or mobility conditions. I strongly believe that individuals with disabilities are capable of doing almost everything able bodied people can do, with proper accommodations. I believe terms such as “dis-abled,” “dis/abled,” and “differently abled” do not appropriately reflect people who are unable to do things because of their disability, such as my inability to drive a car because of my vision impairment, but may be better descriptors for individuals who find alignment with these terms. While these are my own beliefs and values, at no time were they ever enforced on

participants. During interviews, my own experiences, research, and values were utilized to bridge understandings in participants' narratives. An example of this was me asking participants about their experience with the "disability closet," using my own experiences of disclosing as examples for what my questions were asking.

Theoretical Framework

Taken from LGBTQIA+ language, the "disability closet" refers to one's right to either disclose their disability to others or keep it private and to themself. Historically, disclosing one's disability may result in the inability to obtain a job, face public scrutiny, or damage relationships. Today, there are certain laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that prevent discrimination on the basis of a disability. These laws help prevent barriers to the workforce for individuals with disabilities, but there is still work to be done that targets inclusion for this community. While an employer is prohibited from denying employment to an individual due to their disability, they may choose to go with another candidate during the hiring process, without explicit identifying the disability as the reason precluding the hire.

On the other hand, many individuals find that coming out of the "disability closet" gives them freedom to request accommodations in the workforce, assist in building strong relationships with students, and take care of themselves in the way they need to. Individuals who are visibly disabled have no choice but to be "out" for that specific condition but may still be invisibly disabled regarding other conditions. Visible disabilities are those which the public can see the disability clearly, such as an individual using a wheelchair. Invisible disabilities are not visible to the public, such as a leg amputee wearing pants, a person with autism, a hard of

hearing person with their hair down covering hearing aids, or someone with a heart condition. Conditions like blindness can be both visible and invisible, as a cane can make the disability visible, but without the visual aid, or when it is not in plain view, the disability can appear invisible.

Language has evolved leading to terms such as person-first language (PFL) and identity-first language (IFL) having a greater meaning to the individual who uses it. PFL focuses on the individual, not the disability. An example of PFL is "person with autism." IFL places the identity first as one the individual holds. An example of IFL is "autistic person." These terms are heavily debated among the disabled community, educational sphere, and among greater society. For some individuals, focusing on the identity is crucial for them, such as identifying as a blind person, so, for example, individuals remember not to point when giving directions but to verbally explain. For others, using PFL is important, such as a person with a heart condition not needing any day-to-day public accommodation, and therefore it not being a larger part of their identity. Each individual has their own specific needs and reasoning for their preference, as using one type of language does not reflect the greater community.

The social model of disability (SM) and medical model of disability (MM) define what makes an individual disabled, and who is responsible accommodations. The MM focuses on the individual having a disability that disables them, and the disability needs to be cured to bring the individual to the level of able-bodied people. The individual, or the person who cares for them, is responsible for creating the accommodations in the MM. In the SM, the individual has impairments, but society and barriers disable them. The SM focuses on the removing of societal barriers to accommodate the individual.

After analyzing these four major components of disability (the "disability closet," visible and invisible disabilities, person-first language vs. identity-first language, and the social model of disability and the medical model of disability), this study aimed to understand the narratives of four in-service music education teachers with disabilities. The following questions were asked to participants help develop their narrative: preference with language, relationship with their disability, if they have chosen to "come out of the disability closet," their experience within the teacher education programs, the job search process, their experience as an in-service teacher, and their impact in their community and with their students. Their narratives were studied to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities?; and (2) What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people?

Sampling

Using convivence sampling, a message was posted into 14 different music education-related Facebook groups with a brief description on the project, the inclusion criteria, and how to contact the researcher. Of these Facebook groups, 12 of the 14 groups approved the posts. Table 2 shows a breakdown of these Facebook groups.

Table 2

Facebook groups used to recruit participants including their region of origin

Group Type	Region	Number
Middle school band	Not stated	1
Band	Oregon	1
Music education	Southern Oregon	1

Music education	Not stated	2
New directors in music education	Not stated	1
Elementary music	Oregon	1
Elementary music	Not stated	1
High school choir	Not stated	1
Choir	Oregon	1
Choir	Not stated	2

Facebook groups were found using key words like “music education,” “music teachers,” “band,” etc. One Facebook group was no longer active, and another denied the original post. In early February, 10 groups approved a post, and one participant contacted the researcher. A week later another post was made in the same 10 groups and two additional groups, and the remaining three participants contacted the researcher.

Participants

To qualify for this study, participants needed to be in-service music teachers and identify as having a disability. At no time was documentation of a disability ever required for any participant, and they were asked to share only what they felt comfortable sharing. This study was comprised of four individuals. Three participants are in-service music teachers, and one participant has recently resigned. An exception was made for this participant, as their disability was the reason for resigning, and they resigned within a year of this study. Participants were given pseudonyms, and ages were omitted to help preserve anonymity.

Alex

Alex is currently a middle school band director in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia and is in her 6th year of teaching. She has taught both band and choir. Alex, who prefers identity-first language, has autism, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in their adult life, and generalized anxiety disorder in their young childhood. Alex received a diagnosis of ADHD and generalized anxiety disorder at age 26 and was later diagnosed with autism and PTSD at age 29. Alex is invisibly disabled and "out of the disability closet" with her students and community.

Jennifer

Jennifer is currently a high school band director in an urban city in Oregon. Jennifer was a Michigan band director from 1999 to 2021 and has since moved back to Oregon to finish her teaching career. In her 26 years of teaching, she has taught band, orchestra, general music, percussion, and jazz band. At age two, due to a physical condition, one of Jennifer's feet was amputated above the knee, and she has been wearing prosthetics ever since. Jennifer uses both identity-first and person-first language, has grown up with her visible disability, and accommodating it has been part of her routine since age two.

Penelope

Penelope is currently a K–12 music teacher in rural Michigan. She is currently in her third year of teaching. Penelope teaches elementary music and middle and high school band in a K–12 school. Penelope has AuDHD (a term that refers to the combination of autism and ADHD) and was diagnosed after completing her teacher education program at age 26. Penelope prefers

identity-first language. She is invisibly disabled and is only "out of the disability closet" with her students about her ADHD diagnosis. She has shared her autism diagnosis with a handful of students, but fears exiting the "disability closet" with her class as a whole and the greater community due to stigma around autism and the attitudes of the small community she resides.

Rain

Rain has been a music teacher for 16 years, and has taught orchestra, general music, and choir. Throughout her career, Rain has taught in numerous states around the Midwest in both urban and suburban settings. Rain experiences multiple disabilities, including physical, neurological, autoimmune, and mental health disabilities diagnosed throughout her 30s. While she received mental health diagnoses in her 20s, her ADHD and other disabilities were not diagnosed until she was in her 30s. In her 30s, Rain began to use various mobility tools such as a mobility support cane to assist on high symptom days, and variers between being visibly and invisibly disabled. Because she experiences periods of being visibly disabled, she is "out of the disability closet" with her community.

Procedure

This study was reviewed by the University of Oregon Research Compliance Services Institutional Review Board. The initial application was submitted on January 13th, 2025, and after adjustments, was approved on January 29th, 2025. STUDY00001690: Perspectives of In-service Music Teachers with Disabilities was approved (see Appendix A) with the following documents submitted: Category 2 Exemption, Exempt Determination, Informed Consent, Consent Form and Research Plan.

Following the approval of study STUDY00001690, advertisements for this study were posted via Facebook groups. Using convenience sampling, a post was made to 14 different Facebook groups specific to music education. Once participants contacted the researcher, the informed consent document (see Appendix B) and the interview question guidelines (Appendix C) were sent via email to participants. Using Microsoft Bookings, participants were asked to schedule 30-minute interviews. During the initial meeting time, I explained the informed consent document and I gave them an in-depth briefing on the research plan. Following the informed consent meetings, I interviewed participants up to six times in 30- to 60-minute interviews. Some participants preferred longer interviews, while others preferred shorter interview times. Participants were asked to share artifacts (images of objects related to their narratives and journals) when appropriate to help further describe their narrative, and to create a journal if a written form of narrative sharing best accommodated their needs.

Interviews were guided using the Interview Questions Guideline. Participants were reminded they did not have to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and could change a question to better suit their narrative. These questions were used to create a guideline for interviews, and follow-up questions were asked to solicit clarifying extended detailed information. The questions were related to participants' relationships with their disability and how they identify, experiences in their teacher education program, the job search process, ADA accommodation requests, disclosure of their disability with their community, impacts they have seen due to representation, changes in their pedagogy, and what advice they have for others with a disability in the music education field.

Data interview quantity and length varied by participant. Alex completed six one-hour interviews, Penelope took part in three 30–45-minute interviews, Rain took part in three two-

hour interviews, and Jennifer took part in four 30–45-minute interviews. The adjustments were made to best suit the participants' scheduling needs, personal narratives, and interview flow. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's closed captioning service. After each interview, the transcription was collected into one Microsoft Word file (see Appendix D). Adjustments (removal of timestamps, removal of repeated words, removal of unintelligible words, and added typographical symbols and punctuation marks) were made to the transcription for ease of reading.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2019), Patton (2002), and Yin (2014) that followed a ground up approach using inductive coding. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in capturing both shared and unique experiences while remaining grounded in participants' own language. Because there is limited groundwork for a narrative study of in-service music teachers with disabilities, maintaining the integrity of participant narratives was vital in answering the two research questions guiding this study: What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people?

Open coding did not begin until the final interview with the last participant was completed to ensure there was not a researcher bias during the interview phase. After the transcript was cleaned (removal of timestamps, removal of repeated words, removal of unintelligible words, and added typographical symbols and punctuation marks) for ease of reading, with all identifying information removed, line by line open coding was conducted. Each

open code, description, example quote, participant name and interview number, and notes were entered into a Microsoft Excel worksheet for analysis. See Appendix E for a list of the thematic, axial, and open codes. Open coding was completed in its entirety for all participants before the axial coding process began.

Once all open codes were entered into the spreadsheet, axial coding was used to group similar codes together to identify connections and broader categories. For instance, "scrutiny," "fear of disclosure," and "benefits of disclosure" were grouped together under the axial theme "disclosure experience." Codes were reviewed and revised throughout the coding process for both open and axial codes through constant comparison to ensure internal consistency and analytic clarity.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis and intent of the participants, detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews and meaning and intent was verified with participants. Member checks were done with participants throughout the interview process, such as asking participants about their disclosure experience, and if disclosing benefited them and how. Codes were cross examined with these handwritten notes. Final thematic codes were given at the end of the axial coding process with the research questions in mind. To further strengthen the validity of the results, a doctoral candidate in music education independently reviewed approximately 30% of the transcripts and arrived at conclusions consistent with the original thematic analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

With limited research to date on in-service music teachers with disabilities, this study sought to answer two research questions: What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people? Among the four participants' narratives, three themes emerged: (1) the complex terrain of disclosure; (2) the power of representation; and (3) the impact of the community.

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities?

What are the experiences of these four in-service music teachers with disabilities? Each of the four participants had their own unique narrative to tell with no two participants sharing a similar narrative. Participant vignettes, and the themes "the complex terrain of disclosure" and the "power of representation" tell their narratives.

Alex is a 6th year middle school band director in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. Alex has autism, ADHD, generalized anxiety disorder, and PTSD that were all diagnosed in her late twenties.

Jennifer is a high school band director in a suburban Oregon town in her 26th year of teaching and is an above-the-knee amputee. Despite all participants having one or more disabilities from birth, Jennifer is the only participant to have received a diagnosis at birth. Prior to moving to Oregon, Jennifer taught in an urban school in Michigan.

Contrary to Jennifer, Penelope teaches K–12 music and band in a rural town in Michigan. Penelope is in her third year of teaching and has AuDHD (autism and ADHD) that was

diagnosed in her mid-twenties. Penelope has disclosed her ADHD to her students but has not shared her autism diagnosis.

While Rain has resigned from teaching recently, she completed 16 years of teaching and was most recently an orchestra director. In her almost two decades of teaching, Rain taught throughout the Midwest and taught in both urban and suburban areas. Rain has multiple disabilities, including physical, neurological, autoimmune, and mental health disabilities that were diagnosed throughout her thirties.

Participant Vignettes

Alex. Alex's journey in music education began after her high school band director showed her that, despite not seeing herself represented in the field, she could be a band director. When asked why she went into education, Alex responded:

> Well, honestly, I kind of had to be told it was an option for me. I'm a band director, which you know is not… there's not a lot of women. And I was talking to my high school band director, I was a junior, and I remember saying, "I love band so much. I wish I could just do it forever." And my high school, man [male], director is comically tall, like he's almost 7 feet tall and I'm only 5 feet, so he kind of like bent down like… got all the way down on my level, looked me in the eye, and he was like, "why don't you?" And I kinda looked at him, and I was like, "oh, oh, that's what you do. You do band every day. I could do band every day. Excellent. Okay, yeah. Then I'll do that." (February 23rd, 2025)

For her undergraduate degree in music education, Alex attended a small public music conservatory. In Alex's experience, the environment at this conservatory did not foster healthy habits for its students, with Alex sharing that a genuine piece of bad advice she got from another

student was to begin the use of drugs to cope with the mental load of the program. Alex received sparse support from her applied faculty and experienced many negative experiences while in her program, such as a music education professor calling her a vulgar name to her face during a formal observation. Alex described how she pushed through her program:

> I used to block time, like schedule it in my schedule to cry because I couldn't just have a breakdown that didn't fit within the schedule. So, I would block out specific time, like, I'm gonna have a breakdown from 8:00 to 8:45 pm and then I'm gonna have 15 min to pull myself together because I have a rehearsal for chamber music at 9:00. And I'm gonna block that in because otherwise, I'm gonna lose sleep. Like I gotta block that in. And that was kind of like the expectation. (February 17th, 2025)

After completing her undergraduate program, Alex went on to obtain her master's degree and is currently finishing her doctoral degree in education. Between her master's and doctoral program, Alex was diagnosed with autism and ADHD. She shares that this diagnosis has given her freedom to heal from having to force herself "to be a square peg in a round hole" (February 17th, 2025).

> To me, having an identity and my diagnosis is very freeing. Again, I developed a lot of self-loathing a lot of very negative self-image before I was diagnosed, and this has given me a lot of freedom to accept those things and observe myself of blame because I used to just blame myself. (February 17th, 2025)

Alex's diagnosis has also allowed her to have a greater insight into why she faces some of the discrimination she does. She shares that the criticism she receives for her autism is increased due to being a woman with autism.

> Even when they don't say it [that she is "too much"], I can see it in their face. There is a look people get when I've officially become too much. And I know that is a very common thing, especially for women with autism, girls with autism, that we're told a lot is that we're too much because we're not expected to take up space right as women. (February 23rd, 2025)

In the classroom, Alex is open about her disabilities as she feels like it helps inform her teaching and makes her a better teacher.

> Oftentimes like me being autistic is what makes me a good band director, because that's my special interest, my hyperfixation. It is part of what makes me really good at what my job and it's part of what makes me unique and skilled at certain areas that other people are not. It's why I work best, I feel like, in a team because I cover a lot of people's weaknesses. And then neurotypical people cover mine. (March 1st, 2025)

To accommodate herself in the classroom, Alex maintains an environment that suits her sensory needs with accommodations such as her clothing and office space. Within her teaching, Alex has created classroom structure and curricular tools that use instrument color coding, the use of her own method book, and grading policies that assist her needs and the needs of her students.

Alex's road to where she is now was not easy. Through consistent hardship, receiving a diagnosis has given Alex freedom to begin to heal from her own learned negative self-image. A diagnosis has given her permission to trust that she is not the problem, the barriers placed by society are what disable her. Having grown up with a medical model of disability vision of herself (feeling of needing to find a "cure" to engage in the environments around her), her newfound identity has allowed her to embrace a more social model viewpoint of her disability (removing the barriers to engagement in the environments around her).

Jennifer. Of all the participants, Jennifer is the only participant who was born with her disability and knew of it from birth. Jennifer has been an amputee since age two and has grown up with her disability.

> It's interesting to have conversations about how my disability impacts my job. And my first inclination is to say that it doesn't at all. But I think, probably, like you [the researcher], it's always part of my brain, because it's part of my day, from everything. It takes me longer to get ready in the morning. There's a certain routine I have to go through in order to keep my… to even just put my prosthetic on and to... I'll have dreams that I get to school, and I'm like, "Oh, no! I forgot my leg!" And then I'm like…that could never, ever happen. But I will still dream about things like that. (February 28th, 2025)

Following high school, Jennifer went to undergraduate school where she completed a degree in music education. For graduate school, she left Oregon and moved to the Midwest where she would stay until 2021. In the Midwest, Jennifer taught elementary music for one year and then finished her career in the Midwest at a high school in Michigan. After the pandemic, she moved back to Oregon where she now is the director of bands in a successful high school program.

Throughout her career, Jennifer has felt as though she needs to overachieve to be seen as successful as her peers. She shares:

> But I feel like I have to be more capable than a similar able-bodied director in order to garner the same amount of respect, if that makes sense. I think honestly, women in this field have to do that anyway. But being a disabled woman means that I have to ensure that my bands play as well or better than others, in order to get the same credibility as some of my able-bodied male peers. (March 13th, 2025)

Being visibly disabled, Jennifer is open about her disability to her students and community. She shares that while her disability is something she must accommodate constantly, she feels the least disabled when she is teaching.

> I feel the least disabled when I'm doing things that I'm really good at. So, when I'm a band director, I feel very confident. because it's my entire life purpose, and I've invested so much into it. And I feel like I've got a degree of competency and credibility as a band director, and if I'm at any sort of music convention, I have no problem socializing with other band directors or band kids or anybody in the band world. But I feel like if I'm out in the rest of the world, like even just at a teacher meeting or whatever, I feel far more disabled there, because I feel like people interact with me differently than if they know who I am and what I do. (February 28th, 2025)

Over the years, Jennifer has created an environment in her classroom that best suits her physical needs. She has implemented using an aisle in her band room and a set up that requires students to place their belongings at the edge of the room.

Being born disabled, Jennifer's learning curve of navigating a disability was adjacent to every child's typical developmental learning curves. Being an amputee at age two led her not to know any different, as she grew up alongside it. While she expresses that she is frequently having to think about her disability and how to proactively take care of herself, it is all she has ever known and does not see it as a disability to begin with. Jennifer's viewpoint of her disability is heavily rooted in the social model of disability, where she typically will not feel disabled unless there are explicit barriers to her success, such as a missing handrail on a set of stairs.

Penelope. Penelope, like many other music teachers, fell in love with the idea of teaching music after an "ah-ha!" moment during a state festival. After being asked why she went into education, Penelope said:

> I was joking with one of my kids today, one of my students today, cause they were like, "oh, do you… you seem like the kind of person that would enjoy Elden Ring unironically." So, I was discussing favorite video games, and I was like, "you know, I've got the kind of autism that" - and this student is also autistic - so, I was like, "I've got the kind of autism that once I like something I only do that thing. How do you think I got into this job?" But like, that's basically what it was, I was at an honor band and had a like, "this is really cool moment" and decided I wanted to make that my career. (February 25th, 2025)

Penelope pursued her degree in music education at a Midwestern state school. She shared that their time there was not the healthiest time for her. Despite coming from a school with a toxic band culture, Penelope found a support system from therapy and through a music education faculty while in her undergraduate program. She was told that she should consider another field because they were not performing in the same way as her peers. In another instance, Penelope's applied professor similarly wanted to remove them from her program because her focus was education, not performance. Penelope stated:

> One of the music education professors fought for me because the flute professor also wanted to kick me out of the university and he basically told me in the end of my junior year, "you are a waste of my time." I had a music ed professor, that was like, "look, you can. You know she can learn how to conduct and teach and classroom manage. She has a

way with kids and a passion with kids that you cannot teach, and it would be a shame to take her out of the field." (February 25th, 2025)

Penelope is currently building a music program from scratch in a small K–12 school in a rural town in Michigan. She has shared their ADHD diagnosis with her students, but being an outsider to her town where there are generational ties, she fears that sharing her autism diagnosis could be the reason the small town may push them out. Penelope said, "so I kind of don't want to give them any reason to try to push me. I don't want to give anybody a nail in the coffin to push for me being gone" (February 25th, 2025).

Within Penelope's own classroom, many of her students respect her as their teacher, but other students reflect the negative perception of disability they may be hearing at home. Penelope shared that she feels as though she is treated by these students in the same way she sees her students with autism being treated. Penelope shares that she often sees her students picking on her autistic behaviors, searching for ways to "poke the bear."

> I think (…) the non-autistic kid, the allistic [a term for a person without autism] kids, treat me the same way that they treat their autistic peers, even if they don't outwardly know it's like. "Oh, let's pick on the autistic kid until they melt down and freak out. Oh, let's push the buttons of the autistic teacher until she freaks out." (February 25th, 2025)

In the classroom, Penelope self-accommodates by ensuring their environment is not overstimulating. She uses Loop earplugs, a fidget on her lanyard, clothing that makes them feel comfortable, and uses alternative lighting in her classrooms.

Like Alex, Penelope has faced hardship to get her to where she is now. Penelope's experiences have ultimately led to them not feeling comfortable to fully "come out of the

disability closet." Penelope's view of themself is unclear if it follows a particular disability model, as she shared, she views her disability as if it is its own separate entity from herself.

Rain. Rain has taught in numerous positions across the Midwest in both urban and suburban settings. Rain was not diagnosed with her disabilities until she was in her 30s when her disability symptoms severely increased. While Rain has had chronic conditions for much of her life, coming to terms with the idea that these conditions are a disability is a newer journey for her. When asked about her relationship with the term "disability," Rain said:

> I think it's a newer identifier for me… because a lot of the chronic conditions I had, you know… are conditions. And I was never really open to the idea, or like the possibility that those things are considered disabilities. And really, the word disability, I think, is one that overall, I'm just thankful exists because, and the identity of, because it is so much easier to explain to people than, "Oh, I have, you know, 25 chronic conditions that manifest in these ways sometimes and other times these ways." Just being able to say and being comfortable saying, "I'm disabled," or "a person with a disability" like is… I'm grateful for that. And I think once I started identifying with it, I felt a lot more comfortable with a lot of my limits. (March 11th, 2025)

Because her physical disabilities frequently call for the use of mobility tools, Rain fluctuates between being visibly and invisibly disabled. She is openly disabled and "out of the disability closet" with her community. When Rain experiences waves of not using a mobility device, but still wanting to be visibly disabled, she has used tools like the Hidden Sunflower Lanyard. She shares, that she enjoys using these lanyards so she does not have to consistently explain that she is disabled and requires accommodation. "It's really helpful. (…) Those identifiers like, if that's

recognized, like the simpler PIN, or whatever, for people that don't need a mobility aid or don't have any way to show [their disability] is like it's so powerful" (Rain, April 3rd, 2025).

Disability is a spectrum, and living with a dynamic disability has led to Rain receiving pushback from her community on the credibility of her disability. Despite only needing mobility tools when necessary, in positions where her community has not been accepting, she has resorted to using them constantly to quiet public scrutiny.

> Especially at this recent school, when I knew there was a lot of scrutiny about things I just used a mobility cane 24/7. Even if I'm alone in my classroom, the chance that somebody could come in... I was using it. Like I did not want to deal with any more questions about it. "Well, you weren't using it then. So why, do you now?"

In recent years, Rain has made her classroom accessible by sitting while teaching and controlling the environment to help lesson symptoms.

Rain's experience is unique from the other participants in that, while she has had ADHD from birth, she has become more disabled into her adult life. Rain has had to process the grief of lost ability. Due to the nature of her disabilities, Rain follows a social model view of her disability where she seeks to remove the barriers around her, as she is not able to "cure" her disability to access society.

The Complex Terrain of Disclosure

Alex, Jennifer, and Rain are all open about their disabilities while Penelope remains reserved from disclosing their disability to her community. The choice to disclose or not disclose is a decision people with invisible disabilities must choose themselves, while people with visible disabilities do not have the option to remain in the "disability closet." The participants'

experiences with the disadvantages and benefits of disclosure make up the theme I am terming "The Complex Terrain of Disclosure."

Disadvantages of Disclosure. Penelope, Alex, and Rain have each had negative experiences with disclosure. Experiences of fear of negative reactions from the community, facing public scrutiny, and experiences of retaliation were present in participant narratives. For Penelope, her environment has made her feel uncomfortable to disclose. In Alex's situation, despite being open about her disability, she faced verbal and physical negative reaction to her disability. For Rain, requesting ADA accommodations gave her most recent school an opening to write an ADA agreement that pushed her out of her position.

Penelope shared that her decision to not disclose, or openly discuss her AuDHD, is a result of her social environment, and her concerns with her disability being seen as an excuse. Penelope shared that her hesitation to disclose her disability stems from the power the community has on the school environment. She shared:

> I haven't like fully *fully* disclosed it to the community, because the community I teach in is one of those small towns where, like a lot of my students' parents graduated from there, and their parents did, too, and they are friends with the children of the people their parents were friends with. And so, I'm already an outsider, and when this community decides they don't like someone or something specifically, in relationship to the school they will not shut up about it until they get their way. (…) There's also just like a general distrust of the school within the community right now. So, I kind of don't want to give them any reason to try to push me [out]. I don't want to give anybody a nail in the coffin to push for me being gone. (February 25th, 2025)

Despite not disclosing her disability to the community, Penelope has disclosed her AuDHD to her administration. Even though she has disclosed her disability, she is hesitant to discuss it further as she fears it may be perceived as an excuse for any lapses in her instruction. She elaborated:

> So, I also hesitate to like talk more about it [her disabilities with admin] because I'm worried of it being used as an excuse. Especially like that setting [with admin], because, like, I am terrible at tracking and logging behavior stuff, because I just get so like overwhelmed and frustrated in the moment, and then I forget to write it down or I in my mind, I'm like, "okay, I haven't exactly followed all the steps that my principal expects me to follow, so he won't help me if I send this kid to him, because I haven't already called their parents and said, 'hey, this kid's a behavior problem in my class.'" so, I don't know. I hesitate to bring it up a lot because afraid of it being perceived as an excuse. (February 25th, 2025)

In Alex's experience throughout her teacher education program and in her teaching positions, she has faced scrutiny towards her disability from professors, education cohort members, and peers in the workplace. As mentioned in Alex's vignette, her experience in her teacher education program was not the most supportive. But not only did she face scrutiny among faculty in her undergraduate program (see Alex's vignette on page 41), she has recently experienced similar disability-targeted disrespect from her cohort members in her PhD program.

Alex shared that her texting style is to send many small texts instead of one larger text. After finally feeling accepted by members of her cohort, Alex was sent a disrespectful text in the cohort group chat. Alex explained:

> I'm thinking that I have for the first time a group of individuals who actually like me and appreciate my company. I was in a smaller group chat for a group project, and someone sent a message to that group chat that said, "Oh, my God! Is Alex ever going to shut up? I bet she only talks to us because no one else in her life will listen." (March 16th, 2025)

Being open about her disability, and unfortunately privy to situations like this, Alex defended herself by saying, "hey, I think you texted that in the wrong group chat. That's actually really hurtful." In response to Alex standing up for herself, her peer responded, "if you weren't like this, I wouldn't have said it" (March 16th, 2025).

In another instance, she reached out to the same group chat to ask information about a class. After sending the information Alex needed — with incorrect information — the same peer responded to Alex saying, "you really need to start writing this stuff down." Alex continued:

> I replied back to the whole group chat, "it's not that I don't write stuff down. That's why it's a disability. If I just needed to write stuff down, it wouldn't be a disability. What makes a disability is that I can't remember where I wrote stuff down. And you know, I that's what makes a disability. So, I appreciate your help. But that's not a helpful statement." And (…) she sent a reply that said, "Are you? Are you serious? I'm sending you a text," and then blew up my inbox with a whole lot of criticism. But her response just was, "how dare you make me the bad guy for helping you when I'm the only person who's willing to help you. No one else replies to your messages, because everyone is sick and tired of you throwing your disability in everyone's faces off to be as an excuse to be a bitch all of the time." (March 16th, 2025)

Throughout interviews, Alex continued to share more instances of the public scrutiny that comes with disclosing one's disability. Among this was an experience she had while leading a choir

event where another adult put their hands on Alex. Following a performance, another adult asked Alex about the performance. She shared:

> I have all this adrenaline and she's asking me about the thing I'm so excited about, and, as I'm talking, she takes her hand like this [hand positioned with an open palm] and pops me in the middle of the forehead and says, "Off, Button!" And I stepped back, and I looked at her, and I was like, "excuse me," and she said, "Well, you realize you're a bit much right?" (February 23rd, 2025)

Negative experiences related to disclosure were not isolated to the participants with neurological disabilities, but also to Rain who is physically disabled. During the period Rain's disability was increasing in severity, she did not quite have an official ADA accommodation plan but was seeking accommodations from her school. In a school with high teacher coverage needs, Rain was frequently asked to cover other classes around the school. Being physically disabled, moving around is not easy for Rain. To accommodate mobility struggles, she asked if classes that needed coverage could come to her room instead of her coming to theirs. After consistent denial of this accommodation, she began to refuse to cover classes. In retaliation, she was asked, "Why can you request coverage if you can't provide coverage." She reflects that this made her feel like she was a burden on the school. She continues, "I wasn't unable. It was really if we need coverage, send the kids to my room. And I had suggested this over and over and over, and only like towards the end of the year, when they were super desperate, that they did" (April 11th, 2025).

Once she finally had the medical documentation to request a formal ADA accommodation plan, she was met with continued retaliation. This process resulted in Rain being asked to sign an ADA agreement that deemed her unfit for her current position, despite having

consistent positive performance reviews, and was asked to relocate jobs to a different position in the district. After the school refused to discuss the contract further, Rain decided to leave her position and is now looking for other teaching jobs.

Among Alex, Penelope, and Rain, there are clear fears and disadvantages associated with disclosing one's disability. Fear of losing the trust of the community, facing public scrutiny, and experiences of retaliation were experiences shared by participants.

Benefits of Disclosure. Rain, Jennifer, Alex, and Penelope all expressed that disclosing their disability has allowed them to seek assistance and understanding in the classroom. Jennifer and Rain both discussed how disclosing their disability allows for students to recognize when their teacher may need physical assistance. Rain finds that being open about her disability helps give her permission to ask for assistance on physical tasks from her students. Rain stated:

> Yeah, it was like very clear that I wasn't walking around the classroom for a reason. So, I mean sharing that with the students was helpful, utilitarian wise, because I would be able to ask them to get things or to help set things up and move things, and they were all too happy to help with that. (March 11th, 2025)

Jennifer shares a similar sentiment:

> Especially as I get older, I have been firmer about trying to have students move equipment so that I'm not doing it just because it's hard on my whole body. And like last night we had a Bandorama in the gym. (…) And I did move a fair amount, (…) but I think, had I said, "I'm going to sit in my office and you guys get this done between the kids and my assistant band director," it would have gotten done. (…) The kids are really good if I ask them to do things. I'm very short. So, I'm constantly asking them to do things that require tall people. (April 18th, 2025)

While Alex does not ask for physical assistance from her students, she shared that disclosing her disability has allowed her to ask for behavioral and communication assistance from her students when she is having a "difficult time autism-wise." When describing her difficulty with routine changes, she shared how she has gone about sharing her difficulties with her students and how she asks for assistance:

> So I even like explicitly told my 8th grade, (…) "hey, I'm worse today, my temper is shorter, my patience is shorter because I had my routine upset and like, because I'm autistic, I just need you to like, stop being a goblin for like an hour if you could, because I'm gonna be, I'm going to be impatient with you. (March 9th, 2025)

Despite Penelope not being open about her autism to her students, Penelope does share that they have ADHD. Disclosing her ADHD has also given Penelope's students understanding of some of Penelope's actions, such as forgetting tasks. Like Alex, this disclosure creates a positive reaction by her understanding students instead of a negative one when she does forget a task for a student. Penelope shared a time where they consistently forgot to give a student a piece of music:

> One of my kids that I took to honor band wanted another copy of one of the honor band pieces and kept asking me to print it out for her, and I kept forgetting. So, she went and got her pack of sticky notes and put like 20 sticky notes around the band room, saying, "print the *Incredibles* for [student name]." (March 21st, 2025)

Within the job search and interview process, Alex, Jennifer, and Rain all shared that disclosing their disability in an interview gave them insight into how the new school's community would respond to their disability. Each participant shared a sentiment that they do not want to work for a school that is not open to having a teacher with a disability. Alex shared:

> I am aware that that [disclosing her disability in the interview process] may mean that someone may not hire me for that reason, because they don't have to tell you the reason they don't hire you. Technically, legally, they can't say "I'm not hiring this person because they're autistic," because that's discrimination. But they might say, "oh, I just feel like she's not a good fit" and in their head they're like "she's not a good fit, because she's neurodivergent," but I don't want to be at a school that's not going to hire me for that reason, anyway. (March 9th, 2025)

Jennifer states, "if somebody's gonna be disappointed that they're hiring somebody that's disabled, I'd rather not be hired by that that administrative team" (April 18th, 2025). Rain shares:

> It's very obvious that I'm disabled. Like prior to that [her disability severity increasing and now being a visible disability], I wasn't really addressing it [her disability] in the interview process, because I really felt like it was kind of like a liability of like, you know, a reason for them not to hire me. And now, it's if it's a reason for them not to hire me, I don't want to work there if that makes sense. (April 11th, 2025)

Disclosing their disabilities within the interview process gives them the insight needed to know ahead of time if an employer will be accepting of having a teacher with a disability, or if their negative perception of disability will prevent them from hiring a qualified disabled teacher.

All four participants share that disclosing their disability to their students has led to them experiencing an increased student understanding and willingness to assist and be accommodating to their teacher's needs. Within the job search and interview process, disclosing their disability has given Alex, Jennifer, and Rain advanced insight into the perception of disability by the school they are wishing to enter.

The Power of Representation

Among Alex, Jennifer, and Rain's narratives, the impact representation has on students was highlighted. These three participants discussed how their disability has been used as a tool to inspire change in their students. Participants saw increased normalization and student self-acceptance through their disability representation.

By being open about her disability, Alex's narrative showcases how her representation of disability leads to students normalizing disability and feeling more confident to advocate for themselves and their needs. Alex shared:

> And when I say I'm autistic, I get kids who look at me and go "oh, me, too!" Or they'll share stuff with me that they would not have otherwise. I even had a kid last year who really probably needed a 504/IEP who did not have one, and I created accommodations for him. And we had a sub once who was an actual musical sub. So, he was going to lead rehearsal — and it was a half day. So, as I was leaving, this kid said, "hey, will you talk to him about me and tell him that I'm different?" And I was like, "well, I can't, because of laws. Like I cannot tell him that you have a diagnosis, you know," and he was like, "well, will you go with me to talk to him?" And like just me being there he advocated for himself. But I think that's because, like, I helped normalize it. (…) So that's something that I've really liked about being able to share it [her disability] with my students, is that it has helped normalize it. And it has helped kids advocate for themselves. (February 23rd, 2025)

Jennifer also shared how she uses her disability as an example to inspire students to push themselves to do more.

> It [her disability] gives me opportunity, like in marching band, to get kids to get off the field and or get off the sideline and get back onto the field, because I marched four years of high school marching band with one leg and never sat on the sideline. And they usually get right up and go back to the field. So, I think that it gives me more leeway to add some humor to situations and encourage kids to push through some physical barriers that they might not otherwise push through. (March 13th, 2025)

Rain's experience echoes this sentiment of normalization and increased student awareness through visible representation. She shared how her being visibly physically disabled has made students excited to see others like her.

> I also can't tell you how many students would tell me after that that they have limitations with certain things, or they have family members that do. (…) I had one student would be like, "yeah, I was at the mall yesterday, and I saw a girl with a cane that looks a lot like yours!" And you know, just being able to speak about things like that. I think it's so helpful for students, whether or not they identify with it as a disabled person, or know somebody, but like becoming comfortable around those, you know, those things, and with speaking about them to people, and how to deal with them. (March 11th, 2025)

Moments like the child being excited to see someone that looks like their teacher not only normalizes disability but also destigmatizes and demystifies the idea of disability.

Participants Jennifer and Rain both shared that they had not seen other people like them throughout their career. Jennifer and Rain, who have a collective 42 years of teaching, both shared that they met very few people like them in education throughout their career. Jennifer shares:

> It's remarkable how few people with visible disabilities I've met in my profession. I'm sure there's plenty with hidden disabilities. You know things that I can't see just without them telling me. And I've known people with like some autoimmune disorders and things like that, and you would never know just from looking at them. So, I've never met another band director that's an amputee. There's got to be someone, but I have never met them. Or with a visual impairment or a hearing impairment. Well, there's a lot of old band directors that are pretty deaf… But yeah, I've never... I've never met one in a wheelchair, or who uses a cane or a dog. (February 28th, 2025)

Rain shares her own experience, "first of all, teachers with disabilities, I can tell you, I have hardly seen any with visible disabilities, or that, you know, are loud about them. Very few and I'm sure there's multiple reasons for that whether or not they were there" (April 3rd, 2025).

These experiences within participant narratives showcase the power representation has had on their students that not only normalizes disability, teaches supportive language, and teaches them how to respond to people with disabilities, but also shows students that they can do more than the students think they can. Jennifer shared that while she has never met another visibly disabled person, she believes "that putting people [with disabilities] into roles like this [education] shows kids that they can do it" (February 28th, 2025).

Research Question 2: What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people?

Among participants Alex, Penelope, and Rain, each participant has felt the impact that support from the community has had on their journey here. Through their narratives, it is evident

that teacher education programs, public education, and the greater community showing increased support and responsiveness to people with disabilities can be a strong way to support this growing community of people.

The Impact of the Community

Teacher Education Programs. Within teacher education programs, participants indicated that support from people with greater influence, like professors, was vital for students with disabilities to find success in their program. Alex and Penelope both share how having faculty who were willing to advocate on their behalf and give them support directly assisted in creating a barrier between them and the ableism they faced.

Throughout interviews with Alex, she shares how she has consistently been confronted with ableism within her teacher education program. Not only was Alex navigating an undiagnosed neurological condition (Autism and ADHD) during undergraduate school, but she was also having to navigate difficult family dynamics. During a particularly emotional period for Alex, where she was involved in a legal dispute, her applied professor, who Alex describes as intense, showed her empathy that she seldom experienced in the program. After telling her professor she was missing a performance to appear in court, her professor offered to write a faculty recommendation to the university psych center. She explained:

> She kind of was like, "Hey, most people do not have to do that [take their family to court]. If you want a faculty recommendation to the [university] psych center, it will put you at the top of their list. I won't do it if you don't want it, but if you want it, I'll do it, and it will bump you up their priority list." (…) I turned her down. I really shouldn't have

turned her down. But that was like the only time anybody really offered me help or support related to like mental health or anything diagnosis wise. (February 23rd, 2025)

During this period of time where Alex expressed that her self worth was tied heavily to how people treated her (See Alex's vignette on page 41), faculty support held weight.

For Penelope, as also stated in her vignette (see page 46), she faced similar scrutiny within her teacher education program for not performing to the same level as her peers. Penelope had a music education professor stick up for her when discussion of Penelope being a "waste of time" for the flute and conducting professor was brought up.

Public Education and ADA Accommodation Requests. Expressed in the narratives of Alex and Rain, there is a greater need for administrative support for teachers with disabilities. Alex and Rain were both denied ADA accommodation requests from their administration, leading to them not having the supports they need to be successful.

In Alex's school, she shared that there were frequent "emergency meetings" that teachers were pulled into with minimal notice. In response to her having difficulty with changes in her routine without notice, Alex requested an accommodation of 24-hour notice prior to meetings, unless it was a true emergency. She explained:

> When I asked for support [from the school], they [administration] said I needed to have my psych [psychiatrist] redo the evaluation, that I was not actually capable of doing that job, because the supports that I requested were unreasonable. Which were things like, please let me know a day ahead of time, if we're gonna have a meeting. That's 24-hour notice. One working day. Notice is not a big deal, or the other one was. If you're gonna call a meeting, please tell me what it's about before I go. (…) We get emails, "we have a

meeting at one o'clock." How hard is it to say, "we have a meeting at one o'clock to discuss recruitment strategies for next year." (March 16th, 2025)

Rain also experienced ADA request denials as mentioned in the disadvantages of disclosure section. These denials do not make for a healthy work and teaching environment. Public education can support teachers with disabilities by being open and receptive to the needs presented with a disability. By following the social model of disability, and removing the barriers that disable a teacher, or being open to finding ways to limit these barriers, public education can become more supportive for their teachers with disabilities.

Public Education and the Employment Process. As described in the "Disadvantages of Disclosure" section, Alex shared that the hiring process is where a school may choose to not hire someone because of a disability (see page 50). In her 16 years of teaching, Rain has taught all throughout the Midwest and is actively looking at job descriptions during her current job search. Rain shared that as she is looking at job descriptions, she is looking for the "red and green flags" within the descriptions.

When discussing "red flags," she shares, "if there is something about standing for a certain amount of time, or like that, I just don't apply at all. Because just that philosophy in the school, it's like you're not teaching unless you're walking around. I don't want to be part of that" (March 11th, 2025).

Rain shared that school districts can show their "green flags" by finding more inclusive language. An example she gave was that instead of saying "lift 50 pounds," a description can be more inclusive by saying "move 50 pounds…So, they're recognizing that you can do that in different ways. You don't have to lift it. You can put it in a cart, or if somebody puts it on a cart for you, you can push it" (Rain, March 11th, 2025).

In one instance shared, Rain describes how not all job descriptions match the intentions of the school district that posts them. When looking to take on a long-term substitute teaching position, Rain expressed to the peer she would be subbing for that she was nervous about accessibility in the workplace. Rain elaborated:

> When I talk to her [about the position], she also has a good number of conditions and has required accommodations from time to time. And she's like, "oh, yeah, this will be no problem for you, like they're already used to this whole process with me. I can even tell you what I've asked for and who I've spoken to." And she it was like she was like, "yeah, don't even have a second thought about that in this district." But the actual job application says a whole bunch of stuff, whole bunch. (March 11th, 2025)

Without Rain discussing the job with someone who has gone through the accommodation process at this place of employment, that was not a position that would have felt safe to take on. These "red flags" may not align with district philosophies, but people with disabilities will not know that to be true until they are actively living the experience.

The Greater Community. As seen through the narratives of these four participants with disabilities, what typically disables them is not their impairments themselves, but the barriers placed on them systemically, socially, and environmentally. The community continuing to do the work that these teachers with disabilities do is how it can become more supportive. Efforts to normalize and destigmatize disability is not only the responsibility of people with disabilities, but also the community as a whole. The community making efforts like Alex to help teach respectful language around disability, normalize disability like Jennifer, and be open about disability like Rain will make the voices of people with disabilities carry farther than they could on their own.

Within community engagement, inclusion of disability in efforts related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) would make a difference according to Jennifer and Rain. Jennifer and Rain both find that disability is missing from the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) movement. Jennifer stated:

> One thing I've noticed in this world is that we celebrate diversity, and there's been a huge movement in the past 10 years to increase diversity in our composers and in our directors. But it's never disability. In fact, disabled people are often excluded, like in works excluded from these groups that are working to increase diversity. And I've always wondered about that like; we want to see more people of color. We want to see more women. We want to see more queer people in roles for that will positively affect that next generation and breaking into the publication world. But never, ever is it disabled people. (March 13th, 2025)

Rain shares a similar experience, with her feeling as though disability is the DEI afterthought. She shares a story from a recent conference she attended that held a DEI social.

> They [the social event leaders] told me this was the last day of the conference. They said, "you're the first disabled person we've had in here the whole time," because they did it three days in a row. And they're like, (…) "we really find that that [the disabled] voice is absolutely missing. (…) I said, like, "I think that, you know, happens fairly frequently. That were the like leftovers from DEI conversations, or like the outliers in those conversations like, we're just, you know, the marginalized of the marginalized, I guess." (April 3rd, 2025)

There is a need for disabled voices in DEI spaces, especially with the growth of the community.

Advice For People with Disabilities from Teachers with Disabilities

Each participant was asked three advice questions at the end of their final interview: (1) What advice would you give someone with a disability who is thinking about pursuing a career in music education (e.g., a high school student, or someone seeking a career change)?; (2) What advice would you give pre-service music teachers (e.g., music education majors) with a disability?; and (3) What advice would you give other music educators with a disability?

Advice For All People with Disabilities. As seen in the narratives of Alex, Penelope, and Rain, experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and othering can be an unfortunately common experience for people with disabilities. Being able to advocate for yourself, and knowledge of disability protections, and how to go about enforcing them, is one way for people with disabilities to combat systemic ableism.

Penelope suggests to start practicing self-advocacy while in the teacher education program. She said:

> If you aren't already doing this, start practicing, advocating for yourself and your needs being met now because nobody is going… You're not going to have it fought for you in the field, and even like, I know, there's a difference between how accommodations are enforced and taken care of between K–12 public and higher education, but there's like even less support you get in the field. So, if you are not good at advocating for yourself. Get good at it now. (March 28th, 2025)

Jennifer shared a similar message:

> I feel like, if you're gonna go into this field (…) as somebody with a disability that you need to be able to advocate for yourself. I think that it's important that you have an accurate perspective on what you need to be successful. And having an independent

> mindset, I think, helps for sure. You're just not gonna get the same kind of accommodations in the workforce that you would in in the schools like as a student. (April 25th, 2025)

Both suggested taking the time during undergraduate schooling and within teacher education programs and throughout the profession to learn the language and resources available to be an advocate of one's needs. While individuals with disabilities will have support in education, the process may appear different in the workforce.

Alex gives insight into what resources people with disabilities should make themselves aware of in their self-advocacy:

> Know what your protections are, know what the laws are, but also just be prepared to do your accommodations yourself. Like, know what you're entitled to, and also just know that people are gonna fight doing that. (…) Like knowing your rights and making your own systems is valid. (March 23rd, 2025)

For some people with disabilities, self-accommodating may be their preferred route for accessibility, but others may be forced into this direction due to lack of support. Taking the time within the teacher education program and throughout your career to find and implement these resources, and knowing your own systems are valid, may be beneficial for you. Throughout the entire process, be resilient. Jennifer shared, "I think being resilient is going to be an important characteristic. (…) If you want to do it, you'll find a way" (April 25th, 2025).

Advice for Pre-service Music Teachers with Disabilities. Among participants, advice was shared for finding your limitations and finding one's community and support systems during the teacher education program.

Find Your Limitations. Penelope and Rain recognized that people with disabilities are fully capable of doing what they set their mind to. Both recognized that finding your limitations can make a difference in managing energy levels and finding success with working with a disability. Penelope and Rain both suggested that people with disabilities should be mindful of the different disciplines within music education, and aware of how each of them will interact with one's disability:

> There's more movement that needs to be done in the elementary setting, but there's a lot more long-time commitments that need to happen in the band setting or the secondary ensemble setting. So just, you know, being mindful that there may be a part of this field that is better suited. (Penelope, March 28th, 2025)

Having one's limitations in mind as one navigates through the college decision process and the teacher education program may save time in the long run. If one with a disability is unsure how a disability may be impacted by a specific track of music education, observing the different disciplines may ease some concerns:

> Go into the classes. Go see what's going on there, and you'll see pretty quickly if like, "oh, my gosh! This noise level is not going to work for me." Like that's something I think I would have noticed in elementary when I went and the school I student taught in really didn't provide that because it was all separate buildings and things. So, I think if I would have known the noise levels of a lot of elementary schools, it would have given me pause before I took that [student teaching placement], because that's a big issue for me. (Rain, April 11th, 2025)

Build Community and Supports. Alex calls for pre-service teachers to find "people who are also, you know, 'like you,' who are your kind of normal is very helpful, I think. Just to let

you know, my biggest source of support at work is the other neurodivergent person in my department" (March 23rd, 2025). Rain shared a similar sentiment:

> When you're talking about pre-service teachers, finding the community, especially this disabled teaching community, because (…) there is really good advice and good experiences. So, like, there's a disabled teaching community on Facebook and on Reddit. And then there's one for music teachers (…) with disabilities and autoimmune conditions and like chronic health conditions. So, like yeah, those can be double edged swords for sure, but I think, like anything. You look at a review of a restaurant, you're going to find people that are really bitter and angry about stuff, and you ought to take that with grain of salt. It's kind of the same thing. But the communities can also really give you a lot of good advice. (…) There really isn't a ton of teaching with a disability resource that really just, isn't (…) about ADA in relation to jobs. There is just nothing about education, and a lot of it doesn't apply. So, it can be a little hard. But finding those communities, I think, is helpful. (April 11th, 2025)

Alex and Rain advise that having a strong community may assist with the struggles associated with having a disability.

Another way to find support during the pre-service teacher journey is to find professional support services. Alex shared a regret she had during her undergraduate program. One of her professors stressed, for all his students, the importance of going to counseling and therapy:

> We have a high stress profession, and even someone who does not have any diagnosis or like any underlying conditions, still would extremely benefit from it. (…) I always kind of like treated that advice so just like, agh, I don't need it. And maybe I would have gotten diagnosed or gotten some supports earlier had I gone. (March 23rd, 2025)

As pre-service teachers, community and professional supports could be the difference between burn out and increased years in your education program, and having supports, accommodations, and resources on how to succeed teaching with your disability.

Advice For In-service Music Teachers with Disabilities. Like the advice for pre-service teachers, finding community, and being part of the greater community can be a valuable resource for in-service teachers with disabilities. Penelope shares that not only finding your own community is important, but also being involved in the greater community could make the world of difference for your students with disabilities. Penelope shares, 'I would say that if it's something you want to do [be open about being disabled in the community], it's important for the field that you're going into to be a role model of sorts for students who might also be facing the same or similar disabilities" (March 28th, 2025).

This piece of advice extends for more than just students with disabilities. Being a role model within the community may be the spark for other students and teachers with disabilities to feel safe to take part in the community with you.

> Be part of the community, because your existence could be the key for someone else. (…) I think about being that person, if for somebody else that's like, "oh, can I get into music education with a disability?" Or like, "I've developed this condition after teaching, for, you know, 10 years," like me, "and what does that mean for me?" Just like the fact if I could have found somebody else right off the bat that was applied [in music education], it would have been amazing. So, I think, if you are that person, just, exist, be loud about it. I guess now it's like if you can, and if you're willing to. Especially now just is the time to be present (…) For me it pretty much felt like I was alone in that [becoming disabled later in life] and just since there aren't that many of us. There are more than we would

> know, obviously. But I think that it just makes you feel like you're not the only one. (Rain, April 11th, 2025)

Jennifer echoed the desire for more disability representation and visibility while also encouraging people with disabilities to accept their bodies and the limitations now present in their life.

> Finding other people that have experienced what you experience will help validate what you're going through and also encourage you that you can get through it. And even if it's online forums, but I also think that it's important not to wallow in all the things that you're you feel like you might be missing out on so trying to find trying to find things that you can be successful at, despite your disabilities. (Jennifer, April 25th, 2025)

Coming to terms with one's own disability, especially for those who have become disabled later in life, can be incredibly challenging. Each participant strongly urged in-service teachers with disabilities to find community and people like them.

Summary of Results

In this study of four in-service music teachers with disabilities, I sought to answer two research questions: What are the experiences of in-service music teachers with disabilities? What can teacher education programs, public education, and the communities they reside in learn from these narratives that can help better support this growing community of people? Among these participants, Alex, Jennifer, and Rain are all "out of the disability closet," and Penelope is hesitant to disclose her disability. Each participant had their own unique narrative to tell that collectively coalesced around three main themes: (1) The complex terrain of disclosure, (2) The power of representation, and (3) The impact of the community. The complex terrain of disclosure

showcased the disadvantages and benefits of disclosure. Alex, Jennifer, and Rain showcased the power of representation as a tool to inspire positive change in their students, such as normalization of disability and increased student self-acceptance. Participant narratives collectively demonstrated how teacher education programs, public education, and the community being receptive and responsive to people with disabilities and their needs will better support this growing group of people.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The timeline of people with disabilities in the United States is one that showcases a constant fight for rights and a place at the metaphorical societal dinner table. From residing in city holding centers prior to 1900, to finally being granted a civil rights act in 1990, people with disabilities are still experiencing the effects of generational systemic ableism. The limited and scant groundwork for this study is a reflection on the lack of opportunity, prevalence, and perceived importance people with disabilities face within American society. The foundation for a study of this nature being called to action stems from studies of music majors and pre-service music teachers with disabilities (i.e., Parker & Draves, 2016; Parker & Draves, 2018; Parker, Spears, & Draves, 2018). The perspectives of in-service music teachers with disabilities are voices that have been long overdue to be represented within academic research. Despite this study containing only the voices of four people with disabilities, their voices give valuable insight into the possible experiences of other people with disabilities and on how communities can better support people with disabilities.

As a person like Jennifer and Rain, I was born disabled and have become further dynamically disabled myself. Doing a qualitative study on my own community of people allowed for participant narratives to be received with my own experiences being used to help bridge understanding. As I went through the interview process and data analysis, the reality that this study is a piece of research this community desperately needs became increasingly apparent.

Disclosure

For individuals with visible disabilities, disclosure is often done without words. For individuals with invisible disabilities, they likely have to verbally disclose over and over if they

wish to become visibly disabled. To solve this issue of needing to consistently share their disability identity to be seen, there is an increasing amount of tools available to individuals with disabilities to make invisible disabilities visible. In the United Kingdom the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard was developed to make invisible disabilities visible. The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower shares that the sunflower lanyard is, "a simple tool for you to voluntarily share that you have a disability or condition that may not be immediately apparent – and that you may need a helping hand, understanding, or more time in shops, at work, on transport, or in public space" (n.d.). This tool, and tools like this, give people with invisible disabilities the grace typically given by strangers to people with visible disabilities.

For Rain, as shared in her vignette (see page 48), she has used visual indicators of having a disability so others may extend her grace and understanding when she requires extra time and patience. For individuals with invisible disabilities, without these tools, they may be required to verbally disclose their disability, causing a constant consideration of whether or not they disclose their disability, and at what moment? This consistent need to decide if they should disclose or not disclose requires more mental energy than one may have.

Many people with chronic conditions identify with the idea of having "spoonfuls of energy." Spoon Theory comes from blogger Christine Miserandino. Christine retells the story of how Spoon Theory was born in her essay "The Spoon Theory" (2010). When at a diner with her best friend, someone who has been on her journey with Lupus, her friend asks her what it felt like to be sick. Looking around the table, Christine finds spoons and begins a demonstration on how disabled energy works for some people.

> I explained that the difference in being sick and being healthy is having to make choices or to consciously think about things when the rest of the world doesn't have to. The

> healthy have the luxury of a life without choices, a gift most people take for granted. Most people start the day with unlimited amount of possibilities, and energy to do whatever they desire, especially young people. For the most part, they do not need to worry about the effects of their actions. So for my explanation, I used spoons to convey this point. I wanted something for her to actually hold, for me to then take away, since most people who get sick feel a "loss" of a life they once knew. If I was in control of taking away the spoons, then she would know what it feels like to have someone or something else, in this case Lupus, being in control. (Miserandino, 2010)

This demonstration gave Christine a kinesthetic viewpoint of how energy works, and how little control many people with disability feel they have. Within Rain's narrative, she fought for physical accommodations within her place of employment, not because she did not want to venture from class to class when coverage was needed, but because moving from room to room took energy she did not have. Her disabilities are what limited her and removed metaphorical spoons away from her.

Christina continues in her essay:

> I've wanted more "spoons" for years and haven't found a way yet to get more, why should she? I also told her to always be conscious of how many she had, and not to drop them because she can never forget she has Lupus. (Miserandino, 2010)

Rain cannot forget about her disability, or her complications will increase. Tools like the Hidden Sunflower lanyard, when understood by those who engage with the person who uses them, can work to help preserve the spoons of those who measure energy with spoons.

GoodRx writer Jacqueline Raposo (2024) also notes that the number of spoons one may have in a day can also be impacted by mental health. Stress, anxiety, depression, and other

mental health limitations may take the bulk of one's spoons just from experiencing the symptoms associated with the conditions like needing to slow thoughts down during periods of stress, raised heart rate from anxiety, and the feeling of being weighted down from depression. People with disabilities that struggle with overstimulation, like autism and ADHD, may also deplete their spoons in a day when being in environments like a loud classroom for too long.

While not every disabled person identifies with the Spoon Theory, those that do are frequently at the will of the community and environment. Like Christina shares, the disabled person is seldom in control of how many spoons they can have in a day. Disclosure frequently can assist with maintaining spoons. For example, colleagues that understand someone has autism, where sensory overstimulation is a prominent symptom, may provide their autistic colleague a shirt for an event a day ahead so they could wash it and have as much control over the smell, feel, and texture as possible. Without disclosure, the community may not know how they can be assistive in maintaining the spoons of an individual with a disability. Visible disabilities have a built-in label that invisible disabilities do not have. As discussed, there are tools available to help many invisible disabilities become visible, but when one does not know about them or use them, they must choose to disclose or not to disclose consistently. Just like how stress or overstimulation may deplete someone with a disability of spoons, the constant choice of disclosing can also deplete spoons. For some individuals with disabilities, they may experience dilemmas with "coming out of the disability closet."

Dilemmas with "Coming Out of the Disability Closet"

Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky's 2019 study of 20 teachers with physical disabilities throughout Israel found there were four primary dilemmas with coming out of the disability

closet: the "coming out of the disability closet" dilemma, the classroom management dilemma, the equality/equity dilemma, and the healthy/self-dilemma. Alex and Penelope's narratives highlighted Tal-Alon and Shapira-Lishchinky's findings.

The theme "complex terrain of disclosure" (see page 49) dove into the disadvantages and benefits of "coming out of the disability closet." Despite the 2019 study only hearing the voices of teachers with physical disabilities, Penelope's narrative outlines their dilemmas. Penelope has the freedom to remain "in the closet" and not experience the negative responses towards having a disability she feels as though her students would have if she "came out." As stated in her vignette (see page 46), she feels as though her students pick on her autistic behaviors, and that this has led to her fear of disclosing her disability.

In interview two with Penelope, I brought up these different dilemmas, with her sharing that she resonated with this concept. In her situation, is it the question of "do I prioritize my mental health, wellbeing, job security, and professional relationships, or do I prioritize my mental health in a different way, my right to seek accommodations, and unmask?" In contrast to Penelope, Alex is unapologetically openly disabled. Alex has chosen the freedom to unmask at the cost of targeted ableism from her environment, and the need for her to constantly defend herself.

The benefits of disclosing also align with Tal–Alon & Shapira–Lishchinsky's 2019 study. Alex demonstrated the freedom to focus on health while teaching because of disability disclosure. By disclosing and sharing when she experienced increased symptoms of autism, Alex is free to ask for grace from her students. Alex, Jennifer, and Rain all shared how their disclosure of their disability allowed for them to ask for assistance and focus on their health. Alex's ability to ask for grace and be transparent with her students, and Jennifer and Rain's ability to ask for

assistance with physical tasks all demonstrated the right to choose to focus on health and the use of accommodations.

Interview Disclosure

Within the benefits of disclosure section, Alex, Jennifer, and Rain each discussed the sentiment of not wanting to work at for employers that do not want to work with people with disabilities. In Interviews with Rain, the conversation of job descriptions and essential functions were heavily discussed. Rain, who had the most experience with the job search and interview process among the four participants, shared that there were frequently "red and "green flags" within job descriptions, but some jobs may not have a job description that aligns with the view of the school district.

Every teaching job application is likely to state the school district's nondiscrimination policy, but many jobs will have varying "physical demands" and "abilities." While some jobs are very broad, others can be meticulously specific. An example of a broad "physical demands" description would be "must be able to stand, sit, and be physically active for extended periods," with some jobs not even having this listed on job applications. On the other end of the spectrum, some job descriptions are written to be overly specific. An example of a specific "physical demands" description would be:

> While performing the duties of this job, the employee is frequently required to stand; walk; use hands and fingers to handle and/or feel objects, tools or controls; talk and hear. The employee frequently must squat, stoop or kneel, reach above the head and forward 0 –24 inches and on occasion up to 36 inches. The employee continuously uses hand strength to grasp items. The employee will frequently bend or twist at the neck and trunk

> more than the average person while performing the duties of this job. The employee must frequently lift and/or move up to 50 pounds 0–12 feet and occasionally up to 20 feet, such as curriculum materials, desks, chairs, and boxes. The employee will sometimes push/pull items such as tables and carts. Specific vision abilities required by this job include close vision, color vision and the ability to adjust focus while supervising students and working with computers, written materials, reports, assessment data, etc.

While the school district may be looking for someone who perfectly fits this job description, this description excludes many different types of disability, including but not limited to physical disabilities like dwarfism, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, cardiovascular or respiratory conditions, sensory disabilities like vision impairments, color blindness, hearing loss and deafness, and more. While federal employers in the United States are not legally allowed to discriminate on the basis of disability per the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, job descriptions that highlight specific requirements like this send a message to people with disabilities that they may not be welcomed there.

As seen in Rain's experience (see page 62), the job description is one way a person with a disability may get a sense for if a school district would be accommodating and accepting of a disability or continue to perpetuate disability stigma and systemic ableism. It is important for school districts to use language that best represents their values, as they may be subconsciously turning away qualified disabled candidates for teaching jobs. While job descriptions and inclusive language are not perfect indicators of disability acceptance by an employer, it can make the difference between people with disabilities feeling safe to at least apply to positions. Alternatively, a job description may have all the "green flags" necessary to make someone with a disability feel confident to apply to a position, but a teacher with a disability may still experience

disability related discrimination in the workplace. Nonetheless, transparency and actively using inclusive language will allow for school districts to gain an trust from many people with disabilities.

Representation

Disability representation has increased since the disability rights movement, but generational prejudice is still halting progress on curing an ableist society. Historically, because of the "ugly laws" at the turn of the 20th century, people with disabilities were shown through legislature that they were not wanted in society. People with invisible disabilities could blend in by not disclosing or treating their disability, but people with visible disabilities risked being put into city jailhouses if they were caught at the wrong place at the wrong time. With forced sterilization still being legal in more than half of the country, people with disabilities are still fighting for rights to their own bodies and to exist freely. Disability is frequently a silent minority group, with a history that is sparsely told, and a community that still being infantilized.

Today, media centered around people with disabilities is still rooted in ablism, with heavy exploitation of disability for motivation. The idea of "curing," or "overcoming" a disability being inspirational to the public as ties into the medical model of disability, with the disabled person needing to take responsibility for their own equality. Media praises people with disabilities for appearing "able," leading to those with disabilities who do not fit that norm often not wanting to be openly disabled to their community.

Seen in the "Power of Representation" section, Jennifer and Rain's experience of not seeing others like them in their combined 42 years of teaching (see page 58) showcases firsthand how history is still affecting this community. Thinking back to Judy Heumann's story (see page

8), people with visible disabilities were still being denied teaching licenses into the 70s. Prior to Judy Heumann, Rose Freistater was denied her teaching license in 1931 on the basis of her weight (182 lbs.), and then was further denied the appeal after losing the 32 lbs. asked by the court (*"City Fights Appeal of Ousted Teacher,"* 1936). The aforementioned *New York Times* article reports that the New York Department of Education told the State Education Department that granting Freistater her teaching license would "seriously hamper the educational system in the city" (*"City Fights Appeal of Ousted Teacher,"* 1936). While this case was regarding weight, the connection still stands that the appearance of the teacher supposedly made them unqualified to teach. Heumann winning her case almost 40 years later was a major step forward in creating visual representation of differing bodies in the classroom. Just a few years after Judy Heumann won her case and obtained her teaching license, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was signed, making discrimination on the basis of disability in federal employment illegal.

Prior to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, after the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, people with disabilities were solely protected against discrimination by federal employers. It has only been thirty-five years since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Thirty-five years is not enough time for generational trauma to be cured out of American society. Tessa Charlesworth, a researcher on social prejudices, finds that hidden prejudices around disability could take more than 200 years to reach neutrality (Rojas, 2022). Charlesworth shares:

> Implicit bias can change. But so far, it's only changed for some groups. (…) It changed for sexuality and race bias pretty dramatically. Sexuality biases dropped 64 percent over 14 years, but it hasn't changed at all for disability, age, or body weight bias. Disability

bias over 14 years has only shifted by three percent. The disparity between the change in sexuality bias and the stability in disability bias is massive.

Many people with disabilities feel as though they are fighting a battle that can feel impossible, making representation in education matter even more. Since the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, people with disabilities are leaving "the closet" and entering workplaces, courtrooms, and public debates. "Disabled people are now the largest minority group in the United States" (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Despite people with disabilities being the largest minority group, people with disabilities have yet to become widely represented within education. Support for this community, representation from those with disabilities who feel safe and comfortable, research, and discussion around disability is necessary to see real change in visible representation. Representation is powerful and has the ability to combat stigma and negative perceptions of disability,

Disability as a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Afterthought

Participants Jennfier and Rain shared their experiences of not feeling represented within Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) spaces (see page 64). Especially being individuals who experience intersectionality between their disability and gender identity, finding themselves represented within spheres that promote acceptance and awareness is important. Research on the intersection between minority identities is on the rise (i.e., Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991; Garland-Thomson, 2002). Disability notably increases the likelihood that a person in a minority community will be discriminated against or face increased hardship. The intersectionality between being disabled and a woman in music education was also discussed within Alex (see page 41) and Jennifer's narratives (see page 44).

DEI groups that value diversity, equity, and inclusion should be actively seeking to include and uplift the disabled voice. By lifting disabled voices, especially voices of intersecting minority identities, DEI groups can increase representation, support, and build community for people with disabilities. The power DEI initiatives have to show disabled people that they are welcome and safe in a systemically ableist field is frequently underutilized.

Reflection on the Advice Given by In-service Music Teachers with a Disability

Throughout the interview process, my own disability and experiences were used to help bridge understanding in participants' narratives. Participants were made aware that I have been disabled from birth, was previously a pre-service teacher, and am in the job search process during the informed consent meeting. When participants were asked to give advice to people with disabilities, they were disabled people, talking to a disabled person, giving advice to people with disabilities from the experiences they have lived.

The narratives of Alex, Penelope, and Rain consist of discrimination, prejudice, and othering. Self-advocacy has been a tool they have all had to use and become comfortable with. Self-advocacy can be as small as inviting people to events that represent disability, or as large as challenging stigmas head on. Efforts such as calling out behaviors that perpetuate negative stigmas and stereotypes, requesting formal documentation for disabilities and asking for accommodations, publicly sharing your experience as a disabled person, and being an advocate for people with disabilities are all valid forms of self-advocacy. Conducting research, sharing on social media, and being vocal about disability is a way not just to be a self-advocate, but a way to be an overall disability advocate.

One does not need to be disabled to be a disability advocate. Strong and moving advocacy comes from the voices of the community and people of all backgrounds. In the 21st century, social media and online presence is one way to practice strong self-advocacy and overall disability advocacy. Sharing memes that help normalize disability on one's story, making posts with alternative text and image descriptions in the captions, and adding closed captions to videos are ways to build connection to the disabled community, promote awareness of disability, and demonstrate how to create accessibility.

Disability advocates, people with disabilities, and/or a disability ally (someone who is in support of disability rights and awareness) are powerful voices within the community. People with disabilities deserve to have a community full of people who are open to our needs, willing to listen, can serve as a shoulder to cry on, and are willing to laugh with us. Having people who are like us and understand us makes the experience of having a disability feel less isolating. A health policy brief by the Center for Health and Research Transformation reported that "40 percent of adults with a debilitating disability or chronic condition report feeling lonely or socially isolated" (Shafiq, King, & Rontal, 2021, pg. 1). The report continues to note that prolonged loneliness equates to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Having community prevents prolonged loneliness and can save someone's life.

Implications for Music Education

Through the narratives of Alex, Jennifer, Penelope, and Rain, there is a consistent call to action for more research and conversation around teachers with disabilities. Disabled people deserve to hear disabled voices, and communities have difficulty growing without seeing where their faults are. As stated before, barriers should not have to be met by disabled people in order

for communities to tear them down. There is a demand for more research on teachers with disabilities, especially within the fine arts, so people with disabilities can all experience a field that is welcoming with minimal barriers. Systemic ableism still runs rampant within education, despite the right to work in public education without disability discrimination having been available since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. To continue to support the growing community of people with disabilities, I suggest continuing research on the narratives of in-service music teachers of all disability types, deconstructing and researching the barriers within teacher education programs for people with disabilities, and barriers within public education for teachers with disabilities.

Reflection Questions for Teacher Education Programs, Public Education, and the Community

The community can support people with disabilities by being proactive and actionable. Some questions teacher education programs and music education researchers should consider asking themselves are:

- Do we visually show people of differing abilities within our program?
- Do we make students aware of resources available to them on campus?
- Are we proactively offering accommodations, or waiting for students to advocate for them?
- Is our curriculum accessible for all students, or are there requirements that differing bodies may not be able to fulfill?
- Is our physical and digital learning environment truly accessible for all students, beyond the minimum legal requirements?

- Do we foster a culture where students feel safe disclosing a disability without fear of judgment, exclusion, or reduced expectations?
- What messages (explicit or implicit) do we send to students about our requirements for our graduates, and are those messages rooted in ableist norms?

Some questions public education and boards of education should consider asking themselves are:

- Are we actively supporting our disabled educators and valuing their expertise and perspectives?
- Do our job postings and interviews unintentionally communicate able-bodied expectations?
- Do we foster a culture where teachers feel safe disclosing a disability without fear of judgment, job insecurity, or reduced credibility?
- Are disabled teachers represented in professional development, leadership, trainings, and public-facing materials?
- Do we regularly review polices for ablest bias?
- What systems do we have in place for staff to report ableism?

Questions members of the community and various stakeholders should consider asking themselves include:

- Is our image of a "good teacher" rooted in ablest ideas?
- Do we associate disability with tragedy, burden, or pity, or strength and resilient?
- How do we react around disabled people, and is it rooted in ableism?
- Do we uplift voices of people with disabilities in public education? What outreach do we do to hear these voices represented?
- Do we actively challenge negative responses towards disability?

- How can we be active allies, listeners, and advocates for people with disabilities?
- Are we aware of and are actively telling the history of people with disabilities?

APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON | Research Compliance Services

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

January 29, 2025

Gray Araiza
baraiza@uoregon.edu

Dear Gray Araiza:

The following research was reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption.

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Study Title:	Perspectives of In-service Music Teachers with Disabilities
Principal Investigator:	Gray Araiza
Parent Study ID:	STUDY00001690
Transaction ID:	STUDY00001690
Funding Source:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Category 2 Exemption, Category: IRB Protocol; • Exempt Determination, Category: IRB Protocol; • Informed Consent, Category: Consent Form; • Research Plan, Category: IRB Protocol;
Approval Date:	1/29/2025
Effective Date:	1/29/2025
Expiration Date:	1/28/2026

For this research, the following determinations have been made:

- ☐ This study has been reviewed under **the 2018 Common Rule** and determined to qualify for exemption under **Title 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(ii) Tests, survey s, interviews, or observation (low risk).**

The research is approved to be conducted as described in the approved protocol using the approved materials. Approved materials can be accessed in the protocol workspace in the IRB module of the research administration portal (RAP).

All changes to this research must be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption. Research Compliance Services has developed specific guidance to help you understand when a modification is required before a change can be implemented. It is your responsibility to ensure modifications are submitted when required and approval secured before implementing changes to the protocol

A regulatory continuing Review is not required for this study. **An institutional approval period has been established based on your application materials.** If you anticipate the research **will** continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a **Continuing Review Application** at least 45 days prior to the expiration date. A closure report must

be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

With the submission of your request, you agreed to uphold the responsibilities of the Principal Investigator and have agreed to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB module of the RAP.

If you have any questions regarding your protocol or the review process, please contact Research Compliance Services at ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu or (541)346-2510. The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

Please consider completing our user satisfaction survey. It only takes a few minutes, and we would like to hear about your experience working with our office!

Sincerely,

Lizzy Utterback
Research Compliance Services
on behalf of the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects

Appendix B: Informed Consent Document

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Consent for Research Participation

Title:	Perspectives of Music Teachers with Disabilities
Researcher(s):	Gray Araiza, University of Oregon
Researcher Contact Info:	(909) 471-1014
	baraiza@uoregon.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or not to participate. Carefully consider this information and the more detailed information provided below the box. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before you decide whether to participate.

Key Information for You to Consider
• **Voluntary Consent**. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation. • **Purpose**. The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the perspective of music teachers with disabilities. • **Duration.** It is expected that your participation will last 6 weeks from the start of interviews with 30-minutes interviews once a week, for 6 weeks. • **Procedures and Activities.** You will be asked to answer interview guiding questions, bring in artifacts related to your narrative, and journal items that you feel are important to this research. • **Risks.** Some of the foreseeable risks are psychological or emotional risks (e.g., fear, stress, confusion, guilt, loss of self-esteem, depression, triggering of past emotional experiences). • **Benefits**. Some of the benefits that may be expected include having a place to share one's personal story related to their disability. In this research we hope to give the voices of teachers with disabilities a place to be heard. • **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?

The researcher Gray Araiza from the University of Oregon is asking for your consent to this research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research is to give insight to the perspectives of music teachers with disabilities You are being asked to participate because you have indicated you identify has having a disability, visible or invisible. About 5-7 people will take part in this research.

How long will I be in this research?

We expect that your participation will last 6 weeks with one weekly 30-minute zoom meeting a week.

What happens if I agree to participate in this research?

If you agree to be in this research, your participation will include taking part in zoom interviews, providing artifacts that corelate to your narrative when appropriate, and either writing in a journal or providing voice memos for supplemental information about your narrative.

We will tell you about any new information that may affect your willingness to continue participation in this research.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

We may publish/present the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. Responses from participants will be transcribed from interviews, and these may be inserted into the research project.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We will take measures to protect your privacy including using a pseudonym and removing any identifiable markers. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee your privacy will be protected.

We will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information including keeping zoom meeting recordings private. Despite these precautions to protect the confidentiality of your information, we can never fully guarantee confidentiality of all study information.

Individuals and organization that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This may include access to your private information and interview data. These individuals and organizations include: the Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research, and the professor who is the acting advisor for this thesis project.

What are the risks if I participate in this research?

Potential risks include psychological or emotional risks (e.g., fear, stress, confusion, guilt, loss of self-esteem, depression, triggering of past emotional experiences).

What are the benefits of participating in this research?

You may or may not benefit from participating in this research. There are no known direct benefits to you from participating in this study. However, it is hoped that information gained from this study will help give the field of music education the perspective of music teachers with disabilities as the population of incoming teachers with disabilities rises.

What other choices do I have besides participation in this research?

It is your choice to participate or not to participate in this research. Your alternative is to not take part in the research.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Oregon.

If you decide to leave this research, contact the research team so that the investigator can remove and discard any information they may have collected about your narrative.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I be paid for participating in this research?

You will not be paid for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Gray Araiza
(909) 471-1014
baraiza@uoregon.edu

An Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. UO Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout my participation.

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

I understand that by signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent or assent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation in this study.

As described above, you will be audio/video recorded using zoom's record meeting function while performing the activities described above. Recordings will be used for data analysis only.

- Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio/video recording as described.

_____ I agree to the use of audio/video recording consent to participate in this study.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member	Signature of Research Team Member	Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

The objective of this study is to share the narratives of in-service music teachers with disabilities. What is their experience? How can teacher education programs, public education, and the community better support this growing community of people?

At any time, a participant may refuse to answer a question. If a question does not apply to you, then it may be left unanswered. Questions can also be altered to better fit your narrative. Guideline questions are as follows:

Tell me about yourself. (Responses can be personal, professional, academic, demographic, etc.)

What is your relationship with the word “Disability?” “Disabled?”

Do you identify as having a disability? What does this identity mean to you, or why do you not?

For yourself, do you prefer identity first or person first language? What draws you to this form of self-identification?

Why did you go into education?

Describe your teacher education program.

Did you find support in your teacher education program? What did your support system look like? This could be a group of friends or peers, a mentor, formal support systems, therapy, etc..

Does your community (e.g., school, class, parents, among peers, etc.) know about your disability? Why or why not?

How has your disability impacted your relationships with students? Do your students know of your disability? How do you navigate this conversation?

If you are open about your disability to your community, have you noticed a change in your community due to visible representation?

Throughout your career, have you observed a change in your community with how people view adults with disabilities? Students with disabilities? Teachers with disabilities?

What was the job search process like? How was the interview process?

In the job search and interview process, how did you approach your disability?

At your place of work, do you receive accommodations? Do you self-accommodate, or do you have a support system that accommodates you? What does this look like and what is the process of requesting supports? If you do not receive accommodations or self-accommodate, but could benefit from them, why not request them?

What support systems do you have in your current position? This could be a group of friends or peers, a mentor, formal support systems, therapy, etc..

Do you feel like your teaching style is impacted by your disability? Why or why not?

What is your relationship with your disability?

What advice would you give someone with a disability who is thinking about pursuing a career in music education (e.g., a high school student, or someone seeking a career change)?

What advice would you give pre-service music teachers (e.g., music education majors) with a disability?

What advice would you give other music educators with a disability?

Appendix D: Interview Transcriptions

RAIN

Interview 1 (3.11.25)

INTERVIEWER: How has like your week been? I know it's like, how was the conference?

RAIN: It was great. We went to V like, because I live in City, which is, you know, near Ish. We're like an hour from V, and my husband teaches at School University. So, he's very like in that. So, we both applied to do their State music Conference. And it was really good. And then in 2 weeks I'm doing the American String Teachers National Conference in State. So. Present there, which is even. It's like a bigger deal. So, this was a nice practice.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, yeah, that's awesome. I did. We have like our Oregon Music Education Association. it's the Omea Conference, and there's a poster session, and I just submitted what I did for my fall term quantitative research class. It's like will never be published. I'll never actually finish the project. It was really cool. It was a like music education, professor's perspectives on teaching students with disabilities and like level of comfort. It also kind of did the like. If you follow the social model like, agree more, the social model versus the medical model of disability like, how does that impact your level of comfort. And it was I was one of 3 that did a poster session. It was like 2 grad students and a professor. And so, I wish more people here did research and posted about research and stuff.

RAIN: I always like going through that area of the thing because it's usually not too crowded. And you can just kind of like sit in and electrolyze for a little while.

INTERVIEWER: Yep. Well, let's get started. What I just want to reiterate at any time you could choose to answer a question, you can change it to make it fit your story the best you could be like. I don't feel comfortable answering that one I know especially your situation, is a little delicate in certain areas. So, if you're like this, I just don't want to risk it. I'm not going to answer this. You're welcome to do that at any point. And then the 1st question I have is just, will you tell me a little bit about yourself? So, this could be like your background. I know you're a string player, so anything you'd like to share.

RAIN: Yep, violinist mainly, and want to be violist, as Viola's great and I initially went

into school as a double major performance and music ed… pretty quickly dropped the music performance part, just because it was way overwhelming to do 2 things. And I was getting enough playing in the music ed portion so kept doing music ed and right out of school started teaching orchestra, and since then I've done orchestra and general music from preschool up to high school, music theory, piano lab. What else like electronic composition, music and film choir. Only thing I haven't done is a band, I think. Oh, I've done percussion ensemble like world drumming ensemble, ukulele, guitar, and orchestra from very beginning all the way up to high school and I really me did my master's in string, pedagogy, and string education. So, I really kind of have started veering more directly toward that area. Where my expertise is. And as far as playing myself, some of my conditions limit a lot of my physical playing, so I kind of haven't been doing the same number of gigs and professional engagements that I used to do. I'd say 10 years ago I was doing a lot more of them even less. Yeah, like, around 10 years ago. And since then, fewer and fewer. And now I really. I kind of have the mentality of like reserving, playing and my joints and things for my enjoyment rather than for professional reasons. So, like I play Irish music. And I do that every week in in different pubs and just kind of play, for the love of it.

INTERVIEWER: That's awesome. So, you said joints, are you also? Is it HEDS?

RAIN: No. Well, I have a suspicion that yes, but I have rheumatoid arthritis.

Sometimes they lead, like lean into one another. And I'm definitely hypermobile in several areas. And so, I really have a suspicion that yes, probably. But some other diagnoses have taken priority, I guess. Yeah. I love the like autoimmune waterfall of like tons of autoimmune things. And a lot of other things as well. So, it's like. Yeah, there has to be some connection that you get multiple things. You know it doesn't just didn't win the lottery, you know, of.

INTERVIEWER: Or you really won the lottery, and we should gamble.

RAIN: Because you rarely meet somebody with like one thing, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I know. And then what is your relationship with the word disability? And then the relationship with the word disabled. I kind of view them as 2 separate words. But however, you choose to answer that.

RAIN: I think it's a newer identifier for me… because a lot of the chronic conditions I had, you know… are conditions. And I was never really open to the idea, or like the possibility that those things are considered disabilities. And really, the word disability, I think, is one that overall, I'm just thankful exists because, and the identity of, because it is so much easier to explain to

people than, “Oh, I have, you know, 25 chronic conditions that manifest in these ways sometimes and other times these ways.” Just being able to say and being comfortable saying, I'm disabled, or a person with a disability like is… I'm grateful for that. And I think once I started identifying with it. I felt a lot more comfortable with a lot of my limits.

INTERVIEWER: So, you said, it's like recent that you started like identifying as having a disability. What is that? What does now, having that identity mean to you?

RAIN: It feels like a community. And like. I belong to something rather than just being this one-off weird person that you know doesn't fit anywhere. and I think it makes me more tolerant of myself, more like, yeah, I think I understand myself better because of it. And I think. having that, it also means it's a validation that things are sometimes difficult for me, and that doesn't mean that, like I'm at fault for that, that it's something sometimes out of my control. Yeah, I think I would say at the first, like. 1st handicapped parking pass that I got was only like 5, 4, 5 years ago and just getting to the point where I was like, yeah, I want to get that, because that will help me if I were to have that I think, start at that process. Being like it is okay to identify as disabled because you are like. It's not something that you're just gonna take on because you want to. You know.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel like you had to kind of like destigmatize disability in order to feel this identity? Or is it something that you just like, what is your relationship with? With? Are you a juvenile arthritis like, is it something you've had? Okay? So, it's an onset later in life.

RAIN: Yeah, really. I've had certain things like major symptoms, some of which were debilitating of other conditions, probably beginning. It might like near twenties. So, like 18, 19 and then really things became severe and more debilitating Around 10 years ago, and then really severe in 2020. So right, you know. Only 5 years. So yeah, it's really the beginning of my teaching career. I didn't have any of that. So.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, there's a lot of interesting likes, I'm born disabled with the vision, but have become vision is a physical disability it's like a sensory, but we call it physical. My heart condition, and my joint condition is I was 19 onsets at about 16, diagnosed it somewhere between 19 and 20. It's all a blur. Also 2020 and: it's very interesting, like the perspectives people have when it's like young life versus different part of lives and kind of, and it's interesting. Your it sounds like yours is like it's been in waves of like increasing as, but not necessarily like a hit.

RAIN: Yeah. And like looking back, you know, it's different than in the moment you

know it. So, I really never considered that that's what would be happening later, you know, that was just so looking back, it's like, oh, yeah, there were debilitating symptoms I had at this point, but I didn't identify it that way, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that? This is me just trying to like to conceptualize your experiences? Do you think that you learned how to do things with those symptoms in mind like when I explained, this one is like, I learned how to walk, not being able to see the ground. I learned how to play the oboe knowing my heart's gonna freak out like these are things that I like, I learned how to live life with these symptoms in mind. So then, it wasn't like the able-bodied person, you know. You learn how to walk, and you can see the ground versus. I just don't have that experience.

RAIN: Yeah. About certain things like, especially in hindsight, and some things that I know I did have when I was younger. That I you know, as a kid or young adults just thought those were normal things, and people deal with them silently, you know, like, or you know, those are just everybody's got stuff which to a degree is true. Like everyone has a thing, and you have to figure out how to do it. So, I would. I didn't really start realizing some of the stuff that I did to cope with those was abnormal until later. But sure, yeah, there's definitely stuff that I have done in the past and present to just live life that way. Yeah, for sure.

INTERVIEWER: There's like abnormal. And then there's just like our normal. Yeah, yeah. And then do you prefer identity? 1st language or person? 1st language, do you? How do you feel about that? Because I realize that question of every person I've asked has a totally different response.

RAIN: It is interesting. Right? Yeah, I think both honestly. For myself, I tend to do person first most of the time just because there are really very few things like, maybe the exception being Adhd is like, that's my entire personality, really, you know, is affected by that. So, it's like but other things it's like that is not a hundred percent who I am. I don't want to be I. You know it feels weird to say that because I don't know. It just feels like I'm putting myself into a category solely. But I'm not offended by disability, person 1st language like I don't think. I haven't encountered at least a situation where I felt like somebody was doing that to, you know, maliciously, or like where it felt offensive to me in any way. You know, we learn in in class, right to always use identity 1st and for students. So, I think maybe that just translated over to.

INTERVIEWER: So, like with students like the person 1st language. So, like, you know, child with autism versus like artistic child.

RAIN: identity first. That's what I meant.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it's so confusing at times. And then sorry, looking at my questions. Kind of going in in different orders. What drew you to education?

RAIN: My teachers and my, my dad were a teacher an art teacher for 30 something years. And so, I think that it was. I used to go into class with him, and I really enjoyed that. And then my music teachers. That was kind of you know. I in about 7th grade realized that was what I was going to do. And then I never really had any other thoughts except for possibly doing art education. So, it was always going to be education.

INTERVIEWER: There are so many similarities between orchestra kids and band kids, because, like I that you're not the 1st person to say, like, I just love music.

RAIN: Yeah. I realized it was like, oh, that's a thing I can do for my job. Like, yeah, I'm gonna do that.

INTERVIEWER: And then can you describe your teacher? Education program? Just kind of like as a as a body.

RAIN: It was. I went to REDACTED University. So, it's a conservatory style at a university. We had very few Gen Eds, but because it was education, we had school the school of education with that. So, we had I think there were, maybe because it was relatively small school like maybe if 4, 5 string education people throughout the whole time I was there not my class, my class, I think, had 2. It's me and one other girl, and then we had a contingent of band, a contingent of choir contingent of general music. So, it was pretty well mixed. And yeah, it was a 4-year program. And we did our student teaching in the last year the fall of the last year in the fall of last year. So, you do student teaching and then come back and finish your last remaining classes. And I had a job already by February. I think of that year. So, boy, was that last semester a write off as long as I don't fail anything.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, this is our seniors. Last week of term, they did part time student teaching, but they're like Oh, really, last week of school. And then they do full time this next term. we do part-time, full-time.

RAIN: It's interesting to see what's different. Because I've lived in 4 States. So, I've seen really a lot of different. But that's different than any place I've been so.

INTERVIEWER: It's new. This is the 3rd year.

RAIN: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: Both above and below, because I graduated in 22, and I'm now getting them out. It's so complicated.

RAIN: So did you do performance, and then do, Ed, for the masters.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I realized I love performing. I had to sit for my junior recital because my heart couldn't keep up, and my senior recital I was taped up as much as you could be, bracing everything and my senior recital. I finished it feeling so defeated, and then I didn't touch the oboe for a year, because I was like, I can't. There's a point where I started taking out my like disability frustration onto my instrument because it was the thing that was making me see it was like it was the mirror, even though it wasn't a mirror. And so, I took all of my undergrad wanting to teach. I did master classes and whatnot, and was like, that is actually what I want to do. Why am I doing this thing? I love doing this thing, but it should not be my entire life. So that's how we ended up here. this is not the typical path that people take.

RAIN: Yeah, there's so many, though I think, in my program we had at least half been master students doing the Ed program with us. So.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that that feels validating. We typically have maybe one every 3 years, you know, because it takes about 3 years to do it with the licensure. So interesting. Okay, that makes me feel better. When you were going through your teacher education program, kind of what did this look like for you in terms of like, did you? Did you find supports? And that could be related to like a disability? It could be related to just like people are depressed in college, because that's a thing that happens frequently. And so kind of what supports did you have? What did it look like, and it could be like you had a strong group of friends. You had mentors.

RAIN: That was... It was a really hard time for me actually like pretty much immediately when I went away, is when I started experiencing really severe depression, symptoms and anxiety systems or symptoms, but which my psychiatrist now thinks was my Adhd just freaking out and manifesting those ways. But I didn't know I had that at that time, you know, I was only diagnosed 4 years ago officially. So, like, yeah, that was a really hard time. And I also I had. My parents had relatively recently divorced, and it was just a very like tumultuous high school and college experience, and finally getting away, being able to do my own thing. And then having such a hard time doing it. I did need a lot of support like I had friends, but I wasn't super open to talking about that stuff. It just was knowing I had people that cared for me and like looked out for me. And then once I did find some friends that you know understood that specifically like even unspoken, like

just having. That was incredibly valuable, just somebody to like to check on me and know and like and I was really lucky to have a roommate. I didn't super get along with but who was like, hey? You're having problems like you're having trouble. I think you need to do such and such things like, so she was very supportive in that way like. And after we lived together freshman year, we really didn't hang out or anything like that. But I was so grateful to her. Even at 1 point she was contacting my sister just to be like, hey, this is happening. You should know this and that I was able to use the like school mental health facility. I got medicated pretty early on so the therapy itself, I wasn't finding very valuable, and so, since I was medicated. I'm like I kind of went off that path. I wish I hadn't. But no at the time that's what I did. And then I had a professor who was very like, very like understanding. And didn't. She didn't even ask a lot of questions like whenever I would say, hey, I, you know, had this happen, and like we met, which wasn't often. But when I did, she didn't put that back on me, and like, in a way of making me feel guilty about it or punishing me for it. So that was good.

INTERVIEWER: This is where we might get into a little bit of like you don't have to share. Pass what you would like to share. Does your community be like your peers, your friends, you can share whatever teaching experience you would like to share…Do they know about your disability and kind of what does that look like.

RAIN: Yeah, especially since I started needing mobility aids. I mean, you can't really hide that much. So, and not like I really wanted to. But you know, it was just much more obvious.

So yeah, I but prior to that it was more of like, I would have to explain, and it was in the period where I still didn't really identify as disabled particularly. And I didn't have diagnoses. I just knew I was having a lot of trouble with a lot of things. So being able to, at that point, I had to speak with my employer. And luckily it was the time we were teaching remotely so. There wasn't like a ton of physical limitations for me, which was good. But when we had to go back. I really had to do the process with my district of asking for accommodations and it worked out fine. I was really nervous about that initially. But that worked out fine. And I was able to tell… you know I wasn't working closely with people since we were so remote and separated. So, I didn't really need to speak with anyone about it. But my most recent job… I was using mobility aids. And so, I really communicated with people about that, and they were all very supportive. Like my colleagues, my direct colleagues, incredibly supportive and just. They had no issues. It was more the higher ups that did. And yeah, it's and like my professional groups. Now, I'm on like committees with the

American String Teachers Association, and you know, we work remotely. So, you don't really need to communicate a lot of that stuff. Sometimes I have. But then, when we started doing conferences in person again, and things like that, I definitely have. And that, yeah, that's worked out well to be like. Now when they send out surveys for things, they actually, I think because of that of because of myself, ask questions about mobility limitations and stuff. So that's they're definitely receptive.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't start using a cane till I was 15, so, like I lived, I grew up until I was 15, not having a visible mobility aid. And then, now I have a guide dog. So, it's quite obvious. Do you feel like going from maybe being, you know, I'm invisibly disabled, like an invisible disability to somewhat more of a visible disability, because mobility aids. I feel like they out us more than you know anything else. Will have you noticed a change in how you perceive yourself, or how? Maybe people perceive you? Yeah, how those relationships go.

RAIN: Yeah, especially with my family, like using those in front of my family feels really hard. and that, you know, I probably know there's varied reactions between family members to that and some of them. I have no qualms about doing that in front of them, and some of them. I feel like I have to, even when I don't necessarily need to because explaining the not having it is even another thing, but and the same thing at work. I think, like I, I would use the mobility, aid it every chance that I had, because I think I was at least at my most current job was fighting for those accommodations, and just didn't feel like addressing that dynamic part of it. yeah, what was that? Can you remind me the initial question, too. I'm like, am I off topic, or am I.

INTERVIEWER: No, you're on topic. Just kind of like. If you've noticed a change in.

RAIN: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I notice sometimes I have to answer less questions that will answer the questions for me. There are also times that I memorize things like blind people memorize a lot more than people think we do. So, I can get around the school of music without a cane or without a dog, except for when it's really sunny outside. And then I need my dog or my cane, and people ask me a lot of questions. Then, of like what happened. I thought you didn't need this. So that's kind of what my answer would be. If you've noticed anything that's like similar or like a change in perspective. IA hundred percent here, the social relationships, even outside of our professional life, of like, there's time when I started using a cane, a lot of my family had an issue, and they knew I couldn't see. But it's the thing where I think people sometimes take what we do as a personal thing

to them, or like something that they're not comfortable being around. And it's really interesting. Did you feel that with necessarily like your maybe not like the staff of you of your former like, where you've been employed. But did you notice a change of that with the students.

RAIN: Yeah. I that was the first, well, no, I think my prior job the year before in the high school I did need to, or I felt like I should share with the students that I sit down during rehearsals for this this reason, and like I'll be standing when, like periodically, especially when we get closer to the concerts and things like that. Cause at that time I did. Now I sit in concerts, too. But I do think that especially one. I had very severe mobility, because I like. I also injured myself last year and fell down one stair in my house and broke 2 bones in one foot and sp**rain**ed both my ankles. So, I was like. Yeah, it was like very clear that I wasn't walking around the classroom for a reason. So, I mean sharing that with the students was helpful, utilitarian, like wise because they would, I would be able to ask them to get things or to help set things up and move things, and they were all too happy to help with that. But also, I just I noticed then and the year before, just sharing those things makes you more human to students, which is like something that you sometimes don't realize is the barrier there. But like not only I mean, but I also can't tell you how many students would tell me after that that they've had… They have limitations with certain things, or they have family members that do or like. Even sometimes I had one student would be like, Yeah, I was at the mall yesterday, and I saw a girl with a cane that looks a lot like yours. And you know, just being able to speak about things like that. I think it's so helpful for students, whether or not they identify with it as a disabled person, or know somebody, but like becoming comfortable around those you know those things, and with speaking about them to people, and how to deal with them. And that was part, I think, of what made me so angry about what ended up happening with my job. Is that like, why don't we include that with inclusivity and diversity? And like, when we're talking about staff. It's just it's a blind spot in education to me. And I, yeah, I think yeah, I could get in on the soapbox with that one. But yeah, me too definitely changed. And now, whether or not I would use a mobility aid, I would definitely speak about that to my students, because I now know that it's so valuable.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel? Something sorry, getting so like deep into other things? Do you? There's this like whole thought of like we've… we use queer language because it just easily works there's something called coming out of the disability closet. Also, queer minorities and disability minorities are very intertwined, and it's… I love it. There's a there's an ounce of

recognition between these 2 communities and the coming out of the disability closet is there's a study done in Israel that actually, they researched a large number. I can't ever remember how many. But it's over 20 teachers with disabilities and kind of found these different dilemmas that teachers faced with coming out of the disability closet. Essentially one of the biggest ones was like, well, I want to share my disability because one. It makes me more human like you said, and 2, it makes it to where students feel more comfortable to kind of express themselves and to share parts of themselves that they may feel are stigmatized like us, existing sometimes just destigmatizes identities. And do you feel as though, like you've seen a change in your relationship with some students or kind of with the community. By I don't know. I don't want to say like forced to come out of the disability closet. But sometimes ocean frequently throws me out more than I would like to be thrown out like she'll do it for me.

RAIN: Oh, that's her name. Love that? Yeah, definitely. Do you know what? Just curious, what university did that, or what the study was?

INTERVIEWER: I can. I can email it to you. I have it saved to my computer. But it was.

RAIN: That's where I did. My master's was in REDACTED, and I lived there for 5 years, so it's.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that is awesome. What I can't remember what they what their names were. One was out ALON

RAIN: Alon. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And so, and another name that was really long. And it's not saved to my computer, but I will. I will email that to you after.

RAIN: Curious about that.

INTERVIEWER: It was really.

RAIN: They do have working in the schools there they do have a higher level of just because of military participation. I think they definitely have a higher level of like physical disability, and I'm sure mental as well. But you know you can't see that walking around, right? But yeah, I absolutely in my high school, especially sharing that stuff with my students. was, yeah, it especially like when you said just sharing parts of themselves that are, that feel more stigmatized or marginalized? Absolutely. I don't know what that exactly did, but it was you know, even made it so. I would share things like when things happened. In my morning, or you know I was rear ended on a hit and run on the way to school, and like when I shared what that was about, and how I was

just feeling very overstimulated, and things like that. It was it just turned into like a whole hour-long conversation with all the students instead of us learning. And that's what we needed to do that day like and so just sharing those things meant a lot of students, I guess. Just understood that I was okay sharing that stuff. So, they were okay sharing that stuff with me. And they would come to me individually with things that like I had never really been approached with before for my students, and I felt, I felt so like. I don't know what the right word is just like honored, but also like I was so glad that I could be that person for them. That they had that person. And just and I do think it came from just sharing myself as well. It's like, Yeah, I'm not gonna trauma dump on you guys. But here's what's going on. And this is the mood I'm in, and you know, and just even for them being able to say, hey, this happened at my house this weekend, and I might not be myself like even just that little thing for them to be able to say that, and this generation to like. I think it's just way better advocating for those things in general than we were. But I'm sure they wouldn't do it to everyone, yeah. So, I definitely find that to be a change. And then last year I was in a 5th grade building, a 5th and 6th grade building, and that happened with them as well. Not on the same level you know of they just. And also, I think, demographically, where I was living didn't have it. It wasn't the same level of things going on for them, but for sure they had a lot to say, and would be…they would also just, I think it allowed them to check in like they would come in. Just want to see how you're doing like students. I had this semester before. We're like, how's your foot? Like, you know? Just think, yeah, like stuff like that, just being able to like, come and relate to somebody. I think that opens up a lot of empathy from them.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like an increased level of like compassion and empathy, for sure, because of experience. When you would you like, if you would like to get a new job, and you're meeting all new students. How would you navigate this conversation? Is this something that you would like to introduce right from the beginning, because when I introduce myself, I go. You know my name is Director Riza. You can choose to use. They them pronouns, or you can use my name, but you just have to be respectful also. I can't see you so like I have a whole spiel, and it's the 1st thing I say when I introduce myself to kids, because I know they'll have questions, and especially with middle schoolers. I stomp on it before they can, because I get a lot of. I get 2 responses. I get really nice, like, just curious. And I get well. I thought you couldn't see. What do you mean? You could see like I'm wearing a red shirt. How did you know that? Or they'll try to like throw things and make it to where I can't see, and so I attack it right there, because if I beat

them to it they can't. I? I take over the control as someone who uses a mobility aid when you when you need it, and because disability is a fluctuation like impairments. Overall is a huge spectrum. There are days I can't see anything, and there's days I can see a lot for a not sighted person. And so how do you navigate that conversation?

RAIN: Yeah, I think I mean, that's relatively new to me, I think. And it is. It has been as like fluctuation, because there have been periods with my spine disorder that, like after treatment has been fine without a mobility aid for a year, you know, like, and then periods where it's day to day and periods where it's yeah. I'm using this all the time now. So, I there, there have been varied, I guess, requirements for me, to bring it up. But I have like right now for me where I'm needing it all the time. I would definitely come in and say, you know, I would be saying, I sit for the majority of the time because of physical things that I have. 1st of all, you know, like it doesn't mean I can't see you in the back, you know, like that. I can't see you, because I know that's what will be happening in the back right? And it doesn't mean that, you know, like a lot of your teachers will come around and walk to you sometimes. You might just need to come to me instead, like that I still want to answer questions, and I still want that. So, it just kind of talking about how things would operate in the classroom, or I might need your help more on certain things than other teachers will and if you would like to volunteer to do stuff like that. That's great But I definitely would bring it up right away, because I said, I mean maybe less with the kids, but also with staff members like, there's just so much stigma to like. Oh, that teacher sits there the whole time, you know. I've even been in schools where you have. They tell you in the job descriptions, what you need to be up 90% of the time I was in a school where they removed all teacher desks and chairs like stupid shit, like, yeah, there's so much. And I think just being able to say those things right off is really important. When I've done cafeteria duty and stuff like that same thing, I'll tell them like I am right here I can see everything that's going on, and if you need me for anything, I'm right here, and if you ask me to come over there I will come over there like I just won't be wandering around things like that just to make it clear. Yeah, I'm engaged. I'm here, you know. It doesn't mean I'm just lazing off in the corner, right? But I think things like things that are more invisible, like Adhd symptoms or and things like that. I have come and come out and told students, I have a really hard time focusing on something when somebody else is talking over there, or somebody else is talking over there. So, like when I'm asking for us to be silent when somebody else is speaking there are reasons for that, not only for me, but for other students that might have similar. And you know

some people are more sensitive to that than others. But everybody needs to focus. You know, every single person needs to focus. So, I will definitely say things like that now, where I probably wouldn't have before.

INTERVIEWER: This is kind of going off of this, and just kind of from themes that I've noticed throughout talking to people. I'm in the job search right now. And so, it's a very fresh thing in my mind. There's a lot of job applications that will have, you know, the essential functions, and within the essential functions they'll have very specific, really specific, demands. And it's like, raise right arm, raise left arm, bend right knee, depth, perception, small print reading like it gets, I don't know how that… I have feelings. I have a lot of feelings because I know that I'm qualified, and I know that I've like. There's nothing about me not being able. I can't move my pinky like it is. It makes Obo playing so silly, but, like my pinky, is out of its socket frequently. There are times where I like I lose control of my hands. That does not make me any less of a qualified teacher. So how? How? When you're looking at like applying for jobs and doing things like that? Especially, I think, in the situation that you're in where you are now, back out there for reasons that are frustrating, I imagine. How do you feel about you know these guidelines that are being placed on us that essentially the way I read them, and you may not feel this way. But I definitely have a strong bias of it. Looks like it's the direct legal discrimination is how I read that.

RAIN: It does. I think you know, just through a lot of my experience with job accommodations and things you are absolutely allowed to and have the right to ask for accommodations on essential functions. So, you know, they want you to perform that task well, I need an accommodation to perform it that way, but I can perform it with an accommodation legally, if you can perform something with an accommodation that it like, and that is a reasonable accommodation, then that's fine. But I really think those are just like putting as many things there as possible to make it as complicated. It's a super red flag for me in job applications. It doesn't mean necessarily that that would be a harder HR and admin to deal with. But it definitely turns that on for me to think like, okay, well, and if there is something about standing for a certain amount of time, or like that I just. I don't apply at all, because just that that philosophy in the school it's like you're not teaching unless you're walking around. I don't want to be part of that. I think that's just not you know. Philosophically, I would love to be able to tell them what's what. But I'm not gonna be fighting day to day for that particular thing. yeah, it's it can be really tough. And the thing that that is most frustrating to me is, most of those things have to do with non-teaching duties.

Most of most of that stuff is completely extra like curricular like doing do different duties around the school and basically taking over for people they've decided no longer to have on staff, like lunch people and research people and hall monitors and stuff and subs and coverage teachers and things like that, since they no longer have. And you, I mean, you weren't necessarily around when those things were in schools. Teaching like my 1st couple of years, we had persons for all those things, and we had one on ones, aids for the kids that needed them. So that wasn't us. And now every single free period I had I would be assigned something else. And it was… It was definitely that that like made or break them, making my accommodations in this last job. Well, you can't help us out. So, we're not going to help you out, basically was the thing which is just absolutely infuriating to me for a multitude of reasons but, like you said, it makes you no less qualified of teacher, and the fact that you may or may not be somebody that's going to be doing recess duty for them should not be or break that. Yeah, that can be really tough. And I think that's 1 question that I like. I definitely have, what are my extra classroom duties? What are classroom duties outside of the classroom and I would never like bring up needing accommodations on a 1st interview, or anything like that, just because but later in the process. I think now I have to address that potentially in an interview process for my own information. Like I, I want to know what I'm getting into. But also, I don't wanna kill my chances of getting a position. So that's really tough.

INTERVIEWER: I student taught with somebody who was the teacher on special assignment, the tosa

Is this a familiar topic, or a familiar.

RAIN: No.

INTERVIEWER: It's from my understanding, is the person assigned to help create unified curriculum amongst a certain subject within the school district. And so, the teacher on special assignment will like, I know, that she went and helped new elementary music teachers, or just sometimes she'd get thrown in for general education. And so, she did part-time band, and then part time Tosa, and was predominantly music. But when she was reviewing job applications for a middle school that opened up in the school district. She recognized that there was language that was essentially directly making it to where I wouldn't be able to qualify for a job without special accommodations. And I typically don't need accommodations. I self-accommodate for many things. And so, it was one of those things that like, there's no accommodation that's going to make me see kids 100 feet away. And so that was where she recognized that there is language that is

outdated, not with the direction of the music in our school district is wanting. And so, she had that changed like she changed the job application. She was like, this is something I'm going to let people who make the job descriptions because it's not necessarily always the people that you'll be with. It's sometimes the people that are like, you know, it's so. Someone.

RAIN: People that don't really know what your teaching responsibilities are.

INTERVIEWER: Then not teachers usually and so that's something that I I'm looking at a lot of job applications in a lot of different states and a lot of different areas. Some are so specific and some are very broad. And it's, do you think that maybe there are communities that are more willing to hold like to have people with disabilities within their community. But the job applications themselves are the red flag that don't reflect the community.

RAIN: Yeah, for sure. I think there's a lot of stuff that is you know, just like what they would say, boilerplate, like, we're just this is in every job application we have, and, like you said, took somebody really digging in that and knowing somebody that would be affected by that to realize what that was. And yeah, I've certainly seen a fair amount of job applications where it would say that but like, for instance, the school I taught at in Michigan before I left, like right before I moved, we were mostly remote during that time, so it never really affected me, but it did say in that job description that there was like a percentage of time they wanted teachers up. And I found out once I was in the school that they had removed all teacher furniture like you were supposed. There was no desk. There's no chair so you were supposed to be at tables with students all the time, and like schlepping your stuff around the classroom, basically and luckily that was never a thing I had to do there because of pandemic stuff but I realized that was kind of the opposite where they didn't have any of that in the job description. And then, when you got into the school. It was like, oh, okay, and there's just no way to really know that stuff unless you know somebody there that really knows like, for instance, there's somebody I'm looking at taking a long-term sub position for coming up, and when I talk to her, she also has a good number of conditions and has required accommodations from time to time. And she's like, oh, yeah, this will be no problem for you, like they're already used to this whole process with me. I can even tell you what I've asked for and who I've spoken to. And she it was like she was like, Yeah, don't even have a second thought about that in this district. But the actual job application says a whole bunch of stuff, whole bunch.

INTERVIEWER: That's something that like as I'm doing this research. And this comes

from a lot of likes, I'm very naive going into this process. And I recognize that being, you know, next year I'll be a 1st year teacher, that these are the kinds of questions that I don't think we realize until we ask the community. I would have never thought to think of what on a job application is a red flag and what that kind of looks like. So, thank you for sharing that

RAIN: Yeah, there's, I mean, I have a lot. I actually did something for a group of 1st year teachers at University, or like incoming 1st year teachers about what to look for on job applications just in general, because there are some things that are red flags that are just are non-disability related that, I think, are, you know, people kind of overlook, or maybe in there, because it's just part of their language, and it's like you would, you would never know until you were in that situation. But yeah, there's definitely stuff, and one like green flag that I've noticed is that a lot of you know, you will see things like you need to be able to lift 50 pounds or anything where, like a lot of them will say that you need to be able to move 50 pounds, or you need to be able to like. So, they're recognizing that you can do that in different ways. You don't have to lift it. You can put it in a cart, or if somebody puts it on a cart for you, you can push it, or whatever it's, you know. That's just one tiny example. But I've seen stuff like that where they will even say with or without accommodations, you need to be able to. And that stuff. I'm like, okay, that that's something I can work with.

INTERVIEWER: I saw one in California. And I'm applying to the West Coast slash. Colorado is where I'm looking. And there was one that was like, we're looking for a candidate that's willing to put in extra time to meet quality like, yeah, I just kept going. And I turned and I showed my partner, and I was like, can you read that? He goes. That is so suspicious. That's the like we're asking you to work for free so

RAIN: This year, like I've been looking for a lot of corporate, remote stuff just to like to meet my needs. In the meantime, long story short, we're not sure if we're moving at the end of this school year to another state for my husband's job, and so I wasn't about to get another school position during this time, like trying to look for things to make money, and those corporate ones are a wild ride, because some of them are so specific about their inclusivity and accommodation processes. And it's like, Oh, my God! I want to work there, and some of them are like, we're a big family, and we're paid in in the love for what we do and like. Much more education type speak. And it's just like Nope. Yeah, I'm a professional pay me with money. Thank you. Bye.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely awesome. Well, thank you so much.

Interview 2 (4.3.25)

INTERVIEWER: Spring break was really nice. There was like a good like break in the meetings, and now I have to remember to do zoom again. Well, kind of that's the tab I wanted going back to the questions that we're at. We talked a lot. We talked a lot, actually, last time and got through a lot of the questions. Which is fantastic. When I'm writing my, I'm writing my method section right now. And I just wanted to get a couple like demographic questions. First, if that's okay, the pull up the document. There are so many tabs on my computer It is ridiculous!

RAIN: My phone no longer shows me the number of tabs. It's just a smiley face, because I think it's like triple digits, and it won't fit in the box

INTERVIEWER: The questions I have are, if you thought of a pseudonym that you would like

RAIN: Oh, no whatever works.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like me to check back in if maybe you want to find one? Or would you like me to find one for you. I told my professor I don't want to name myself a 3rd time

Okay, so just find you want something more feminine, more gender, neutral. Do you want like a masculine name?

RAIN: All of it is fine

INTERVIEWER: And then the next one is the state, and you can also just give me a fake. Any of these, if you like. Don't want to connect because I know you're in like a difficult situation.

If you want to disconnect as much as you want, go for it. The next one is the state that you're in

RAIN: So maybe just avoid the ones that I've actually been in. So, I've been in (REDACTED).

INTERVIEWER: Okay, do you want to pick one that feels like it's similar. Kind of vibe.

I can also say, prefers not to disclose

RAIN: I mean, most of them are Midwest Ish, so we could go like Ohio or Missouri, or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: Let me go, Missouri, because that's also what I was thinking. Soon as I think. Midwest, I think Missouri then, the next one is like gender. So, your pronouns so like, if I'm when I'm writing about you, I'm using that correctly.

RAIN: Yeah, she her. I used to my zoom name, and I don't know where it went

INTERVIEWER: I was checking, too, because I think mine was like she then for like 6 months into me, not using she pronouns

RAIN: It like yours does

INTERVIEWER: Perfect. Okay, and then years teaching

RAIN: 16

INTERVIEWER: And subject. So is it just orchestra, or is it like, do you do a combination of things

RAIN: I've done a combination. I've done general music. I've done choir. I've done drumming. I've done everything. So, music is usually what I say, Okay. But strings are the focus for me. So

INTERVIEWER: Okay, I'll put… I have another person that did both K. 12, general music and band. So, then I'll put general music or orchestra, general music, and choir, the order that you stated that

RAIN: Yup!

INTERVIEWER: And then where are you? Combination of things, or you can say, you know I've taught in both rural versus urban and suburban. What kind of environments have you taught in

RAIN: So yeah, it's suburban and urban. I never had a rural school

INTERVIEWER: I can also say, for sorry going. I'm just looking at my notes… for state, are you? Okay? If I just say, Midwest. Okay. Cause I feel like it's so many that let's just let's just generalize it. We don't need to be specific

RAIN: Yeah, that's true.

INTERVIEWER: And then the next. So, you can say something as broad as like physical disability. Somebody said Audhd. And then somebody else said, Autism and Adhd, and so you can kind of label it. However, you want to

RAIN: Yeah, that's hard to do. Obviously, I usually when people or when I'm saying something, I'd like whatever is affecting me most in that moment what I will say so like, I often say that in their neurological conditions and remote, remote rheumatic conditions, rheumatoid conditions, one of those but oftentimes I'll just say autoimmune and neurological and Adhd, physical is good, too.

INTERVIEWER: I can give you a little bit of context because I had to do this for myself, too, just because when I mean if I if I told you who I was in the prior to you, signing a consent. Now, when I go in the method I have to say, you know I have a bias. This is who I am. So, I had so weird writing about my like personal self in my method section. But the way that I described myself. I said I was born disabled with a vision impairment after puberty in my teen years I became further disabled with physical and medical disabilities that would later be diagnosed in my early twenties. And then I go on to say, I'm a service dog handler, white cane mobility or white mobility cane user. And I'm both visibly and invisibly disabled and prefer identity. 1st language that was like that was my, that's my blurb. So

RAIN: I would say, yeah, physically ends like, I'm a mobility cane user because I use different ones from time to time. So, I don't specify mobility aid, for sure. I don't know what the like. The best way to say is, you don't say mental disabilities. That's not right, like physical and mental.

INTERVIEWER: You can say, I mean, there's like the term cognitive, there's neurological and neurodiverse. You could just like, neurodivergent?

RAIN: Yeah. Yeah, we'll just like. General, I mean, yeah, we don't have to mention every single thing, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: I put medically, cause I was like. There's no way I even know.

RAIN: Like mental health is another but I often will say, like neurological and autoimmune conditions causing disability.

INTERVIEWER: you said, sorry, neurological and autoimmune

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

RAIN: yeah, neurodivergent is another one. And identity 1st as well. Like, I think we talked about point but not always offensive, disabled person. So, whatever and oh, yeah, as far as timeline. I like mental health conditions in my twenties and physical disabilities and conditions in my thirties.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

RAIN: So neurodivergent, but

INTERVIEWER: Do you know, you also don't have to say if, when the like neurodivergent conditions were finally recognized.

RAIN: My thirties.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

RAIN: It took me that long

INTERVIEWER: And that's okay. It's hard. I mean, I'm talking about this with my professor and parents feel ways. And then it becomes the children need to feel that way

RAIN: My brother had very severe Adhd, and that was recognized like very early on. And now think like we have a lot more in common, like he and I, I realize, like we have the same type, like everything. But then it did not manifest the same way, and, like my parents were very focused on that. And so, like

INTERVIEWER: You know they're never recognized.

RAIN: Yeah, I think, of course I didn't, because I was a kid. But it's a hard topic.

INTERVIEWER: we talked a lot about essential functions in the last one. And actually, that conversation sparked me asking other participants other things too kind of like one of those questions that I didn't think about. And I'm really glad that you talked about it, because it then was like, oh, I need to talk about this. I didn't even consider that until you had said something

RAIN: About like the marginal functions of jobs like that, like non-teaching responsibilities and stuff. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I believe. Last I asked was, did you find support in your teacher education program? And you kind of talked about how when you went through it. It wasn't like this was a consideration at the time not really in terms of recognizing what was happening.

RAIN: I definitely had challenges with mental health that I did fine with, but I also wasn't comfortable asking for a lot. That point It was very much masking things, but I think there was a lot of that just recognition from like couple particular professors that were like, okay, well, it's like, I don't need you to tell me what's going on like I know you well enough to know if something isn't right. So, kind of

INTERVIEWER: when and now it seems like, when you have students and when you were able to have all those conversations, because it was an everyday thing. See from what? Looking at like my notes, and kind of just understanding what you were saying. There's that being able to share it made you feel more human, made them feel like more of a person, and that it was a tool that you could use to, you know, be open with kids and have them feel like they were safer in a classroom he I also put that like having conversations is still new to you. Is that okay?

RAIN: Relatively, I'd say in the last, like 5 years

INTERVIEWER: The next question I have is for the community that you're open with, and I imagine that's changed over time. But in, I guess the many communities that you've been in have you noticed a change in that space because of visible representation, especially being going between being a visible and invisible. You know, disabled person where some days it's people can see it without asking, and then other days where you can kind of. I feel this very strongly, as you know, a cane user that I can hide. I can go to the grocery store and be like, hey, I'm going to go sighted, Guide, and no one's going to know I'm blind. It just looks like I'm holding your hand. But then there's I have the can, and everyone knows. Have you noticed a change in kind of how people respond? Maybe talk to each other

RAIN: Oh, definitely like, it's I think we kind of got into a tiny bit last time of just where it just legitimizes it so like once they can see something, I suddenly get, you know, I'm sure you've recognized that, too, where people are like making space for you or like. You know, telling, you know, allowing you to go first, and things like that just where they wouldn't otherwise, because there's no visual reason to but yeah, I think I think there definitely is recognition like. And then my colleagues like just asking, would it be better if I did this, or like is it? Is it? Is this something that you can do comfortably or like? Can I help with that? And like dividing up roles and responsibilities accordingly. Like that. Yeah, it's also you just get grace from people on certain things like, I used to have to go in my last job, 2 floors up across the school to get to the homeroom class that I was supposed to be recognizing, and eventually the teacher up there asked, would it be better if we just had the kids come to your classroom? And it's like, yes, that would absolutely be better. And it was a new job, and I didn't feel comfortable asking for it right away. And I wish I had like at the beginning. So, like once I was, you know, having used the cane to get to that spot, that spot she recognized that it was an issue without me saying something. Which I should have. But that's another conversation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like the? It's nice talking to another mobility tool user. There's such a stigma around, not like using it that I think people frequently feel like there's no privileges. And I'm like, there's negative sides, absolutely. You're tethered to something 24, 7. But there's also the I no longer have to always use my words, we have something in the blind community called identity canes, which are literally like this, the width of my apple pencil, and they're a cane. You should not use it for real cane use like it's it will break. It's just. It's a flimsy

stick. But in the colors that people know. I say that there's so many people that don't know what a white cane looks like. You'd be astonished, and probably not actually. But many people would be, and we have it just for the sake of other people knowing we can't see.

It's no function for us, purely for society. Do you think that like when you have the cane and when you're using the mobility tools that it definitely can aid in assistance of like. I don't want to say the things today. So, I'm going to bring it. And even if I don't need it.

RAIN: Yes, 100%. And like I, especially at this school, when I knew there was a lot of scrutiny about things like, I just used it 24, 7 like, even if I'm alone in my classroom, the chance that somebody could come in. I was using it like I did not want to deal with any more questions about. Well, you weren't using it then. So why, do you know, like cause? These were the people that would do that like, I bet you know. Ordinarily I would not expect that from people. But then I definitely would. And yeah, it functions for that like where I wish you know how they have the sunflower lanyards in the Uk. And that's becoming more of a thing here, and like the thing is ugly as crap, but wear it because, like, it's really helpful. And I lost it on my last trip to the Uk. So, I have to get another one but like those identifiers like, if that's recognized, like the simpler PIN or whatever for people that don't need a mobility aid or don't have any way to show is like it's so powerful. Have to use their words exactly like I don't have. I don't know it just also, like, 1st of all, asking for the things you need is very hard, but also like that is coloring your entire identity. When you have to say to somebody like, it's nice to meet you. Here are these things you need to know before we talk or like, you know… it's yeah. It's a big responsibility for yourself. I think

INTERVIEWER: So would your kind of. I'm very much of the opinion I love and hate mobility tools. I hate that I'm tethered. I'm so tired of being tethered all the time, but also, I love that when I run into a wall, people know why. There's like the pros and the cons to it. Oh. it happens I trip in a class, and then people go. Can we laugh? And I go? If you would laugh at a sighted person. Please laugh at me like if it's something that would make you laugh because it was a normal person. Truthfully, sometimes I'm blind, sometimes I'm just clumsy

RAIN: The next one I have is themselves. That's a good measure

INTERVIEWER: What was that?

RAIN: If we're laughing at ourselves, please laugh along

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, laugh with me. Don't make me feel like I'm laughing at myself throughout your career. Have you noticed a change in how people just view people with

disabilities, I imagine, working in many different spaces. You've seen a lot of different from what I can imagine. I mean, I've lived in only 2 States. But the culture between these 2 states is so vastly different that… have you seen changes in how people view people with disabilities or students with disabilities. Or, you know, even like teachers?

RAIN: Yes, I mean, it's so. 1st of all, teachers with disabilities, I can tell you. I have hardly seen any like with visible disabilities, or that, you know, are loud about them. Very few and I'm sure there's multiple reasons for that whether or not they were there. But where I grew up. We had sorry I like my school was our district had like a specialized school for the deaf and hard of hearing, and it was like people would come from all over for this particular school. but it was pretty much sequestered to itself, like they would come in. The students from that school. We'd see them around, or they would be in some of our classes. But there was not really like any social interaction, encouraged or available like they wouldn't be with us at recess. Things like that for a long time. And once they finally were it, it changed a lot, but I think that they were like the way that things were set up. It manufactured that division, and I really wish that weren't the case, because I think I grew up thinking like that group of people wants to stick together. They don't, you know. If you aren't deaf and hard of hearing, then you don't belong in their social group. You know what I mean like, or they don't belong in mine, and it couldn't be further from the truth like. And I really wish, especially now, working in some schools where things are like are not self-contained. And seeing how wonderful that is, like those relationships between students. It's like, I really wish I had more of that and that it makes me concerned that there are a lot of schools that don't or at least some. But yes, I think like, because there was a really big change. I think you probably know some of this history where, like everything, was pretty self-contained, and then there was a huge push for integrating into classrooms with one-on-one aids, and then those started going away. So now it's like very few that okay, that have them. So, things have changed a lot over that time. And I think there's like it. There's no just like there's no one. Size fits all for anything. Disability related. There isn't for that, either, like sometimes that integration is positive and sometimes is negative. Sometimes it's like and just having that mandate for things is not appropriate. And especially when kids are in situations where they don't have what they need.

I mean, there's nothing positive about that for anyone. So, I think it does cause issues with the way students. Non-disabled students relate to those students and what they need. But I like and teachers as well. I think a lot of them for a while got very bitter about having to be the aid and you

know everything for these kids. So, the attitudes changed, and it was like. it's concerning how that developed and how I was very uncomfortable with how a lot of teachers would talk about it. This likes it's the kid's fault, you know, and

INTERVIEWER: Leads to resentment.

RAIN: Yes, absolutely. It was. It was really kind of uncomfortable in some places, and you know, especially then, I wasn't part of the disabled community. But, as you know, a person with empathy and like that thinks about those things, it was really disturbing but I do see in some like some schools where that's changing. And this past school that I was in like there weren't always enough paraprofessionals or one on ones for students. But it was everybody's business at that point, like a lot of the time the vice principal would be with her like this particular student I'm thinking of, and she always had somebody. whether it was t**rain**ed para or not. so, things are different with that now, but not. I think, some positive changes, but I think it's like, despite the policies, not because of If that's a complicated answer, I know.

INTERVIEWER: No, that's okay. I started school preschool for me was like 2,004. I started kindergarten 2,005, which is like, right about when we were still in the very separated, but maybe not in California, specifically, but not specialized schools. There was actually, if I wanted to learn braille in high school. I was gonna have to transfer schools. So, I didn't, because I didn't want to transfer schools. And it's a little wild to me that that was what would have been expected. Instead of bringing the tool to the student. Let's move medical model versus social model. I can go so far into that, too. My vision has gotten worse, but it has not, like actually gotten worse. My brain has gotten unhealthier, and therefore the visions decreased, but I have the same amount of vision I have now that I did then, for the most part, and I believe truly, that I wasn't given accommodations because they knew if I was given accommodations, I would have been separated into the special Ed classroom. That was the whole elementary school special Ed classroom all into one room. but I didn't have failing grades except for reading which duh, you got somebody who can't see it's going to be reading. And truly the 3rd grade teacher, that, or the sorry, the 4th grade that just decided I didn't need to do reading, and was excusing me from that grade should have said something, because we should not be making those changes for students with that documentation. And then it, like the whole thing, is just like I, being in a 2,000 child saw all those changes of that was still a thing in California. And then I got to high school, and kids were integrated with special Ed, you know, with paraeducators. My mom was a para. And then, as soon as I graduated in 2018, that's

when we went full. Send. Kids are like you're only in a special Ed room. If you absolutely have to be in a special classroom

RAIN: And only for some parts of the day, and things like that, like

INTERVIEWER: Yes, and I think it was like, you have to have 8 kids on an Iep before a parent was allowed to be in the room like 504 is. I guess it was a bigger number. But IEPS was where you needed to have, and there were kids with seizure disorders, and the teachers trying to tackle a seizure disorder plus teach a science classroom to sophomore. Like, yeah. I definitely like in my own experience, saw the resentment from teachers, too. And it's not the kid's fault. And I think a lot of them knew it wasn't the kids' fault, but they just took it out on the kids.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Definitely, admin.

RAIN: Even to the point like this last school that I was at, the way they divided the classes. They put all the kids with IEPS in one class team, and it was for I mean for all. For me it was awful, and for the kids it was awful. It's like I don't know how we can. And it wasn't the entire class. There were definitely kids without as well. It's just… I don't know that I had a lot of feelings about that. How are we even supposed to? It's like that's not helpful. You have to accommodate 20 different IEPS at once like some of them, need require the same things, but like that's not helpful. Does the opposite

INTERVIEWER: You can only universally design so far.

RAIN: Yes, and behaviorally, that was just an absolute nightmare. Yeah, for those kids to like just the like by the end of the quarter. The amount that we'd actually done versus my other classes was astounding. It was like, okay, there's a clear indicator that this is not a good idea, like. And I…That's 1 of the areas where I feel is the biggest deficit, like the policy makers are, are doing things that so profoundly affect students and teachers just so like uninformedly and recklessly like, it just absolutely boils my blood.

INTERVIEWER: I have so strong feelings.

RAIN: Yeah, I'm sure that's like.

INTERVIEWER: Being a special Ed kid, because I eventually actually got accommodations in high school. And it was so interesting because I full send. I'm a special Ed kid like that. I had accommodations. I had, you know, rotation, mobility specialists. I had all the things I just was in normal classrooms. and for some reason a lot of people love to go. You weren't in

special Ed, and I go, I was. The only reason I didn't get pulled out of PE during the archery unit, which is crazy was because my mom threw a fit, said, You, I know that was when I got accommodations is during the archery unit. They were like, we cannot have her doing that. I was like she hasn't shot anybody yet. She's not going to let her. It's good. It's right there. So, they all freaked out. My mom, working in the school, made it to where she was like, you are not pulling my kid out of any classrooms. Then they tried to say, no, you shouldn't do ap classes like it's going to be too difficult. Again, my mom threw a fit. She was like, no, you are not going to tell, my child they can't sign up for ap classes like they're the overachiever. I have always been, and I knew not to do ap English and things that involved reading, but I got a foreign ap calc like, and on the Ap test. I'm not that smart anymore. But I was at one time

RAIN: Think any of us are, as far

INTERVIEWER: Doesn't work.

RAIN: Well, I mean

INTERVIEWER: That you can set up peak of everything for me. But I was like I needed those things, and it's like there was a strong push of. I think they knew if I was in general education classrooms they could accommodate easier. It's a general education classroom. If I was in an ap classroom. I'm 1 of maybe 2 kids on an Iep, and they have to actually do work and accommodate and change the environment and believe it or not. They made the Ap history book in large print. They made the physics book in large print, like the publishers, make large print textbooks. This is not like a thing that doesn't. I have gigantic history books. And so, it was just like one of those things of my history. Professor. My professor. Well, high school. My history teacher I had for 3 years like he just switched with us, and I had him for 3 full years, which is wild because that doesn't happen in the general education classrooms, and we just we figured it out. And he was like, Okay. cool. I 1 time got yelled at for using my phone to see a board because I didn't have my binoculars, and I got chewed out by the economics teacher and my mom working in the class like working in the school went, you know. She can't see right. I know you can read. There's an Iep that actually says all of that you should read it. I was like, whoa, this is awesome. And I know that if I didn't have my mom there, things would have been so different that that was like mad privilege to have a parent there just because of the force

RAIN: Less than an advocacy. Because, like, I mean, why shouldn't a student be comfortable saying like, oh, I have... You know I have an IEP, I have issues with this, like, why is,

I think we're taught like to be ashamed of that and say, anything,

INTERVIEWER: I was, there was a question on. If I should go to Iep meetings, I think students should always be involved in their Iep meetings, unless it will cause a disturbance. You know, to the student's sake, and they can be

RAIN: And really obnoxious those meetings. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But for kids, you know, with physical disabilities, there's no reason a child should not be unless it's like an emotional thing where hearing people talk about them can cause some sort of thing. But it's like genuinely my mom was like, no, she's gonna be in the Iep meetings like they're here. Let them in. It's not like they can't

RAIN: Seen that ad. I can't remember what it's from, where it's all of these conversations about accommodations or decisions for disabled people, and they're being excluded, and then they're like breaking into the conversation. I'll send it to you if I can find it

INTERVIEWER: I have not, but that would be so interesting to see

RAIN: Yeah, it was like an it's not very long. It was just like, Oh, huh! Please involve us in the conversation like

INTERVIEWER: It's what is the phrase is, there's no us without us, or something. There's no, I can't remember what the actual words are, but, like the you know, I was talking to a friend yesterday, and she's experiencing a lot of misogyny right now in the music education world, because of course. that's just how it goes and being a female band director is hard She just went to I think it was in Texas the like band director Conference. And you know she's with

RAIN: Solid old Guard there.

INTERVIEWER: She was with a very strong, one of the other GEs, you know, very tall, very successful black man, and so confident in himself, and, you know, can just start a conversation with anybody. And when you're a 4-foot 10 female presenting person next to a very tall like, you know, 6-foot one strong man. It's like people were turning her back to her. And I was like, you know, there's a whole thing of you can't be. You're not racist till you're anti-racist. You're not misogynistic until you're anti misogynistic, and I think the same goes with ableism of you. Are not pro supporting people with disabilities until you are actively seeking to cut the barriers and destroy some of those things. But yet I've never seen that on a poster board, you know.

RAIN: Definitely. We actually went to the intersectional affinity groups that they had. And it's the 1st time I've done that. I've never been to one of those, and it was so awesome like I

thought, oh, I'll stop in for 15 min, or whatever, because it's like these ongoing circle I was there for 2 and a half hours cause that was just like, you know, I know there's other things going on that I want to go to but this, these conversations are so great. And they told me this was the last day of the conference. They said, You're the 1st disabled person we've had in here the whole because they did it 3 days in a row. And they're like, we find that this is like the Dei committee that is putting this on and they were like, we really find that that voice is absolutely missing from our like. And that's and I said, like, I think that, you know, happens fairly frequently. That were the like leftovers from Dei conversations, or like the outliers in those conversations like, we're just, you know, the marginalized of the marginalized, I guess. And he was like, Oh, yeah, absolutely. And he thought, he said that they were thinking of changing it to Deia for accessibility. I was like that could be great. But really that should just be inclusion like that. Just you shouldn't need another letter for it. But if you want to signal something like a change, sure. But yeah, that that is inclusion. That's part of it like, that's what it means.

INTERVIEWER: I feel historically like Dei doesn't include us. And it's and it should. In theory it does. But through action and lived experience it doesn't. And so, I really appreciate the groups that do put an A because then that's we see you or in the room statements, including disability in the, you know, minority communities such as you know, Bipoc, Lgbtqia and disability include us in the conversation. There's 3, you know.

RAIN: I mean it would

INTERVIEWER: More than that.

RAIN: Like in the description. It did say that which is great

INTERVIEWER: That's good to hear

RAIN: Yeah. And I mean, really like, like, I said that they said that you're the 1st like physically disabled person, because there's a lot of people that represent more than one group, too, that are coming in there. Or, you know, have invisible disabilities and didn't really say, but in those groups you usually do. But yeah, it's like, it's just you're talking about lots of people that probably were already here. Just that, you know. That may not be the 1st thing they're representing, or like obvious thing then we've only been, this is the second time. So, we don't have to get through all these questions,

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INTERVIEWER: the last question I asked you. I like took weird notes last time. And I usually leave like a note for myself of where we were last. I did. But it's so cryptic. I believe the last question I asked you was a change in community, and the like, observing changes. And what I what I took down was that? Yes, you've seen changes just from people being like legitimizing in some ways like colleagues acknowledging you and your existence, and kind of giving that grace in there. And then I wrote using our mobility tools as a as a way to be seen without words.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And that you have not. And this is not an uncommon experience. I've actually written this down for many people that you have not seen other teachers with visible disabilities.

RAIN: Very few.

INTERVIEWER: I also wrote down that like within your like, your experience in education, as like a child, and in your youth that you've seen it go from kind of a way of like isolated schools. For, for you know, people with disabilities to now more integrated for better or for worse. Maybe going from nothing to a hundred percent isn't the way to go but that's.

RAIN: Proper Staffing.

INTERVIEWER: And training, and you know, mental health resources. I laugh out of frustration, not out of thinking it's funny. And then that's where we left off. Does that all sound about what you were trying to convey.

RAIN: Yeah, it's just that. Yeah, that all sounds about right.

INTERVIEWER: The next question I have. I have a list today. What was the job search process like and then how was the interview process? I know your kind of in like a bit of that right now.

RAIN: Yeah, I so like once, like, it's kind of hard to think about. So, I've never like cause my disabilities to have been pretty dynamic, and like there have been periods where things are really fine, and then, like one of them, probably the most intense one as far as limitations go is something that like can be it, it can be surgically removed. It can be like, because I have, like a growth in my spine, where that is compressing nerves that affect my lower body. So, when it's there and it's large, it's compressing. And I have like intermittent paralysis and issues, standing and walking, and all that. So, when that is remedied which, I it has been before, like we've had,

I've done procedures that have made it virtually nonexistent for a period. Those have been the periods that I've been job searching basically. So, I've never really like it. And now it's been active for the longest time. For me this has been a year and a half. Now we're like where it's been at a consistent level of severity. And so, like now is really the 1st time I'm job searching with that in mind like if that makes sense like I think it was. I always thought about, you know, and I always alerted employers and did the Ada portion of things, because I know that's something that can come up for me. But also, it wasn't like I wasn't using mobility aids at the time of the job search, you know things like that. so, I think I'm now also considering, like this has been the time that things we haven't been able to remedy anything like. We've tried 3 or 4 things, and nothing is worked. And it's getting now to like a place where of permanence and like the possibility of this just being how life is like So, I really am just thinking, from that standpoint of like and existing that standpoint, using mobile aids all the time things like that. So, it's I think it's different now. But even when I was job searching at points where things were less severe, I was always looking for those like red flags. And we talked about that just knowing, like everybody has their disability statement because they're legally required to. But how does the rest of the job description look and compare it like I think we talked about some of those at 1 point.

Do you want me to go into any of that now, or we already kind of.

INTERVIEWER: If you if you want to. I do have a bunch of notes, a lot of it being like you know, want somebody to stand for so many hours versus. I know at 1 point you said, like essential functions, being something like ability to move, not lift.

RAIN: Yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: That being like a big key word in in what could be considered a green flag.

RAIN: Yeah, definitely. And I also like, try my best, you know, since there really aren't a lot of us, right? But looking at reviews of the districts as far as employment goes and seeing if there is anything in there. Once in a while, you see stuff not necessarily related to disability, but just general like treatment of so making sure that I'm applying, you know, to the right places, but also knowing that, like. You don't always know that right away, and kind of feeling those things out. So, I haven't really asked like, do you have any other teachers with disabilities, things like that. But now, when I'm searching, I am like now, I'm asking that question and especially since now, like going into an interview. It's very obvious that I've disabled like Prior to that, I wasn't

really addressing it in the interview process, because I really felt like it was kind of like a liability of like, you know, a reason for them not to hire me. And now it's if it's a reason for them not to hire me. I don't want to work there if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER: Something I'm currently experiencing is the job interview process.

RAIN: What.

INTERVIEWER: The job interview process as somebody who has a disability that is so written on my forehead. And that's not even all of them that's just like one.

RAIN: Right, which is awesome.

INTERVIEWER: Right, like the whole. Another like layer. That's you know, we're a cake with many layers or onion, as Shrek, calls it, yeah, but I I've approached this in a way that's they can't legally ask questions. And so, what I've done and what I'm planning on doing for future interviews is when they ask you the question of you know, do you have any questions for us? Is asking my questions, and then also turning it around to answer questions. You know, opening that that dialogue and consenting to that, do you have, like a way that you go about that, just to kind of maybe not so much answer their questions, but to see further red flags or potential green flags.

RAIN: Yeah, I definitely like, even prior to having a disability trying to get some of that, because you can't ask like, how many preps do I have? How many, you know like, but that is incredibly important. And so, I do ask, like, what is an average class load? What? How many times a week do you see, students, what grades do you see? So, you can kind of start making like a little picture of what it looks like. What non-teaching duties are involved? Just those kinds of questions. What does it hold the day look like and asking if there are teachers with disabilities. I've asked that before. Yeah, things like that. I think. it's still something that I'm struggling with, because if there is that incredibly fine line of like, yeah, we want to address this. But how far do we want to go like, I don't want to ask things like, what barriers do you see? For, like, I don’t, and I don't really know what the right thing to do is, you know, and it's different for different employers like different. Some employers would probably love to tell you what accommodations they've made, you know, and things like that. But some would see that as an okay, well, this person's gonna be too much work, but again, I really do have that feeling of like, if this is gonna be in the interview process too much for them. What is working? They're gonna be like. which is hard, because, yeah, it might like cancel out a lot of places, but I would rather have that than

finding it out in the course of employment. Really would. I know. That's like not really a helpful answer, but.

INTERVIEWER: It's all about. It's all about what your perspective is. So, I mean, any answer is a helpful answer. The next question I have which this one always gets. People is at your place of work, former place of work, experience with the work. Do you? Have you received accommodations. Do you find that you have to self-accommodate? Do you have like a support system that helps make those accommodations or helped make those accommodations? And what did this look like? If and if you were denied Because I've also heard that experience, too. What was that like.

RAIN: So, in my former district. Accommodations were basically I needed air conditioning in my room like adequate air conditioning and heating. There was one room in that building that had it and it just so happened that that I could use that because I was teaching remotely from school. This was during Covid, and it was like a dungeon in the middle, with no windows and things like that. So, I don't think many people really wanted to be in there, and I, and there was like no social interaction during that time, either. So, it was just like I went there. I did my thing. I left the other accommodations were that whenever we had drills at the school like they would let me know ahead of time that they were going to happen.

And tell me like either like I can, you know, start making my way to the door early, or I can just stay in my room. And then by my request, was like, what do we do if this is a real emergency like you know, if obviously I can move if it's a real emergency. But if I have to go back and teach, you know, that's a different thing. And just was getting like an evacuation buddy basically was somebody that would be we could possibly come, especially if I were to have kids because we didn't know if we were going back to teaching in person to help me get the kids out and to get myself out and for that school that was kind of the extent of it, because it was remote teaching, and there were no extra duties, anything like that. And then, in my current, like my last district. I definitely needed more. I requested things like keeping all of my duties in one room, so that, like cause initially, they wanted me to be on a different floor on the other end of the school for homeroom, and then to do coverage for other teachers during free periods which could be anywhere. And you know we have a 2 min passing period kind of deal, and just that if I was gonna be cover. What? He looked surprised.

INTERVIEWER: 2 min is not enough time to even like breath.

RAIN: No, it's like it takes 2 min for kids to put their stuff in their backpack and stand up.

I mean there was. There were no bells, which is helpful, but also kind of you know, makes it a gray area of like or really it was really just get to your next class as fast as possible.

INTERVIEWER: Know bells as pros and cons, because also, like I know, like I've got major time blindness. I like structured to where I check my watch frequently.

RAIN: That I had like a little digital, because I also am like I cannot read an analog clock like just can't do it unless I stare at it for like 5 min. So, I had like a little digital clock in my room that you could set alarms with, and they were like just little reminder alarms do not like. It'll go off until you turn it off. And sometimes it was just a blinking light alarm, which was awesome, so like it would tell me when we have 5 min left when the class like, because otherwise I would not survive so that and then, like phone reminders, also, is a big thing. Daily. Cool. Yeah. So, I think. And then I needed that. They had a major issue with me, not being able to provide coverage for teachers, who were not there like it was almost like that was my most important function as a substitute. And it wasn't just me that was kind of universal like. That was our biggest, you know, Mitzvah, if you like, but it was also required of us like I did get questions of like, well, why can you request coverage if you can't provide coverage and things like that like it was just, it was weird. And I really felt in those cases like I was burden on them, but just not being able to, and I wasn't in it unable. It was really if we need coverage. Send the kids to my room like. And I had suggested this over and over and over, and only like towards the end of the year, when they were super desperate that they do it like it's not that hard like yeah. So.

INTERVIEWER: This sounds very much like your school district had like, I think I've asked this before… the medical versus the social model view of disability. that your school district was very medical model of. You need to cure yourself for us, instead of because I know that you had. You said you had a teacher that would bring your kids to your room, where it sounds like your colleagues were more of that of that social model of, we're going to remove the barriers. But the school district itself, and your school admin was more. No, you need to remove your own barriers and fix this this our way.

RAIN: Yeah, and I did, you know, stupidly. But it was also at the very beginning of this period of like this unrelenting issue with my spine that just was like, and it was in combination with an injury I had so like. Things were really difficult, and I did stupidly like, try it once. Like

to get across the building, and it was a disaster like it was awful. But I really didn't want to display that, you know, like. So, I tried, and I did tell them afterwards. It's like it did not work for me like this is not something that I'm able to do. We need to find a way around it. And they are just. And at that point I also hadn't done the Ada request because it was…it started off as this injury. So, they told me that I'm not eligible because you know, it's like a temporary injury. It's not something you request through Ada. It's not covered which is true and not true. So there, then… You're able to make one. Then, just like temporary accommodation requests with medical note, and then they provide them. But this ended up being, you know, long, long term and so eventually I decided, okay, I'm doing the Ada process.

INTERVIEWER: Did they not? Did you like bring a medical note, and they deny covering the medical note.

RAIN: No, not denied, but. They definitely had. They had things to say about it, and they were not happy about it, and they made that very well known, and they were requiring for me for me updated notes like every couple of weeks And would like and would do things like request the note, and then I would respond and say, I have a follow up appointment on Monday, and I will get you that note then, and replying to that with like we are legally you know, but within our legal rights to ask you for updated notes like I had said something like, No, I'm not gonna give it to you like. It was very hostile. It was very strange and there were 2 Hr. Reps, and sometimes both of them would be asking me at the same time. It was just like it felt harassment-y and then I would get these weird things from the school admin about like, well, how can she request? You know this coverage if she can't provide it like it's a quid pro quo kind of thing like It was obvious that it just was not comfortable for them, like even.

INTERVIEWER: Intimidation.

RAIN: My job with. You know I was getting the spec like the highest ratings on me can't think of the word right now… distinguished. There we go, ratings on my performance reviews by principal everything. But somehow, you know, I was a problem, right? So, it was just. and yes, my colleagues were excellent, my colleagues were so helpful, and I don't think I would have been able to do a lot of what I did that year without them because there was. There was this attitude from the school, and because they were telling me I wasn't eligible for the Ada but once I did put in that request is when it like it really started to feel like they want me out. There were like unrelated things like just to be like to put it in perspective. I've worked now in like 5 districts

before that. Only once did I even ever know who my Hr. Rep was because I had to request those accommodations once and no other district have, I ever known. But I was in contact with these people like every day they were on me about absolutely everything. If I were 5 min late, even having record like requested it to go to an appointment or something like that I would get emails copied from the principal to the superintendent to Hr., just saying, like your start, time is blah blah. This is a reminder. Blah blah like stuff like that. I had been selected to present at the National Conference for string teachers and was, which is like a really big honor. And you know, kind of a feather in the cap for the district you would think and the day before I went, I got a call. No, the day I was leaving I got a call from Hr. Saying that I'm not approved for unpaid time off, because I had to take unpaid time because they were not accommodating with using sick bank stuff. I had to like… they said. Like. Oh, if you go, there will be consequences essentially like I was being threatened by that kind of stuff.

INTERVIEWER: As if, like those conferences don't also represent them.

RAIN: Right. And I was paying a hundred percent for my own stuff. I didn't request anything, and I was taking unpaid time because they weren't going to give me the days, which also is ridiculous. So, it was. It started being stuff like that. And like I got that distinct feeling that I was being like watched, and like they were looking for things to get me with. So, I would get disciplinary letters about that stuff. So like once I did the Ada request I can naively in my mind it was like this will all go away because it's official and really that just kicked off them, being able to tell me that even though I gave a very detailed long form that they required with like a lot of information, probably more than I needed to share with them, because I wanted to make sure they had it all, and it gave them access to some of my medical records. If they had questions and contact for my doctor. They requested that I do like a medical exam with their doctor which was started setting off. My, okay, they're trying to like to tell me that I don't get accommodations or something like that. So that's when I started contacting not hiring a lawyer, but make having a consultation and saying like, is this a legal request? And they were like absolutely not. There's no reason for them to request that when you. The only reason is, if you hadn't provided enough information or if they, your doctor, was qualified to make that.

INTERVIEWER: That is incredibly against the Ada. I went through a similar process, not at all at the same level when I was student teaching where they tried to get me to mind you, we're glorified volunteers. We're student teaching

RAIN: Some States they pay, but.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, not in Oregon!

RAIN: Not where I was either.

INTERVIEWER: And they tried to get me to submit my medical records in order to bring my service dog, and that I had to stay within certain hours, and I told them you are not allowed to require a student teacher to only come in during certain hours because of a disability. And then I got guide dogs involved, and they went and stopped really hard. Because you can't require an Ada form for a volunteer, With medical records. I'm so sorry that that was your experience especially considering, like we see specialists and frequently for this very obscure disease, like diseases and illnesses and impairments. And when we get really down to the nitty gritty, you need somebody that understands what's going on. Because if I go see an optometrist. They look at me and they go I don't understand. I had 3 doctors try to take my vision test last time I went, and they were like, I don't know how to get this where the doctor had too just like. See how my eyes reacted to certain things, because my Nystagmus is so severe that I lose. I will see, and then I'll lose it like things just move out of vision. Social security required me to go to an optometrist, and that was how that appointment went where I have my specialists. But then social security, which is an entirely different branch, and they're allowed to make that request. No other branch is allowed to do that because you ask a car mechanic to fix a rocket ship, and they're gonna look at you like, what? Yeah? Sorry. That is so much personal feeling.

RAIN: No, that's exactly why I was like I'm and it's their doctor, their choice, which is like what you would do if you had workers comp, which is how they avoid giving you like, you know, because their doctor is, gonna say what they want them to say to a level? yeah. And so then, what just ended up happening after that, like the short version was that I was, they gave me 2 months like, tried to do this during June and July. And that was like, I'll get back to you because it was summer, and I'm like, I don't know my travel schedule because they had to make the appointment. But really, I mean that was true. But also, I wanted to consult somebody because I was like. And then, midway through June. So, like only like a half a month and a bit into this, they called and said, never mind, you don't have to do it anymore because we're gonna move you to this other job. And it was like a 6th grade, general music, keyboarding position. That also is study skills. And all of this like. It's not the job that your 1st of all, not at the job you have after 16 years of teaching, and it's not what I was hired for or what my specialty is.

Technically, it's on my certification. But anyway, you know, they're not firstly, not allowed to move you to another job as an accommodation without your you agreeing it has to be mutually agreed also that job didn't exist when I started the Ada process. So, them doing that also be like that can't be part of it unless I agree. And it basically said they basically were saying, you can't be in the strings position because we can accommodate you at school, which I knew they had problems with. But we can't accommodate you when you do a concert, and the concerts were not essential functions. Those are extra duties that we get compensated for by a stipend, and I was told during the year, if you can't get to one of these, that's not an essential function of your job. You won't be penalized. So, like I had that on record basically. And I had done a whole year of concerts, providing my own accommodations, basically like talking to the stage manager, making sure there was enough space for me to walk with my mobility aid in front of the orchestra, making sure there was a place for me to put my mobility cane while I was conducting and making sure there were chairs, backstage, and in the tuning room for me to use, and that's really it. Everything else was really fine, and I did them all year, no problems. And they're telling me now that I can't and that's why I can't have the job that I was hired for so at that point, you know, and it was a really hostile phone call. It was you know, I said, this isn't something that I'm going to accept. So, let's can we meet further? Discuss it? And he said, well, we can try. But there's no point. The decisions already made. And I said, can we meet with the superintendent. He was supposed to set that up, never did, and basically said, well, if you don't want to work here, you don't have to. And that was it? Yeah, it was. And he basically hung up on me. And this was hr., so at that point, I was like, you know, I'm gonna try to… I contacted the union. There were no contractual violations, so they could only do so much. But basically, double check that and say, Yeah, we think this is an 88 violation. So, you're gonna have to contact your own people. Which I did. And it really boiled down to like, I didn't feel comfortable working there anymore. I felt like I was going to be in this constant fight. And I'm a very non-confrontational person. So, being in a place where I feel like I'm not wanted and was just not good for my mental health, like it was really taking a toll already that they were telling me that I'm not qualified to do the thing that I do best. And essentially, I felt like I needed to resign because they weren't gonna bend giving me this job, and I knew if I was gonna fight it was gonna be like a whole year fight, and I would probably have to do this other job which I'd have to do a lot of things I don't want to do when and that aren't in my wheelhouse. And so, I essentially resigned and told them it was

because of the treatment I had with the Ada process and then filed the thing with the [redacted]. So, like I mean that was unfortunate, you know. Experience with ADA accommodations like I said, the 1st one went very well, and it I also needed less, but it is in my head. That's what kind of how it was gonna go, because that's how it was the 1st time. And I know a couple districts I work for before that, if I had requested it, it would have been okay. What can we do? How can we work with you and make this work like they would have been. they would have absolutely been in that camp. And so, you know, after a while started like realizing, okay, this is not every place that is going to react this way. I'm sure they're out there. But and for now, like I was kind of, you know, physically and now, mentally, with this going on and this, we're still in this legal thing. Not anywhere near the end. And like with that happening, I was. I basically said, I'm not going to be in the classroom for a little bit. I'm taking a pause. So right now, I'm looking for remote work. Also, the fact that my husband has we move around a lot because of his job. And I'm like, I'm not looking for another job here. If we're gonna have to leave in a year like I'm going to take a pause, and when we get a place that we're settled there for a good long time I will start looking for classroom jobs. But right now, it's not gonna work for me which is heartbreaking cause that's all I've ever wanted to do, and it's been a hard year not doing it, and I don't know if I'm going to do it next year, either, so it's… But some of it is good, like I didn't need that. That pause like I do and when I go back to it, I want it to be at the right place with the right accommodations. And I want to start this process fresh and then I really think, yeah, it can do it like this. It's gonna… it would work. It will work out. Just not at the moment.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that I I've heard just from like people that I'm friends with, and just in general, the current climate regarding disability and everything else involved. A lot of like my trans. Friends and whatnot are like, this is making me not want to be a teacher. Yeah how? How are you feeling with everything like, in terms of like, what you're what you're currently going through legally, and just this, like major rejection. Your kind of just said like, it's not changed like you just want to teach but it is making you be reserved on that decision right now.

RAIN: Yeah, and definitely that definitely factors into it. I know, like.

Can you ask that question one more time.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah,

It was. Essentially, if so, can I remember what I just said? If right now, you know you, you just said, like, I think, which is a very important line, is you want to teach because it's all you've ever wanted to do. But this has made you need to take a pause.

RAIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. I think the way things are going right now, it's gonna be filtering down to districts and having, you know its own consequences and disarray. There. I do think there are going to be some places that it motivates them to look at people with disabilities as an asset you know whether or not that's for the right reasons, but also just to I think you know, there is that sense of like. Oh, these, you know, this population is having an extra hard time right now, like it looks really good for us to be you know, accommodating that and making this like. If that's the reason, I'll take it like you know what? It's fine. But I do think there is gonna be some of that. I also think it's going to make it clearer where we want to be and where we don't want to be. It's easier to see now like I mean, just yesterday there was this huge blow up in a friend's districts board meeting, where you know, the community itself was very much in support. It was about trans issues in school. But then there was a whole, you know, nonresident group of people coming and making noise that weren't even from there, you know, like, and seeing how that worked out. But the community itself is very supportive, like that stuff is broadcast in the news. It's all these board meetings are on YouTube like, it's easy to find that stuff. Before, I don't think it was as clear. So, finding places, you know. Obviously, that's not about disability rights for the but you can see where the attitudes lie in the district and with the School Board and things like that. I think that is helpful, but it does, I mean, and it has for a while given me pause when I have students in the high school that were like, okay, I want to go into music ed, being like. okay, like, you know, it's you don't wanna say, don't do it and you don't, and you shouldn't, because you don't know what the landscape is going to be like in the future. And we need those students who are excited about it. It's just like. Oh, bless your heart, you're gonna like, you know what? I mean, that kind of like, okay, yeah. But it's yeah, it's tough, and I know I mean I can't even count on 2 hands the number of teachers I know who've gotten out in the last 10 years And even now I have some colleagues that we're posting on LinkedIn like just looking at other options because of things happening in the end, but like it's got people real spooked and I do hope that that means that districts will look at people who come in and are passionate differently. A little bit. But again, I you know that's the hope. And I do, I believe That there are places like that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, absolutely. I you said. I sorry. This is one of those moments where I go. Look at this time, because that's such a good quote… you think that there will be definitely school districts that are trying to fight against what's currently happening and seeking out to support these communities.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I want that to be true. I'm gonna let that ring in my head for a while. Cause I agree a hundred.

RAIN: And I've seen it already, like, LinkedIn specifically, is a really good resource for this. And like what was it today? The Ford Foundation announced. They're gonna spend, I don't know 15 million dollars on a plan to support disability in the workplace. Like yeah, there's stuff like that coming up. Oh, what was the other one? There was somebody else that was doing a major… Michael's. The craft store corporate was doing a major thing about like. So, they're out there. And I think it's a form, you know. I mean, it's gonna be more aggressive because it's a form of resistance. And I hope that that works in our favor. And I, like, you know, education is its own beast, and especially you know, losing the Education department. We nobody knows what that looks like. If that makes things more flexible in the State from the state level, or if that you know and that's, you know, very a distinct possibility that throwing this back to the States even more than it already is. And things were happening, you know in the last I could, I could say probably the last 5 years where, like certain States, were making these laws, like Ohio, had a law that that teachers were allowed to carry guns in the classroom, and I lived an hour from Ohio and Michigan at the time. And so, I looked in that area for jobs like not anymore and you know, there are the laws that don't say gay in Florida and Texas, and all of this where it makes it very clear. That's not a place I'm going to teach so, and you do see the opposite of that. You see, like states coming out in support when these things happen. So, I think paying attention to that is extra important. But I also think it's going to be more obvious.

INTERVIEWER: Our current university is currently in a lawsuit because we receive state funding, and we still have Dei scholarships. you know, 1st generation, 1st year, 1st generation students, students with disabilities. There's like diversity, excellence awards. And so, the UO has decided to enter the lawsuit, not back down. And that's there's a large list of universities that are currently under that. And it's like those, I think a hundred percent are. I mean, the State of New York or no. Maybe it was Massachusetts, one of those one of the colony

states. For the New England States put in like a or maybe it was Maine. Actually, that was like, we are not going to get rid of these initiatives.

RAIN: It was Maine.

INTERVIEWER: Which I never expected that to come out of Maine, so left Field.

RAIN: She? Yeah, she she's got that stuff down.

INTERVIEWER: That's awesome. With everything considered, this is like a kind of going back to other things. You're bringing it back into the classroom. Have you noticed that your teaching has changed since? Since maybe being, you know, essentially forced into more of like an advocate role for disability. Whether or not you want to or should. And you know, interacting with the community more. Have you noticed a change.

RAIN: Definitely. I mean, I think I've always been a very student-centered teacher. And I've learned early that you're teaching students, not music. And so many teachers and music educators especially, don't view things that way. Whether or not they do. They're still doing that work like you. You can still be that person for a lot of students without really engaging with it or knowing it. But I think it has opened my eyes to it, especially when I got my diagnosis of Adhd, which was only in my thirties, knowing, like, if I had had these things when I was in school, how different. My experience would have been and if I had had teachers who were not only aware just because of training, but were understanding empathetic, worked with you and saw you as a human being and not just a student in class like how different those things would have been. And I didn't have a terrible experience in school, but there are certain classes I did because I also have Dyscalculia, so like math was hard and I was called a failure in front of the class in 4th grade, because I couldn't fill out a multiplication table on the thing, and that stuck with me forever, and I think it gave me more of a complex about numbers and math than I already had so, like certain things I know like would have been very different. And I think my view of myself would have been very different. So really like, it's more given me the viewpoint that I'm a guide for those students having their relationship with music, their own relationship with music, whatever it is, it's not my relationship that I'm forcing on them. And that they come first, not the curriculum and I think it's been. I found more ways to make that part of my teaching, and like the part of my teaching over time, and I think that only increases like it strengthens your relationship with students. And I've seen it like I've heard it from students. That's like, I had one student, particularly in high school I taught at North Carolina. It was like, you're the only teacher that

doesn't treat us like we're stupid and that just killed me because it's like that. Why is that a compliment that shouldn't be something that that a student feels and like that should be every T-shirt like it just. and I think that made me even more like aggressive in my in my standpoint of like they're first. And I think it's easy to lose that, especially with the way teaching has gone and how much overloaded we are now, and things like that. But it's important to take. It's more than important. It's essential to keep that at the forefront. Yeah, I think I like hearing those things from students has just made me even more like aggressive in the pursuit. That pursuit like that they come 1st and like that. It's only gotten harder, I think, for teachers because of the weight that we're overloaded and things like that. I just and how much are required of us, and in just the state of things right now. But it also became more essential during Covid. I think that was like a great unifier for everybody realizing. Oh, we're all human, and we're all having emotional reactions to this. And like me, seeing you on zoom every day is you're communicating with the outside world. Essentially so like I think, that did wake up a lot of teachers to that like some days, you are a therapist. Some days you are a teacher. Some days you are both at the same time, like it's just. And then the following year, I taught in a title one school for the 1st time, and like, I loved that like there were parts of it that were incredibly difficult, like my program was beyond not a priority. I had the shittiest room. I had no supplies, no budget, no nothing but like that also meant there was little oversight in my curriculum, and I could do what was best, for the kids like every day could make that choice, and there was so much need for that, like I felt like… I felt like I needed to be there. So, I yeah, that has a lot of that has definitely changed.

INTERVIEWER: Do you… One of the things you said was that like especially having a teacher that didn't recognize you were struggling, decided to pinpoint a negative in you. That's something I see a lot, and my instant for better or for worse. I don't know. Somebody says, you know, this person like can't even do this or that, and I go. Well, what do you mean? there's somebody in our environment that they were like he couldn't do like. He was like struggling to find the 5.th And I'm like, well, that sounds more like Dyscalculia, more than not able to count to 5, because Dyscalculia, a lot of like inability to count to just like it's all of the above and I definitely think that my go to is to always think about disability, and it was like the number one thing on my mind all the time to where I get annoyed sometimes, but I would prefer that as my default. Then to think about that and go. Well, the student just isn't trying, because 90% of the time it's never that. Do you find that like, just for me, trying to understand what you know. What

you're saying is that something similar that you experience, that you know our lived experiences. Reflect on how we view students and would much rather find support. Then just tell them they're not enough.

RAIN: Yeah. And I, honestly, I love that part of teaching because it makes you kind of into a detective. It's like, what is it that we aren't what is not connecting here. What is the issue? Because it's something like. Oh, my God! So rarely is it that you get a kid that's just so obstinate. They're not gonna do the thing or like they don't care enough. That's always a cover for something like it's with music reading. Specifically, I love this because I get kids get such a complex about it, too. It's like, well, I'm not going to be able to do this. This is nothing. I do. Kids that sit there and try to learn things by ear and pretend to read, and don't ever tell you they can't like so. And it's I love getting into that scenario because it's like we're gonna figure out how to read this. And you just, you know, like for most of them, it's not for everybody. But there's something that isn't connecting, or there's a block somewhere that says, this is something a magical code. I'm never going to understand. That's how I felt about math, and it wasn't the case like it, it just. And I still have that book, you know, at almost 40, so like finding that and getting a kid past that where they realize this is a thing they can do is like. Oh, I just absolutely love that moment, and seeing them progress after that, and how proud of themselves they are, and just like amazed. But I agree we're like… so recently, this at the National Conference in Atlanta. The thing I presented was about co-regulation just in the classroom as communal, like communal co-regulation, and you know part of it I address is like, this is probably something you only heard about in your exceptional child classes, right? Like a dealing with an emotional dysregulation, a meltdown something like that co-regulating to get past that. But like. if anything has shown us, Covid has shown us that we all have nervous systems that get overloaded. This is a human thing. This is not necessarily a disability thing, and disability is a human thing. So, like you, we all have that we all need this so like that benefits everybody so, and the people had a lot of questions about that part of it just, and not like doubts. But they were. They wanted to know more about it, and I felt like it was a really positive discussion. Because, like you said, you always go to think about disability. It's because it's very rarely the person like making the choice not to do the thing or to not understand the thing or to need the thing. And I think, having the, you know, perspective of disability makes that very clear, just knowing and being able to recognize it more,

too. I think that's like the face that someone makes when it's like, oh, my God, I'm I want to do this more than anything. But yeah, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: The block is not the child; the block is something else. The next question is that we just talked a lot about disability just kind of as a whole. I purposely put this question at the end, because I think I am constantly self-reflecting on my disability and my relationship, too, and my relationship with it and people and I feel kind of mean putting it at the end, because it's hard to answer. I think once you talk about it more. But what is your relationship with your disability at this point in your life?

RAIN: Yeah, that is a really hard question. yeah, it's it was like, that is a really hard question to consider. And I you posed it last time. So, I was thinking about it, and in bits over the couple of weeks last week. I was just saying that was like, that's a really tough question. And like you posed it at the end last time that we were gonna talk about it. So, I kind of started thinking about it over the week and it's like I'm also at a just like right at a point of weird point where I'm trying to get help for the spine issue. There are like a handful of specialists in the country and that's what I need to get to now. I had another neurosurgeon this last week, who knew absolutely nothing about it, and was super invalidating and essentially told me like. it's because you've gained weight and you're not exercising. I'm like, how should someone do Cardio when they're paralyzed from the waist down, or when it causes them excessive pain. And like essentially, it was like, I don't know. And that was it. So, I had, and like that hasn't happened before. But I this one was just infuriating. So, like I had the very 1st time in my life that I've ever just had that anger at the universe for the whole thing and really haven't, even my therapist this week was like, Yeah, you've never spoken like that before, and I'm like. I don't think I've ever thought this before. I just it got to a point where like, why are so many things so hard? Because I don't have the proper care and accommodations and resources for a lot of things. I'm on my own trying to get proper mobility aids without the help of a doctor, you know all of that. So, like, I'm just at that spot also, with this legal battle, and being unemployed of like how much havoc it is causing in my life. However, I will say there are things I am incredibly grateful for having this perspective and this experience. I think it's made me more perceptive, more empathetic, more understanding of myself. I'm there things I'm incredibly grateful for, and I also like the initial things that a lot of my autoimmune conditions are things that will never go away. then they're always going to be there and like getting to the point where that was accepting that point of like

this is what things are now like, not by battling against it. And there's a lot of that rhetoric of like the warrior and all this stuff. And I really dislike that. Because, yeah, you're battling against life a lot of the time. But this thing is something you need to make peace with, not fight against, and I think you kind of have to partner with it. And that's a lot of work that I've done this. This spine thing is a little different, because it is so like in and out, and I am looking for some relief from that, like trying to find proper treatment that will make it better. It's not going to go away, but there are improvements that can be made. So, it's a little different. And that one, you know. I think, that ignites more of the frustration of like the process of trying to live with this and find the right support and do things in my life that you know. I know that nobody can go back to 5 years ago or 10 years ago. That's not something we can do any person but like finding the ways, I can do the things that make me feel like me and have them not be like torture, or you know, I think. and that's mostly been finding mobility aids, and that are and find learning how to find things that are accessible and those supports. So, I like it does feel a little bit like learning how to be a human and things could change again. You know, things can change anytime, so it's I don't know. It makes you more in the moment and more… giving more grace to yourself and other people and there are definitely things like that. I wish weren't the case I like, I wish that it wasn't. You know I've wanted to have a family and have children, and that just isn't something I'm physically, mentally able to do. I know that. But I wish that weren't the case. That's 1 thing I'm really battling with that I'd feel like it's taken away from me. But also, you know, just getting, you know, it's a choice I'm making still. So, getting to peace with that, and just what like life will look like is different than I thought.

INTERVIEWER: Like the biggest message I'm getting out of this is you can both wish it wasn't the case and be mad and frustrated with the existence of and accept it at the same time.

RAIN: Yeah

INTERVIEWER: I love, make peace with it, not fight against it, especially because I think much of our existence is just accepting reality in all facets, you know, accepting you grew up in a place accepting you were born to whatever family you're born and accepting who we are as people, and I don't think disability is any different. I am me, you know you can't change the orientation. You were born as the same way that you can't just change that this is a reality, my professor. I've been with her for 7 years, and we talk. She's, I think, at the point now where she's like, I feel comfortable to ask these questions, and like, I'm not worried about making you feel

weird. It's like, I think that's what took her the longest for her to feel like she's not making me uncomfortable. It takes a lot to make me uncomfortable at this point. But yeah, I'm like 25 is 25 years of being disabled. You know, 25 years is still 25 years, regardless of if it starts at age 0 versus age 25. And she's like, yeah. it must be like annoying when people say, like, you're brave, it's like, oh, you have no clue, because if it was like she's telling me I'm brave. She's known me very well for 7 years. If it's my partner telling me, I'm brave for going outside and existing in a day where I knew I probably couldn't. That's an entirely different story than like Jim Bob coming up being like you're so brave for what.

RAIN: Like for walking down the sidewalk like, yeah. Should I just stay inside and not do that like, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Thy my favorite thing is that you don't look XYZ.

You don't. Xyz disabled something.

RAIN: I also get it about being Jewish. You don't look Jewish. Excuse me.

INTERVIEWER: What does that look like. Do you find that a lot of me personally, a lot of wishing it wasn't the case isn't actually so much centered around my heart. I wish I could run, not just because I can't see, but because my heart does not let me. That's 1 thing that like, I wish that wasn't the case, but I don't wish I wasn't able to see. I just wish we had better bus systems.

RAIN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, like, there's the social. And then there's the very internal personal desires.

Yeah. But a majority of my wishing it wasn't. The case is everything out here? Nothing to do with here.

RAIN: That's absolutely the case, like I think the only exception for me is the pain like that I get from the spine thing in and from Ra like that, you know, is very like, I wish this wasn't happening, because then you're just, you know a statue. At that point you're not doing anything, saying anything like I but those. But in general, I yeah, absolutely. I wish that I would like the things that were required of me were accommodated to me, or like, there were systems that allowed. Yeah, absolutely. I feel that.

INTERVIEWER: There are 3 advice questions. And after going through and talking about disability. I feel like it's fresh on the mind.

the 1st one is, what advice would you give someone with a disability who's thinking about pursuing a career in music, education? And that could be, you know, the students that are like, I want to go into music, Ed, and you're like, oh, or you know, the students in college that are a different major that want to switch majors or somebody. That's yeah. All of the above.

RAIN: Yeah. my 1st recommendation for those kids is like, okay. So, you know what your music education looked like. You've been in those classrooms go to a few other places, schools, volunteer, or just observe and see what the atmosphere is like. Just so, you know, because, like you're basing your desire on your experience, but that is not necessarily what it will look like when you get in the field. So, understand what it looks like from all angles, and then make that decision. I like. I think if I had gone in and not necessarily wouldn't have made that choice but maybe wouldn't have made the choice to teach the things that I taught like. Take the positions that I took because I, just at that point really didn't know what it was going to look like, and you can never know everything, but I think that would be my advice and you know, that can help a lot of things. It also gives you the ability to see other teachers and other programs and know the possibilities and get more excited about it, you know, I think just being involved in some kind of music education. Whether it's observing, volunteering, teaching during the summer, and seeing how that feels. And then my advice, for, like choosing a school as soon as we're gonna choose, is knowing what the focus of that school is, because I've had. Like, I know, a lot of people have gone to like to schools where they're string teachers. But the focus is choral music ed, really. And strings are an afterthought so like making sure that that's a place that's going to give you the support that you want. Before you choose it.

INTERVIEWER: Not to diss on my own university. But I know of one of my friends is a string teacher in Southern Oregon, telling students to go to a different university.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: We have a fantastic band and choral, and general music actually is also really supported orchestra, not by our decision, but University has decided to not rehire the position of the previous orchestra music ed Professor, and therefore we just haven't had a very strong and we get like a proof for interim professors a lot easier than hiring a professor.

RAIN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: They've tried to bring someone in which is fantastic still, so frequently an afterthought. And I feel like that's as someone who's very band centered it like it

breaks my heart for all the string people, because I know that that's a specific form of music education is shrinking in a lot of places.

RAIN: And it's already such an issue that we have this degree that qualifies you to teach everything and that you they're trying to make you. You know, certain places have more of a focus on that, like making you the jack of all trades. And I think that's another thing to really look at is like what is because I know I'm never gonna accept a band position. I'm not. And that's not because I don't want to do it. It's just not my specialty. And those kids should not suffer through me trying to teach them band like, especially beginners like that's not gonna give them what they need And yet I was taking 8 weeks of every single band instrument, and it was enjoyable. But could I have done something else with that time that was probably more. Yes, so like what choices are available to you in the universities. Other ones I've seen that make it, you know. You take a methods class, and that's it. So, like, you have exposure to it. And then you're talking about full symphony. And that's different. So yeah, I think I think that's I know it's not disability related, but it is also like, you know. Go into the classes, go see what's going on there, and you'll see pretty quickly if like. Oh, my gosh! This noise level is not going to work for me like that's something I think I would have noticed in elementary when I went and the school I student taught in really didn't provide that because it was all separate buildings and things. So, I think if I would have known the noise levels of a lot of elementary schools, it would have given me pause before I took that, because that's a big issue for me. So. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I don't think that there's anything we do for many of us that isn't also disability related.

RAIN: Yeah, honestly. Because it's a human thing. This is all human. Related. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I think I think, drawing it back to like, go experience other classrooms I know from just looking at small children I don't. I don't need to be in a classroom to know I should not do that because of my disability, and it's not that I think I would ever do a badge. I would love to teach elementary school so bad I should not, unless I was coaching, but. Like, unless it was like co-teaching. Kids put things in their mouth and swallow. And that with, you know, 6th grader. they're so much less likely to put something in their mouth and swallow. Maybe, if their nose still, but like seldom in the mouth, and that's what they're.

RAIN: Own, like logic at that point, like.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, they built the connections to not do that. But I have fears around me being in charge of a bunch of, you know 5-year-olds and going oh, and not being able to keep keeping them safe,

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: The next one I have is just making sure it's still recording, because the number of times I've gone on and off it freaks me out.

RAIN: Doesn't.

INTERVIEWER: The next question is pre-service teachers, you know, students that have already. I love that you integrated the college choice. That's something that I think is super important for these students that have already, you know, gone into it. And they're a music education major, what kind of advice do you have? The oh, the one of the like secret things that I wish my orientation mobility specialist taught me was how to plug in stuff that's the matching. The prong to the outlets is so difficult when you can't see, and I'm like that's not something I should put my finger in

RAIN: A lot of the time will like sorry feel it goes for it. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

RAIN: So pre-service. It's a good question. I think there's still some of that like identifying what the thing that you'd like to do is and what things you can do. Because, especially when you're talking about strings, there aren't that many positions out there. You may be taking ones that are combined strings in choir. I've seen a lot of strings in general or just general music for a while, like finding the things that you can do and feel confident doing to a degree and knowing like especially at the beginning. Taking those jobs is gonna teach you a lot, even if it's not the specialty that you want to go into. Of course, when you're talking about disability, there's a lot like I wasn't as disabled at that point. Like, I was neurodivergent, but I didn't know it. But also, I did not have a lot of these same considerations as the physical layouts of places that you know. That was never a consideration for me. but I think in a lot of communities you get those connections of like, oh, this job is gonna open up things like that. And when you find that out you know, you can kind of look into the place. Go observe with the teacher, talk to a teacher that has that position. That's good advice for everyone. And you know, go to their concerts. Just kind of get ideas about that and cause. There's just so many different places out there, and so many different cultures and I think a lot of us myself. At least, kind of

assume everything is gonna be like where you grew up and what your program was like. And a lot of us have that picture, you know. That's the most distinct picture of a music education program and a teacher in our mind. And a lot of us will. you know, consciously or subconsciously, like, want to replicate a lot of that, and going in to a position and then trying to make it what you want like immediately, or put things on it that are not, you know, wanting them to play these pieces that they're not able to play just because you think you know those pieces the good ones you liked things like that. Being very cautious of that and like. And I think this is good advice for being new anywhere. Is taken observation time before you're making changes, or you know, you don't have to do things exactly the way they were done before, but acknowledge those ways, and at least experience some of them, so that you can understand why maybe that decision was made, or, like. you know. I think that stuff is. I guess that's not really preservice. That's like new teachers. But I see, have seen so many times where people come in really headstrong and really excited, you know. And then they get that the eliminated really quick because this didn't work out exactly how they wanted and like, it's a long career. It's a long life. You're gonna get the chance to do those things. And you'll make it happen. And it might just be next year. It might be the year after might be in the next district you work in. So, I think you know, that's the way to make things smooth for yourself, but also to blend with a place and acknowledge the place and respect the place and their ways before you know, like. You'll have a lot more respect from colleagues, and you'll understand them better. If you're not coming in that way. I feel like a history thing, but.

INTERVIEWER: Did you? Oh, my computer opened the tab that goes. Your battery was about to die… passive, aggressive. The last one is advice you would give other music educators with a disability. I think it goes a lot with what you just said. With that, with like Job searching and truthfully pre-service teachers, I don't think could ever get enough information about what the job search process looks like. And all of that. our NAfME, that's primarily what where all that information comes from is from our cNAfME chapter.

But again, they're also preservice teachers running that. So, it's you know. They don't always know either.

RAIN: Oh, like your collegiate national.

INTERVIEWER: We do studies. Yeah, yeah.

You know, that's why we do studies to figure out, what do people want.

RAIN: I have webinar like I go to some of their webinars sometimes, and that, like the National NAfME, and that they should have a preservice job. Search. Where like, why don't they have that like a panel of people that should exist? Because I recently we did absolutely meet with the music Ed students at my husband's university. And that was the topic was, was the job search. Because I've done a million of them since we've been in a million places, and I've worked in 5 states. So, like, I have got a lot of background on that. So, and they were they, I was like, really, do they need to hear a lot about this? Don't they get it from their professors? They were like eating up everything because they've not heard any of this. So yeah, that just I think it's a double-edged sword. When you're talking about pre-service teachers finding the community, especially this disabled teaching community because you're going to hear a lot of things that might like put you off it like a lot of like my experience. But some people are not very delicate about it, or like, you know, some people like this is what's gonna happen to you. You got to take that with a grain of salt. But also, there is really good advice and good experiences. So, like, there's a disabled teaching community on Facebook and on Reddit. And then there's 1 for music teachers I think I showed you of with disabilities and autoimmune conditions and like chronic health conditions. So, like. yeah, those can be double edged swords for sure. but I think, like anything. You look at a review of a restaurant. You're going to find people that are really bitter and angry about stuff, and you ought to take that with grain of salt. It's kind of the same thing. But the communities can also really give you a lot of good advice. And since there really isn't a ton of teaching with a disability resource that really just isn't I mean, it's pretty spread out in the in the general, like job accommodation network and things like that. They're really give you a lot about Ada in relation to jobs. There is just nothing about education, and a lot of it doesn't apply. So, it can be a little hard. But finding those communities, I think, is helpful.

INTERVIEWER: This kind of, I think, also goes for in service teachers, too. A lot of what you're saying for both. what more like specific advice would you give for in-service teachers? Like other, you know, or even just overall music educators.

RAIN: Are you thinking like disability related, or just in general?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, music teachers with a disability.

RAIN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And seeking that out.

RAIN: Be part of the community, because your existence could be the key for someone else. You know. Just. I think about being that person, if for somebody else. That's like, oh, can I get into music education with a disability, or like, I've you know, developed this condition after teaching, for, you know, 10 years like me. And what does that mean for me? Just like the fact. If I could have found somebody else right off the bat that was applied to it would have been amazing. So, I think, if you are that person just, he exists, be loud about it. I guess now is like if you can, and if you're willing to. especially now, just is the time to be present, I guess is. And I yeah, I think that's the big one, because for me I'd like it pretty much. Felt like I was alone in that. And they're just since there aren't that many of us. There are more than we would know. obviously. But I think that it's just like it makes you feel like you're not the only one. This is possible because other people have done it. And I think also, if that community can be stronger, it demonstrates that to the powers that be that. You know, we're assets and not challenges. Yeah, I would. I would really like that music teaching or just teaching in general, with disabilities to be a more present community, and not just in the disability community, but for like well at large, because I think us serving each other is very, very helpful. But I think relating to the non-disabled folks is even more important because a lot of the time those are. I mean, obviously, that's the majority, right? And those are the people we're going to be working with and working for, and being able to demonstrate our abilities, successes, existence. what we offer, and our desire and passion. To do these things and on a larger scale is very valuable.

INTERVIEWER: I am finishing the 1st chapter or my literature review. and I realized I did not include a section on what is disability, crazy foresight, or whatever that word is crazy, miss, that.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How do you forget to do that? One?

RAIN: Yeah, and no good.

INTERVIEWER: I was like duh and I the National Institute for Medicine, the Us. Like National Institute for Medicine. Whatever I forget, there's a word that I'm forgetting.

RAIN: American Medal.

INTERVIEWER: But they have.

RAIN: That one ama.

INTERVIEWER: It's currently on my computer.

it's the National Library of Medicine. Sorry National Center for Bio Biotechnology information.

They published a book the surgeons General's call to action, to improve the health and wellness of persons with disabilities in 2,005 actually didn't know this existed which tells me that the call to action was heard, but not loud enough. And it's really cool reading it. because there's an entire section that I mean, it's all. So, from everything. I've read of it so far, I feel so represented because there's an entire section on checking this one section, and I included it in the Literature review known as immune to the potential onset of a disability. An infant can be born with profound disease. A child can become paralyzed. That's pretty much the gist of it. It's I put it in the chat, too, because it's, I think, a really. it's 1 of those things that disability is not a punishment. It's a reality of life. And you know babies can be born addicted to drugs, and they didn't ask for that. I like that. It's he said, playground injury, because that's just part of you know, being a kid, you can end up disabled for the rest of your life, and I think that it's so important that we not just reach a bigger community for us, but for the people that will become our community.

RAIN: and our, you know, we exist in their in their community. They exist in our community. Now like just coexisting with more understanding. What is it that I heard like a TikTok of somebody saying that you're either disabled or pre-disabled because you will become disabled at some point in your life. It may be when you're 90, but you're going to have that, or you're going to have an experience with an injury that limits your mobility. You know. you're going to have that experience. It's a human experience. So, like. I think. And for me, you know, growing up where we had that hearing impaired school that was pretty separate except for a lot. It was like us and them. you know, and I think there's a lot of that sentiment in just general society and culture like, oh, that's not something that has to deal with, or I have to know about. Or you know, it's just. I think, getting that making that, you know just, I think, existing in people's lives now, being one, you know, disabled around my friends and my family does that. But I think making it clear to everyone that you are going to deal with this at some point. And you're probably you're going to know somebody that deals with this at some point. You're going to care about somebody that deals with this at some point. So, it is you. This is something for you to know, like.

INTERVIEWER: not every person will experience. Every other culture. But every culture will, experience disability.

RAIN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Especially as you know, someone who… My whole viewpoint of disability has changed since becoming more disabled. The vision thing was just I mean I that's I. I didn't know any different but once it was like, I need. Elevators can't do stairs. This floor is uneven. There's the hill. Things like that where I think, had my reality shaked, I realized I'd become a much louder advocate once it was so much more present in my life. And which is wild because it's always been part of my life. Have you? Do you have any advice for the people that are maybe new to the community and kind of went through an experience that you similarly did of you know, onset of stuff later in life.

RAIN: Yeah, I was recently on a reddit post of this, like basically saying, like, if you developed your disability or you came into your disability later in life you know. Can you talk about that for a second? Because it was, you know, somebody that had been born with their condition? And I just I started realizing how different that is, and how you would approach it. And there's just. I think, accepting that in yourself is so much more difficult. When you have a picture of yourself in a non-disabled state. I would assume again, I haven't been in that position like, but we, I think, like myself. I expect a lot of things of myself the way that you know I was, or my abilities were, and it's it adapting to that and realizing like. Especially, there's a different mentality when it's something that's chronic and not changing, or something that you can get you improve with. It's a very different mentality. I think, yeah, that that making peace with things is a big one. I think you know there are things that we all have to make peace with. And if even if it is something you are looking to improve or make get treatment for, or you're fighting for there is. There is an element of that like, this is where I am. And yeah, I'm trying to get to a different place than that fixer mentality, is there? But I think if you're if you're constantly in that, it's just constant. Disappointment is what you're going to be met with. So, like, there is an element of that making piece where, like, you know, this is going to be this hard fight, or this is going to be this, and I'm in that, and sometimes it will be very difficult. is an important thing to notice. But again, I think, like you think I've said this, for, like every question but community again like finding that community of people and having somebody to talk with that will validate your experiences at that point. I don't think. even if you're getting therapy, which I also highly recommend that you have. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's about like improving your mentality or changing it. But just you might get there, but also just having somebody listen, and validate is so valuable

because you don't need to feel alone in that fight in that scenario and it's so easy to feel alone. I'd say, also talk. Just talk with people about it. Don't avoid this topic and the subject. Once you get to a point that you're comfortable, doing it like being honest about challenges and fears and successes and the things that matter to you, or are on your mind with people who are around you. It can only help having people understand. What's going on. Is this very, very easy to kind of internalize that, and just talk about good stuff with people, and not even like I told some friends that were much more Texters than talkers, and I told them, like, I'm probably I'm just gonna send you like, it doesn't necessarily mean that, like. I need to have a big, long conversation about this. I just want you to know this like so like sometimes you might get a text from me that's like XY, and Z. This is, you know I'm really worried about this thing right now, and just like letting them know to, especially when your long distance with people that's everyone for me letting them know, to check in or to like. because I think one thing that was really hard for me was just like feeling like everybody like people should be reaching out to me or checking in. But how would they know to do that? I think that's like a way I made myself feel really isolated, just like putting it on them when really, I wasn't sharing some of that and you might have that person like my sister is that person that will reach out and ask like, this sounds like it might be difficult. What's going on. How do you feel about that? But not that's not everybody that has that.

INTERVIEWER: Oh. I've taken like all of this advice is going in the paper, but it's also like just so good for me to hear as I'm transitioning in life.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I am seeing a psychiatrist which has been fantastic just for myself, and I have, like a panic disorder and just like living. What caused me to have a panic attack, and my response is freeze. And if I learned last night, if I try to break out of the freeze, I go into fight. And it's so like primal of human reaction. And for some reason, questions that don't. And this is where I think another neurodivergent thing comes and they meet together, where, if you try to get me to do something out of the way that I know is correct. there's so many things clicking in my brain every time I talk about it. that I have a structure, and things have to happen in that order, and if you try to like. Convince me that something different can happen. I'll have a panic attack. and it happened with my roommate present, and she'd like, I've been very. I've never been up front with a roommate and this one I'm like you. If I live with you, you need to know that these are happening just out of your safety. So, you don't worry about me. And she

had caused a panic attack one time, and I always tell people like you did not cause it. It's gonna happen because it's a me thing, but like what my situation will cause it. But, like, you know, it's you just happen to be the catalyst, and we're at the school of Music, and I'm planning on how to get home. And one of our friends is like, we just got to do this, and I was like. But there's all these other things, and a lot of it is disability related off. I can't. If it's not just putting my instrument away. It's standing up, letting my heart rate go back to normal getting the swab, because I'm moving my body in different ways. It's like there's so many disability things related to it that people are like, but just do that doesn't work like that. And she, my roommate, was with us, and she's like, we got to stop because Gray's gonna have a panic attack. It's like that is why we tell people because if I can't recognize those moments. But she looked she was. They have that look in their eyes like I didn't know I had a look.

RAIN: My husband for me. He is like he not only like he just knows my limits, or my requirements better than I do where it's just like… Don't do that. I'm going to go and do the thing like I'll be right back. and me being like I was ready to get up and do the thing, and I really shouldn't like he just is so much more in tune to that. And he'll know, too, like when I'm starting to get toward panic attack, because a lot of I have them out of the blue. Very rarely, you know where it's like. Oh, my God, I'm having a heart attack kind of attack. That's just like I'm not upset or anything. It just happens. But usually, it's when I'm upset. And then something starts happening. And he, he like, knows exactly what to do and what I need. And it's just such a blessing, because in those moments you can't really think clearly about what's gonna help.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely.

RAIN: But you reminded me I was. Oh, God! Now I lost the train of thought. Come back. Oh, I can't remember. Oh, yeah, about that there's a different kind of anxiety that you can get when you have neurodivergence, or when you have a chronic condition or a disability that is just related to how you're going to you know. Like, when I'm thinking about going out, you know, I'm anxious that I'm going to have to walk a far distance to get to the table in the restaurant, or that it's going to be too loud for me in that atmosphere, or like the anxiety of not being able to contribute then to conversation, or that we're gonna have to sit at a high top table that I can't really get onto like, you know, what is the situation in this place? And I just that clicked for me so much of just like how much things have changed for me and going to like unfamiliar places. We're trying new things, and the anxiety that comes along with that, and how

much I've improved in that really just like I know a little bit more what to check for, what to know and like, what to ask for when I get to a place, but still that absolutely is there, especially when I'm doing traveling just how I usually end up in a panic mode the night before I go someplace because I'm not only packing and doing things more physically, and that just gets a lot of things going, but also just knowing there are so many things coming that I have to remember that I have to know, and so many unknowns, that it's just like a totally different kind of anxiety.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, awesome. we're, we're really stimmy today, and a lot of my things are vocal stims. I'm sorry if, like any of that bled through, keep trying to mute before it happens distract me, so I imagine they're distracting.

RAIN: No.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's good. that was those were all the questions. Actually, we kind of just did all 6 and 3, which works out right. Do you have anything that like you just want to add any anything that you want out there? I say out there, as if this will get really big. But to me it's really big, and I know all of our organ people will read it so at least it'll reach this audience.

RAIN: I think you like a message to like administrators, and the higher ups that you, not you, but your school, or diff, or schools in general, students can be missing out on excellent teachers who are passionate and care and have a unique perspective. especially when we're all working with students with disabilities every day, if you're not open to and accommodating to teachers with disabilities. That it's an essential part of diversity and inclusion having that present in your schools and making. If, when that comes to you, the opportunity to have somebody there with all of those qualities good and have them around for the teaching. We're not subs or recess monitors or lunch monitors. Yeah, that's great. When people can do that. Then we need it. But you're hiring us to teach and to be there for students and for our knowledge and experience in that And I think that's the big one for me. That's I'm a teacher first, and we can, you know, a lot of people with disabilities can do that and do it amazingly and have limitations with the other stuff, and some of them can do the other stuff, too. It just. I think, knowing that you're hiring people as educators. The very big one.

INTERVIEWER: Prioritizing the students.

RAIN: Absolutely. And that I think you hear a lot of that from people of well, there just aren't a lot of people with, you know, a lot of disabled educators. It's like you have to think about

why that is and actively make it possible and inviting for those people. Because I think we've gotten the message over and over that from society and in general, and as employers a lot that we don't fit there, that the things that we need to function are a burden or impossible, or just something that you don't want to deal with. As a community. We've gotten that. And we. We all know it like, we know, we all know it's there. And that gets internalized very easily. So, when you aren't actively opposing that when you aren't actively welcoming. It feels like you're like were being excluded or were not wanted.

INTERVIEWER: To put like actively posing historical barriers.

RAIN: And just being anti, you know, like, they say, anti-ableist, like, I think you know and there are different ways depending on every situation, every atmosphere that that can be done. But yeah, and that's a big like kind of an uphill battle. When you have people who are just used to being excluded in a lot of ways. Just making it clear that that's not the case.

INTERVIEWER: If there's any like me, I love this. You're a millennial right? Like that's like the okay. I love this about millennials especially. And it's, I think, what Gen. Z. Took from you guys is the use of memes to relate life.

RAIN: It's a oh, it's hard to explain, but like they can say so much, it's just.

INTERVIEWER: You've discussed a good number of memes and like reddit posts and whatnot. If you, if you find once again, don't feel like you have to actively search, although if you have one in mind, I would love if you could send it. Those are actually artifacts like great artifacts, and if you're.

RAIN: Probably have screenshots of 300 of them on my phone.

INTERVIEWER: If you want to find a couple and send them. Those are absolutely things that count as artifacts. You know there's their moments where you feel represented, and you feel seen. And it's just from like a stupid reddit post. I say stupid because it feels so silly scrolling on my phone going. Oh, visibility! And then I go back to real life. And I'm like I don't exist.

RAIN: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: But any moment like that feel free to send them. I would love them. They're great things that I can include. And I imagine that's how I find my millennial audience. I got memes.

RAIN: It works. I use them in like every presentation. And like clinic that I do now cause it's a language. Okay.

INTERVIEWER: It is if the if Gen. Alpha can find representation within toilets versus cameras,

RAIN: What that.

INTERVIEWER: That's what the whole skibbity toilet thing is entirely heads and toilets versus cameras. And if you team toilet? Are you team camera.

RAIN: I know about the head thing, but I don't know anything else.

INTERVIEWER: So much more.

RAIN: For a while, so I think I'm like extra uninformed.

INTERVIEWER: I just know, because part of like I am assisting in a sophomore checkpoint class right now. And so, I'm with a lot of freshmen and sophomores, and I'm only like 7 years older than them. However, I feel so old. I guess 7 is almost a decade. So, I you know what I'm gonna give myself, Grace in that

RAIN: I feel like you want to think every generation has had that like, I don't understand these kids, but I really feel like Gen. Alpha has a different language like it, just the existence of like slang and inside jokey type stuff. It's just. There's just so much of it and I don't feel like we had that much, you know. We'd say like words here and there.

INTERVIEWER: No, it was, it was.

RAIN: Cultural concepts we didn't understand in every around, every turn, but.

INTERVIEWER: And it's so fast it's so fast. Terms. Come and go.

RAIN: I think that's something that's different is how things spread so widely and quickly that we didn't have yeah.

INTERVIEWER: sweet, I will. Probably in a couple of days. When I remember send you an email, I am being like hey, just check it in you found anything. I would love to have them.

RAIN: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Otherwise feel free to send them at any time. And it especially because I know email gets weird. I still have messenger I like don't go on Facebook, but I still have messenger and so you could send them that way or through this, or however you would like to. I appreciate every single ounce of your time like. Thank you so much.

RAIN: This has been great.

INTERVIEWER: This is, oh, good. Yeah. I'm glad.

RAIN: It's yeah, because you feel like you're having all of these experiences for yourself. And when you're able to share that and relate to people or like, just have somebody understand it and just be like, Yeah, I've been there or know that my story could be helpful to somebody. I think that's just feels amazing.

INTERVIEWER: The biggest reason I wanted to take this on is because I feel I feel as though there's so many projects about us, not by us. And absolutely, you know, it's so important that people who historically have voices share the voices of those that don't. But I know when I'm talking to an able, bodied person. It is so hard for me to actually share what I'm feeling, because there's an ounce of like I still feel like I'm crazy. So, I hope that I have not made you feel that way.

RAIN: I know you mean that it's just like they couldn't possibly understand this, because it took me so long to understand this, but also, that is, with a lot of the able-bodied people in my life. That is not the case. They sometimes are very much quicker to understand a concept than I was. So.

JENNIFER

Interview 1 (2.28.25)

JENNIFER: I'll be honest. I, being disabled is never. I guess it's not something that's part of my metacognition, you know, but this will force it to be. It's a part of my daily life, for sure, but I'm not. I don't think about it, and how it impacts my daily life. The horn lessons getting really loud right now, by the way, so hopefully, it's not bleeding through. So yeah, so I'd be happy to write things down as thoughts occur to me.

INTERVIEWER: Awesome. The 1st question. I have kind of helps guide a little bit into the whole thing, and it could be so about just like who you are, because I think that that same thing of the disability is just like a part of everyday life that I mean. I can't see, and I'll leave the house without my dog, and I'll also leave the house without my cane, and then I get out there, and I'm like. So, anything that's just don't feel like you have to fit it into that world. And so, the 1st question I have is, will you just tell me a little bit about yourself? And this could be anything of like who you are. Some demographic information, anything you'd like to share.

JENNIFER: Sure, I was born here in Oregon. I grew up in the X School district when I was born. It was 1975, and it was like right after ultrasounds had become common in pregnancy. And so, my mom had an ultrasound done. But nothing looked off at all. And then, when I was born, they saw that one leg was half the size of the other leg, and I had a condition called proximal femoral focal deficiency or PFFD, so basically, I was born with just almost no femur, no patella. I don't have a like a ball and socket that's normal in my hip joint. But I did have a foot, and my parents' options were to leave it like that. And then, as I grew, they could fit me with a prosthetic that was kind of like an extension that attaches to the bottom of your shoe, or I could have what's called a rotation plasty where they amputate the foot, and they turn it around backwards, and then your ankle becomes your knee joint, and then you're fitted for a below the knee, prosthetic or they could just amputate the foot and then fit me with an above the knee prosthetic, which has a knee. People with prosthetic legs are more disabled if they have… if they have an amputation that's above the knee, and they don't have that knee joint. But my parents felt like that was probably the best option. And so, and I agree with that. I mean living the way that I am. I think I would have made the same decision, knowing what life would be like now. So, when I was 2, they amputated my foot, and then they fit me with prosthetics growing up. The technology has changed greatly over the last 45 years, but it's I don't remember ever having anything else. I went to school and participated fully that. So, when was idea introduced to the school system that was like 1990. Right? It was so. I was in high school by the time they were really making any sort of accommodations for kids and my parents. I'm the youngest of 4, and so they said that they wanted to parent me the exact same way that they parented my older siblings, and they really did not provide me with any accommodations, because they could see that I could just figure out how to make things work, and I did in elementary school. My PE teacher had wanted to put me into the special education PE class, and my mom went into the school and said, no, she's going to stay in the regular PE class. You just ask every single one of your kids to hop the length of the gym and see which one can do it. And so I was never in any special classes, anything different. My dad taught me to ski when I was 3. So, and I learned how to ride a bike. I got a bike in kindergarten, and it took me 3 summers to learn how to ride. It is a bike, with no modifications at all. But I other than training wheels, which every kid or a lot of kids have. But after 3 summers I finally learned how to ride a bike and actually cycling now is a big part of my life in high school. I well, in middle school I joined the band as a percussionist, and then my freshman year of high school. I switched

to trumpet and that became my passion. So that's, I think, where that that's my identity. I don't think being disabled is it's definitely who I am. But it's not my identity. And I actually get kind of uncomfortable when it becomes part of my identity. And I've heard there's research on this very specific thing, and that there are some disabled people who will overachieve in order to not be seen as being disabled before being. Whatever it is they feel their identity is, and I completely relate to that I thought that I would want to go into healthcare of some sort. So, when I graduated high school, I went to State University to be a biology, Major, but I took, I declared, music Major, 1st to get free lessons. So, because if you're a music major, then you don't have to pay for your lessons. And then I realized I was enjoying all the music stuff far more than the biology. And I just stayed a music education major. but if you go to State school, at least in the nineties, and they actually had a band program back then. They don't even have one now you didn't do your student teaching as an undergrad. I don't know how different things are now, I think it is very different, but you would have to go get a master's, and then you did your student teaching as part of your master's, and really the only options in Oregon at that time to get a master's in music ed. I think the only option was [university]. So, I applied to [university]. But then I also applied to [other university]. And to [university 3] and to Northwestern and to Ithaca and I got in everywhere, which completely shocked me, and so I decided to go to Northwestern, and I left Oregon, went to Northwestern, had my eyes completely open about how much bigger the music world actually was. My husband, who I'd been dating at the time was a year behind me at State school, and he ended up going to [state school], and so when I finished my degree at [NW University], he was getting a PhD in chemistry at the University of M. And so, I applied for jobs in Michigan. And that's how I ended up in Michigan, where I taught from 1999 to 2021, but we're both from Oregon. and we thought we'd come right back to Oregon. But it took a pandemic to get us back here. So, it's interesting to have conversations about how my disability impacts my job. And my 1st inclination is to say that it doesn't at all. But I think, probably, like you, it's always part of my brain because it's part of my day, from everything from it takes me longer to get ready in the morning. There's a certain routine I have to go through in order to keep my to even just put my prosthetic on and to. I'll have dreams that I get to school, and I'm like, Oh, no! I forgot my leg, and then I'm like, what do I like? That could never, ever happen. But I will still dream about things like that. And then, like this week is crazy. I'm here at School, probably about 75 h this week, because we had 2 concerts. We're hosting solo and ensemble tomorrow. So today we'll be there late, setting up and so that the number of

hours that you wear a prosthetic can cause discomfort, it can cause blisters, it can cause things that nobody without one ever even has to think about. and then, and moving equipment, too, can also cause wear and tear. That probably does not happen to everybody. So, these are all things, and it makes me sweaty. So, then I start to sweat, and then I'm like, do I need to go take it off and wipe down? I mean all these things that are just part of me, and I don't consider as being a disability, are things that any other band director would never, ever have to worry about at all. And then I also I try to get some sort of 30 min workout in every single day, so sometimes I'll sneak off to the gym if it's a long day like this, if I can, but then I have to think about. Do I have time to do care for my prosthetic? So, because if it does get sweaty. Then I'm taking it off. I'm wiping everything down. I'm cleaning it. I'm putting it back on, which is extra time, or do I not have time for that. Maybe I'll just go walk the track for 30 min at some point during the middle of the day. yeah, I'm not. I'm not sure what else you want to know. When I was in Michigan I taught high school band almost my entire career. I taught elementary for one year. and then I moved to the High that one of the high schools in the same district that I was teaching elementary and taught there for 21 years, I think. And is a huge program. It was great. I was really fortunate that the doors opened at the right time. And when the pandemic hit. My husband's a chemist, and he realized that he could work remotely which, because by that time he was managing a lab he wasn't in the in the lab, and the pandemic was already messing so much up. I just randomly started looking for jobs in Oregon. and I'd never even heard of School High School, but I saw it come across my feed and applied, and I got the job in like June of 2021, and had 6 weeks to move our family of 5 out here. So, because we have 3 teenagers. And so, this is my 4th year at School. And it's fantastic. I love it here. It's not an easy school to teach at. But the support system makes being a band director as easy as it could be anywhere. I mean, I've got the staff that I need. I have a schedule that is as humane as it can be, I mean, which probably sounds crazy after I said. I'm working 75 h this week, but the fact that I taught one class this morning and I don't have another one until 2 o'clock today. That's not how my life in Michigan was. So yeah. So, coming out here is going to be a good way to end my career. And I think that having a schedule like this will also make my career extend a little bit longer than it would have in Michigan. What else do you want to know. I'm not sure I'm hitting things that you want… You want to know.

INTERVIEWER: it's truly everything is helpful. This is all really good. my own experience is I was born with a disability, and I've collected more along the way, and so I have the

experience of both growing up with one. But then the joint and heart conditions I was I was in. I was 19, 20 years old when that happened in that onset, and so I've had both experiences of being so normalized to one. And you don't know any different. And then reality of like learning how to have a disability. And that's something that is very interesting. And so do you think that, just to kind of ask this again. So, you can answer from this frame of quote of mind. Do you think being born with your disability has made it to where you are more comfortable with the idea and how to how to. I think just like, go about life, because I know that that is a similar thing with a lot of people who later onset of things. That's a lot of an emotional journey.

JENNIFER: Yeah, I have 2 thoughts on that one. yes, I absolutely think that it allows me to forget things because I've spent a whole lifetime figuring out how to make accommodations for myself that I don't. I don't feel like I need to ask for help, but then I should be asking for help, but I don't want to ask for help. You know, with certain things but because I was not accommodated ever. It's just part of who I am to figure out how to do anything that needs to be done to survive. My other thought about that is really well... 2 other thoughts. F. And I think that comes back to the research studies that talk about disabled people who overachieve in order to be seen as not disabled. So, I feel like when I'm in any other sort of social situation, whether it's a professional social situation with other teachers, or maybe a social situation with people who don't know who I am outside of the profession. I yeah, I totally feel I feel people interact with me differently. And this was this real hit home for me in 2019 I broke my only foot. I had a Liz frank injury. I tore the Liz Frank tendon or ligament. It's a ligament. If you Google, worst possible foot injury, it's this injury. because that's the ligament that holds all the bones in the arch of your foot together, and when I injured that I injured it in December of 2019, and my band was supposed to be playing at a conference with Julie Giroux in April, and so they wanted me to do a surgery in January, and then I would have to be completely non weight bearing for 6. I'd have to be out of school for 6 weeks, and I said, I can't be out of school that long right before this conference, like, I never accept conference performances, and this is the one time in the world I've accepted something like this, and I don't want to screw it up for the kids. And so, they said, well, you can put off the surgery until after your performance. But you'll just be on crutches that much longer. So long. Story short, the pandemic happened. My surgery was delayed, and that performance never happened anyway, and I ended up being on crutches for 9 months and when I was on crutches or on a knee scooter and I was in a boot. I looked like I was injured. I did not look like I was disabled. I looked like I

was injured, and people reacted and talked to me so much more than they ever did when I was not on crutches, like just talking to people at the grocery store, or just anywhere. And it was so strange to me I'm like, is this, how it, how it is? Because I feel like I've got somewhat of an extroverted personality. Is this how it, how it is for a typically abled extrovert every day, and that I'm treated differently because I'm seen as disabled, or am I being treated this way because I'm being seen as injured, and that piques people's curiosity, but it was very apparent to me that people were more apt to come, strike up conversations and be kind to me when they saw that I was on crutches, but when they could see that I had a prosthetic I did not get the same treatment. So, my phone is blown up. Let me. I don't know who is texting me so many times, and I don't know how to turn off that chime.

INTERVIEWER: It's really interesting. When I went from, I started using a cane. Because I was similarly shamed out of using one. And then my mobility inspector was like, I've never heard of a 15-year-old wanting to use a cane, and I said, I want to look up from the ground like I've never seen the world, and I have a lot of vision for a blind person, because I'm really big spectrum. I go from nothing to just like legally blind. And so, I started using a cane, and the whole thing of a high schooler choosing to use a cane and living in Southern California. If you can imagine what that looked like. It's not accepting of a place. But then I went from using a cane to a guide dog, and it was like suddenly. Wow! I'm a human now, because I have a dog with me. I feel very. This is me trying to see if I'm understanding what you're saying. I feel I don't feel disabled. There are things that I'm like, even with my energy, I mean with a heart condition. I definitely am a spoon theory person. I have X number of spoons on some days. but in terms of the Vision impairment, I don't ever feel disabled. It's just it's who I am. I learned how to walk blind. I don't know any different, but I definitely feel as though the way society treats me and the expectations, and I very much feel like I am disabled because of maybe people's medical view, or this the social model of disability. I feel like encompasses more of why I feel disabled, and you know what the social model is before I dive in and just explain it.

JENNIFER: No, go ahead and explain it.

INTERVIEWER: The social model. So, there's the medical model and social model of disability. And the medical model focuses primarily on curing impairments. So, getting somebody to the level of society where they need it. They need them to be the social model of disability, essentially says that society creates barriers that create a disability, but the person themselves is not

what creates that disability. The impairment isn't. What is the disabling part? Do you find that just kind of like looking at what you're saying. Do you feel like that? Is more so? What makes the disability for you.

JENNIFER: Sure. Yeah, especially because, like I said, I don't feel disabled in a band directing situation. I don't feel disabled when I'm cycling when I'm skiing things that I'm good at and can function. Normally, I hike a lot, too. And actually, what you said about wanting to look up is the same when I'm hiking, because I have to look down a lot to make sure that I'm placing my foot in the right place. And so, if I want to see the view when I'm hiking. I have to stop and look so, but I can still do all the hikes that I want to do so. I don't feel disabled. I think I would feel disabled if I was hiking with people who wanted to go really fast, you know, because I'm not. I'm not fast. Yeah. So, there are certain scenarios where I'm just kind of hyper aware of my disability, I wear shorts a lot so that people don't have to wonder. I do. A lot of clinicing of bands or honor band directing. And just part of my introduction is, hey, I walk weird. This is why, and that seems to immediately put kids at ease. And then they don't have to wonder and think about it. And it's weird, you know. You think that the last place anybody with a disability would want to be is in a public school. But kids are way more accepting than adults. and once they once they have their curiosities satisfied, then they don't think about it either. So yeah, no, I would agree that there are certain things that that I wish I could do. but I don't feel disabled. And there's certain times in in the band directing world where my disability, I become hyper aware, and, like one of those, is at the State Band championships at Osu. Because to get on that stage you have to go up and down stairs, and I can go up and down stairs just fine. I can go up and down stairs just as fast as anybody else. If there's a handrail but one of the years. They didn't have that handrail up. They pulled it out. So, then I had to go step by step by step, which that makes me feel super awkward, and I had to go up twice, once with the band, and then once because they bring all the directors up to introduce them. And so, every year. Now, when they have 5 a state band championship, I look at the videos. And if I don't see that handrail up, I email and I say, you need to put that handrail up because and again, no other director is going to have to think about that. But I'm sure there's kids that are disabled, too. And what are they going to do?

INTERVIEWER: You've answered a lot of these, and I won't make you answer them again.

when you you've said that you like will introduce yourself and explain cure like cure the

curiosity, do you in other parts of your life do you identify as having a disability.

JENNIFER: No like when I talk to other adults, and I meet them. I know I never bring it up, and when I'm when I'm forging new friendships… Usually, they will ask at some point, but not always. So. Yeah, I only with kids. Do I do that because I feel like it's a barrier that will get in the way of me being able to make music with them if they're thinking about that so, and because I can make some funny jokes, and it gets them laughing right away. So, but with, yeah, with other adults, I don't really talk about it unless they ask. And I kind of wish adults would ask questions more I don't… I will say I don't like it when little kids come up, random little kids come up and say, why do you have a robot leg, you know, like things like that, that actually annoys me. And I think, feel like people think, well, it's okay. You should go ask the lady, but actually that annoys me. So, I don't. And maybe that's just a personality flaw on my part. But that bugs me. But if one of my colleagues or one of my friends asks questions, that's different, and that's something that I welcome.

INTERVIEWER: Does it ever feel like when little kids ask questions that it's an adult filtering their questions through a child.

JENNIFER: Yeah, maybe. Yeah, it could be. Or in a way, feeling like they're doing a service, because, you know, like I, I feel like they think that I don't know. it doesn't feel genuine or appropriate to me. I guess that depends on how they ask the question, too.

INTERVIEWER: the last question I'll ask you, and then I'm sorry for holding some of your time, when you discuss it? Do you prefer to use person first, or identity1st language? Do you? Like person 1st meaning like, if I was to say I'm a person with a vision impairment, or I'm visually impaired. Kind of way.

JENNIFER: Yeah, I feel like I could be wrong about this. But I feel like this is something that non-disabled people care about more than disabled people, so I really don't care. So, I will when I introduce myself. If I'm introducing myself to students. I say, hey, I have one leg. If I'm introducing myself, or if I'm talking about as an adult, I usually say I'm an amputee. but that on my list of things I care about is very low, and I think it's really dumbed that. And I think it's also very American. I don't think that there's that kind of thought about language as much in other countries. So, I think that its non-disabled people being offended about something disabled people give no shits about. Yeah, maybe there are people who care about it, but the ones I think, care about it is likely the ones who are just barely disabled and want to identify as disabled because they get

attention. Those are the kinds of people I feel like probably care about it.

INTERVIEWER: I feel like it's very commonly that whole group and people who haven't come to. I say this super close-minded as a born, disabled person, but people who haven't emotionally come to terms with reality. Yeah. And I recognize that that is a very close-minded statement. But it's very interesting when people tell somebody who is who's only known this life, how they should feel.

JENNIFER: Yeah, that's good. I mean, my lens is the same as yours that I don't know any different, But I will say when I broke my foot and I actually felt more disabled because I like, I'm like, how do I drive my car? How do I, how do I get up these stairs like things I've never had to think about before. I felt more disabled, but society treated me less disabled. So yeah, it was. That was an interesting era of my life.

INTERVIEWER: I love the transcript because I can put Timestamps on my notes awesome, we'll, we'll pick up the next questions because it's kind of like a good stopping point, and if anything comes to mind, don't hesitate to just like start writing. Feel like I want to make sure I say these things. I definitely am a blabber, and I had to keep myself in wraps when I was doing this. And so sweet, does that sound? Okay. Yeah. And it doesn't have to be super extensive, just something that might help and out, like as I'm reading and coding and doing other things, give perspectives that way. Your story is told in the way that you want it to be.

JENNIFER: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: It's entirely like this whole thing is. I put on the interview questions and let me know if you need me to send anything again. But the overall objective is to just have insight into the narratives of people, and it's only 5. So that's a very small window. But right now. 5 is better than 0, which is where we're at. I say that, knowing there might be other things, I have not found anything else that's accessible. My main goal is, how can teacher education programs, public education and the community better support this growing community of people because the community is growing like statistically. Well, we'll see how much it grows in the next couple of years. But over the last few years it's been growing. And so, it's not like, it's a small community anymore, which is really. And I imagine with how long you've been teaching; you've seen a growth.

JENNIFER: Yeah, it's remarkable how few people with visible disabilities I've met in my profession. I'm sure there's plenty with hidden disabilities. You know things that I can't see just

without them telling me. And I've known people with like some autoimmune disorders and things like that, and you would never know just from looking at them. So, I've never met another band director that's an amputee. There's got to be someone, but I have never met them so. Or with a visual impairment or a hearing impairment. Well, there's a lot of old band directors that are pretty deaf. But yeah, I've never... I've never met one in a wheelchair, or who uses a cane or a dog. I've never met one so, but I think that putting people into roles like this shows kids that they can do it.

Interview 2 (3.13.25)

INTERVIEWER: Awesome. Okay? So, when we left off, you had an iconic quote. And I've just, I've been sitting on this one of specific to person first, and identity 1st language of it being a thing able-bodied people care about that. Tell disabled people they need to care about. Would you say I interpreted that like kind of what you meant.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no, that's yeah. I that it's just not something that really enters into my thinking, unless somebody else chooses to use that kind of language so. And I feel like it's there's much more important things for us to be solving other than what words to be using.

INTERVIEWER: That quote has just like sat in my head. I've been living on that one I love that I'm taking that everywhere. The next question in the sequences is kind of guiding into why you went into education, and if you had any support, so the 1st question is, why did you go into education?

JENNIFER: Well, I've always loved music, and I took piano lessons as a very young kid, and then I played the violin in 4th and 5th grade. Then I went to middle school. I wanted to play percussion. My parents said no but in the old days you would turn in these cards with your classes forecasted, and I would. I took an eraser and just erased a class and wrote band. And then I called my mom from the payphone after school, because there are no cell phones back then, and said, you need to pick up some 2 b drumsticks from the music store. So, then I played percussion in middle school and my freshman year of high school. But it wasn't super satisfying in high school. It was a lot of sitting around, so I would sit behind the trumpets and kind of watch what they were doing, and for my 15th birthday I asked if my mom would rent a trumpet for me. So, she rented a trumpet, and I bought a beginning band book and taught myself how to play trumpet, and then by my junior year. I was an all-state musician, and then my senior year. I was 6th in state, and it was just. It was the right fit for me. It was something where I could feel like I could excel. It's something I was passionate about immersed myself in. I would practice constantly, and I practiced a lot with

percussion, too, but I didn't find it as satisfying as trumpet.

And then, but I was also interested in the sciences, and I didn't really see myself. I didn't want to become a performance major, because I didn't really want to perform, but I also didn't think I wanted to be a conductor, because I felt like I'd miss playing the trumpet too much if I was a conductor. So, I became a biology major, and then I think I mentioned at our last meeting. That became a biology major. But I also declared music education as a major because I could get free lessons. And then I ended up dropping the bio-Major, my sophomore year, and just staying with music ed. And while I was at State School, I connected William. It does not have a very good music program. Now it's a little better then. The thing I appreciated about it was just real easy access to the professors. Everything was very personal. There were 2 bands at that point, and then the City Symphony played at State, and students like the top students, were a part of that. So, I was able to play in the City Symphony, I was able to play in the wind ensemble and the symphonic band in the jazz band. I had a brass quintet. And then I also connected with some of the teachers at in school district. And just I must have just called them because I don't. Maybe I emailed. I don't know how prevalent email was back then, but I connected with them. It's in some way I might have even just sent a letter in the mail, and just said, I'm a music education major, if I can ever be of assistance, let me know. And so, like Ike teacher back then was teaching at Other High School, and he contacted me, and I went out and observed him, and did some sectionals. And then there were, I think, I was at north. I don't remember who the director was and did trumpet sectionals there and then. I was at one of the middle schools, too, and did trumpet sectionals there and then Little Elementary School, which is the. It's a private school in City, and it's marketed to be like. At least then it was marketed to be like a talented and gifted school. They hired me to do after school band when I was a junior and senior in college, and so I got all this band experience, even before I student taught, which was perfect, because by the time I graduated State at that time, in order to be a teacher in Oregon. You needed a master's degree.

And so, I ended up going out of State for that, and I did my student teaching. I went to North University for my master's degree, and I also student taught while I was out there. So, I, student taught in the Chicago suburbs, and by the time I did my student teaching I'd already done so much teaching that it was just a really enjoyable experience. I've hosted almost 20 student teachers, probably even more than 20 student teachers over my career, and I would say, most of the student teachers who come in with no teaching experience have kind of some traumatic

experiences at the beginning of their student teaching experience. Just with the reality of this is what it's actually like to stand in front of a bunch of kids who may not understand what you're trying to communicate or appreciate what you're trying to communicate or give your body language that makes you feel good about yourself or whatever, and I never experienced that. And I think it's because I got all these other experiences before I landed in my student teaching positions, and I student taught. I split my time between a high school and a middle school, and it was fantastic. I thought I wanted to do middle school until my advisor at North said something that stuck with me, and she just said. Don't teach middle school just because you're a woman and I didn't think that's why I wanted to teach middle school, but it made me realize that I probably had some internal biases that was steering me towards middle school, because I thought, that's what I was capable of. And that probably has to do with stereotypes of women in this profession. So, it was definitely not a conscious decision. I'm going to do middle school because I'm a woman, but I do think it was a decision of. That's where I thought my capabilities were, and I actually have never taught middle school now. So, I mean I. When I started my career I started as an elementary, like a beginning band teacher for a year, and I did that for one year, and then I moved into a high school position in that district, and while I was the high school director in that district there was a period of years where I team taught an 8th grade class to help with the transition to high school, and then here at current school I have room. It's not an official position, but I have room in my schedule where I can go down and be in the classroom with of my feeder teachers once a week. So, I'm down there in the middle schools twice a week. But I'm not there in any official capacity, so I'm not a director down there. I just I will do whatever. Sometimes I'll leave rehearsal, lead, sectional. Sometimes I just observe, sometimes I'll take notes. Just an extra pair of eyes and ears in the classroom. So yeah, I feel like, I almost kind of fell into this by happenstance. But I was so torn between science and music that I was going to end up in one of those fields. And I at this point in my life, like there's been times where I've experienced challenges and stress throughout my career, where I question whether I want to stay in the career or not or do something else. But I just I literally can't imagine myself doing anything else and being as happy as I am, despite all the stress and feel as purposeful. I don't think I would feel the same amount of purpose had I gone into science as I do in the public schools. So does that answer your question. Were there any supports? Not really. I never really asked for anything, and I don't know if I would have known to ask for anything. So no, I mean throughout the years there's been times I've been pregnant 3 times I have 3

children. So, I remember when I was pregnant the 1st time at the high school in Michigan. It snows. It gets very snowy and icy, and I started parking kind of in an illegal spot to be really close to the school, and I remember the custodian complained about it, and the principal came in to talk to me. And he said, basically, said, Fuck, that custodian, you park wherever you want to park. So, because all he needed was a pregnant lady falling in the parking lot. And then, yeah, so. But I. So maybe I just don't do a good job of advocating for things I need. But unless it's pretty dire, I don't typically ask for supports. And I think people don't typically think, to offer them.

INTERVIEWER: Could you talk a little bit more about what the teacher like your teacher training program looked like what the kind of environment was.

JENNIFER: Are you talking about the academic program or the student teaching experience.

INTERVIEWER: Kind of both. I would say. Yeah, because it's all within the education part of it.

JENNIFER: Okay, so at State school music, ed majors is probably a pretty typical program for what you would find in Oregon. We would take all we do all of our theory, ear training, history requirements, mostly in the 1st 2 years, and then our methods. Classes on learning how to play instruments would happen. After that. I feel like I have a lot of gaps at state school like I never took a percussion class, and it's because the percussion class was over capacity, and so it was [name] who taught at that time he was not a percussionist, and he asked for volunteers to not take that class people who may have had experience with percussion, and I'm like I played percussion in middle school, and so I never took that class. I never took a double read class. I did take a woodwind class and a brass class and a string class, and then I feel like I didn't get enough like research and writing experience as an undergrad. And then, when I went to Northwestern as a grad student that was there was so much more, and I found it so interesting and intriguing. I'm like, why have we not been reading these articles? Why did I not know this entire world existed? But I don't know if that's just because I was transitioning from an undergrad to a grad program, or if I was transition, if it was because I was transitioning from a small Liberal Arts mediocre music program to a really well-known top notch elite music conservatory. I don't know what the difference is. Since that time the State school music. I don't think they offer music Ed anymore. I don't think they offer any music majors they might. I think they offer some minors. I don't think they have a band. I think they have a jazz band and an orchestra. so, it's really. I also feel like I had

gaps in marching band, too, because State school did not have a marching band or a Pep band, and my high school had a marching band. But they it was not it? It was not competitive. We would do like 2 or 3 sets per show, and it was it was not marching band, really and so, and then I didn't get the marching experience at State school and then at North in order to take marching methods. You were a part of the marching band. So, you had to march in the marching band, and then you're taking marching band methods. It did not, and I was like, there's no way I can do. I can't march in the North Marching Band because I would screw everybody up. My feet aren't going to be in time. I'm not going to be like. They would quick step up and down stairs like there's no way I'd be able to do that, and it never occurred to me to go to. It was Rodney Dorsey at that time to go to Rodney and say, hey? I want to take marching band methods, but I can't actually do the marching part. I totally should have done that, because I ended up going through 6 years of college and then landing in a large urban program with eventually, by the time I left a 200-member marching band without ever having marching band experience so. But what I did when I moved from Illinois to Michigan. I sent out emails to all of my new High School colleagues in the area. And I said, hey, I'm going to be taking this job, that at that point it was going to be the elementary job. I'm taking this elementary job in this district, and if you need any help with anything, summer band, just send me an email. And so, somebody hired me to be their front ensemble tech. And so, I got experience that way. And thank goodness, I did, because that's really the 1st time I saw how a real marching band worked. It wasn't even it was a lightly competitive band in Michigan. The competitive bands do boa, or they do our state competitive organization. And then there's a show band circuit. And then there's non-competitive. And this. This group was in the show band circuit, and also did the State competitive circuit. So, I was able to kind of see, well, how is that organized. What's the director's role? What's the staff role? I'd never even seen a marching band that has text and caption heads, and I'd never even looked at drill other than maybe some general methods course somewhere. So, I didn't even know how to read it. And then the next year, I was directing my own marching band. So yeah, that was a pretty big gap. But it was fine and honestly in Oregon that I would say most of the educators who graduate from Oregon schools don't have enough marching experience, because if you go to PSU, or if you go to Western and I'm guessing Southern, you're not going to. Or if you go to any of the small private schools, you're not going to have any marching experience. The only way you're going to get any sort of marching experience is Osu or U of O, so, but yeah, I made that decision a hundred percent to avoid that class, because I didn't think I could march in the marching

band and then at so it north the experience there. So, I was a little bit of an unusual student, because most of the students at North who get a master's have already student taught. And at that time, you could do a 1-year master's program. But I extended mine to 2 years, so I completed my one-year requirements in the 1st year, and then, and it is in trimesters, and then in the second year I did 2 trimesters, of coursework and one trimester of student teaching. So, my master's program, a lot of it was focused on pedagogy and conducting. I got a study with Mallory Thompson, which was amazing playing in the ensembles. I got to play under Steve Peterson, which was also amazing. And then just a whole lot of kind of education, theory, and education philosophy, Bennett Reamer. I don't know if you've ever had to read Bennett Reamer philosophy, but he was a North professor, and so his. In fact, I have his book right here. Philosophy of Music, Education, by Bennett Reamer. Every North grad has their own copy of this and this really kind of guided movement in music education, that music, education is unique and necessary to every child, no matter how competent. They are in performance, and that was kind of the North philosophy, and I've held on to that for forever. Which is kind of funny to end up in school district, where the contest world is really important. But I've discovered that you can be successful at contests, and also still have a philosophy that every child deserves a music education, and if you just do it to make music, you can still be successful.

INTERVIEWER: And then the kind of follow up question is, I guess. Kind of now. But then, also, then, did your community know about your disability?

JENNIFER: Yeah, well, it's hard to hide. yeah, it's interesting. So, I like my K-12 schooling. I had pretty much the same cohort for well, 1st through 12th grade. So, 12 years. So, it wasn't something that I ever had to that had to enter into the conversation, because everybody knew me and it, State school, I honestly don't remember. I just I don't know. I just live my life, and if people ask questions, I answer them. when I went to North. Yes, same thing. I just I don't. It never entered into anything. Student teaching. I don't think anybody I don't remember anybody ever asking about it, but I would, I mean I'd wear shorts, and I'd wear skirts. But then I think I mentioned last time at this point in my career. Now, when I work with a new group, I bring it up at the beginning. Just so. There's no questions. But I never did that back then I would. But I think that just leaves people with lingering questions. And I don't go into great detail. I'm just like, hey, I walk weird. And this is why. But I feel like I have to be more capable than a similar able-bodied director in order to garner the same amount of respect. If that makes sense, I think honestly,

women in this field have to do that anyway. But being a disabled woman means that I have to ensure that my bands play as well or better than others, in order to get the same credibility as some of my able-bodied male peers. So, and I and I don't really talk about that. I just. I'm driven to make that happen. And I and I feel that once people hear my bands play or see me teach or read something that I've written. I can get that credibility, and then disability never insert, enters into the picture again. That means.

INTERVIEWER: Go if you need to go? Because this next question might. The next question I have is, how has your disability impacted your relationship with students. If that will pull you into too much time, feel free to be like we could do that next time.

JENNIFER: That I mean, that's a good question, and I feel like I almost feel like the self-assessment of this perception is not going to be super accurate. Right? Like, you probably need to interview students and colleagues and even then, students and colleagues aren't going to always communicate really what they are thinking. But my, I don't think I think it's only impacted relationships with students in a positive way, being that they have a model that somebody with a disability can be successful in in the professional world. Somebody with a disability can be successful in a very public role without making disability their identity like there's a I think there's a lot of disabled people who are in very public roles, but it's because they're disabled, not because of things that they've achieved, and I don't feel like being disabled is an achievement. But I think that people who aren't disabled see it as an achievement to be disabled and live a typical life. So maybe there's something to that. But I've never known anything different. It gives me opportunity, like in marching band to tell, get kids to get off the field and or get off the sideline and get back onto the field, because I marched 4 years of high school marching band with one leg and never sat on the sideline, and they usually get right up and go back to the field. So, I think that it gives me more leeway to add some humor to situations and encourage kids to push through some physical barriers that they might not otherwise push through. I and I feel like that… It's I can be an example of that old adage that if there's a will there's a way. But if there's no will, then there's an excuse. So, if kids want to do something, they'll find a way to do it. But if they don't really want to do something, then they're going to find an excuse because, they're not going to do it. So, I mean, and I feel like I probably should talk about these things more in my rehearsals. But I don't. And it's just it's because that's my personality. When we're in rehearsal it's music 99% of the time, and I very, very rarely talk about anything from my personal life, but I actually think that it would probably be

more beneficial if I did talk a little bit about my personal life because it humanizes me. And I can build more connections with students. But that's yeah. I think that's just more of my personality than anything else, and I don't think that would be any different had I been able bodied. I don't. I feel like there's probably a perception that people who are disabled would like the last place they'd want to would be in a classroom, you know, because kids can be mean, and kids can.

I don't know. I've never experienced. I didn't experience that as a student, either, like I always had as an elementary student. I always had a group of friends, and it's probably because I was with the same group for 12 years, but I never experienced bullying or harassment, or anything that anything more than any other kid would. And as a teacher it's the same thing I never experienced. When I taught elementary. I would get questions from the little ones sometimes, but that's about it. So, I even teaching middle school, which, of course, can probably be the years where the kids have the least amount of social control and ability to filter. I've never had any issues. So, but yeah, I can imagine that it can be scary for especially a newly disabled person to want to enter into a situation like that. But I think if you're confident in what you do and your abilities to do it. Well, then, everything else kind of drops away, and then you can just invest yourself in the process, and the kids will follow cool.

INTERVIEWER: Sorry I'm doing all this by hand and like writing notes. Awesome. I think that's a really good stopping point, because the next ones I have is more like community focused. So, thank you so much for your time. I just wanted to check one thing. The last like sentiment that you were giving is kind of along the line of like. I'm seeing this as a familiar theme of kids are inherently mean that its, they tend to be the most accepting population that we interact with.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: You say that's kind of true in your experience.

JENNIFER: Yes, because they haven't had time to build up the societal expectations of disabled people, right? And if they have more disabled role models in their life. Then maybe they won't build those societal expectations. But I feel like it's harder to fit in with the adult world than with the with kids with the adult world. There are the biases that enter into everybody's minds, my own included. Have you ever taken one of those implicit bias tests. I'm a thousand percent biased against disabled people, and which is ridiculous. But you know I take this test, and I'm like what I should not. I'm not, but I have the same implicit biases that everybody else has and it's not. I don't

think it's a character flaw. I think it's a societal flaw, and that if we're aware of it, then we can. We can be aware of situations where we might treat somebody differently because of anything.

INTERVIEWER: Awesome. Okay, that's that has been a very like consistent theme between okay, every person that I've talked to is just like they're little kind sponges. Yeah, they really are.

JENNIFER: It's true, and I think, like it. Once you get into the into rehearsing and making music and creating a space for the kids. They're not thinking about it. They're not that. It's not something that's a topic for them. They're just coming to band because they enjoy band, and they don't think their teachers any different, or more or less effective or cool than any other teacher would be.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you so much for your time. I think we're meeting Friday of next week.

JENNIFER: you want this research study to kind of raise questions and awareness. And how can you support people? And I'll say, one thing I've noticed in this world is that we celebrate diversity, and there's been a huge movement in the past 10 years to increase diversity in our composers and in our directors. But it's never disability. In fact. disabled people are often excluded, like in words excluded from these groups that are working to increase diversity. And I've always wondered about that like we want to see more people of color. We want to see more women. We want to see more queer people in roles for that will positively affect that next generation and breaking into the publication world. But never, ever is it disabled people? I don't know if you've found any movement towards that, but I haven't looked for it, but I haven't noticed it either.

INTERVIEWER: I've looked for it. I have not found anything that's like that's not incredibly niche. Yeah, even the thing where I've seen some people do. They've diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. But very rarely do I see. I see DEIA.

JENNIFER: Yeah. yeah, it's that's something that's interesting to me. In fact, I found there is a group I don't remember what it was called. But I was like, oh, maybe I should join this group, and then I read about it. I'm like this is not for me. In fact, I don't, because I'm white, I don't fit into this group, and they would not accept me. And so, but then I think about it, and then I think. Well, if anybody's going to make changes in that way, it's got to be a disabled person, but I don't want it to be me. And then I just kind of go about my life again. So maybe that person is you. But I feel like, yeah, because otherwise we just get unnoticed. And not that I think that we need more

attention. But I think that it's important. It's important to recognize the fact that there are more underserved populations that are in play, and I also think that poverty is also another underserved population in our profession, because it's really a profession for wealthy people, because how many, how many, how many current school students? Well, current school is a bad example, because there's so much district support. But how many students from other low-income schools that don't get the school district support that we do here. How many of them can take private lessons? How many of them can own an instrument? How many of them can afford to go to college for a degree in something like music. So, I think that disabled people and impoverished people are kind of too neglected groups in the Dei movement, in music, sound.

INTERVIEWER: Also, a large connection between those 2 groups, especially when you have, like a child or an adult who has medical needs, and with the healthcare system we have that frequently comes out of pockets, and I know of a lot of situations where children who have high medical needs are. That family is then forced into poverty because of a need of somewhere else. Again, a lack of support. So those 2 groups of people frequently are intertwined, and then I receive SSI benefits. And now, with the Ge. I've just on the insurance, and I'm not getting the income, but they're so strict of regulations like you can't have more than $2,000 in your bank account. You can't get married without. Then your partner's wages being taken into yours, and it's a heavily. They're frequently put together. Yeah, just situationally.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no. And I, it's only gonna get worse right now, too. And with people on Medicaid as well. So. It's kind of a scary time, and we're going to see, I think, further tunneling of who has access to music.

INTERVIEWER: would you say that an increased awareness of also this category of people in this, this marginalized group would maybe help combat some potential tunneling of us out.

JENNIFER: I think so. But then there's the flip side of that, and I don't remember if I talked about this last week, I think I might have of when you get hired as a kind of in a public facing role, like if I'm hired as an honor band director or as a clinician. I sometimes I do wonder am I being hired for my skills and what I can bring to the table? Or am I being hired because I can be a check mark on you know. Like, am I being hired as a virtue, signaling

INTERVIEWER: affirmative action?

JENNIFER: Yes, right? And I mean we're we could get into the meat of the political

climate right now. But there's a difference between Dei, and virtue signaling. I don't know how us I mean. You know what I'm talking about. So. But again, that comes back to then you just have to be really good at what you do, so that there is no question on why you get a position or a role or an offer over somebody else.

INTERVIEWER: And so on like going into, like the need to be overqualified to help combat any even like implicit or explicit feeling of you're just being hired for a title.

JENNIFER: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

JENNIFER: Yeah. Yeah. And I'm not sure if other people feel that I've had conversations like this with some of my friends who are racial minorities and in positions where they get hired for different things. And I know that it's felt by those people, too. But I don't know how wide widespread of a perception that the few people are just I've had conversations with. So yeah, so I think that I think that it's important to be included in in the movement. But at the same time. during the transition years, while more disabled people are being recognized as being important in the field. there's that question. But I think we're we've moved. I feel like we've moved more into a space where women who are hired are hired more for their abilities than for being a woman like I feel like that's way. Less of a question now than it was even 5 years ago.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think that is.

JENNIFER: I think it's because more women got hired and people realized that they actually could do things. That's exactly. That's exactly why the Dei movement is important because it gets you through that hump.

INTERVIEWER: Like kind of like. The women as a whole, have no longer feel the need to like, over qualify as, and we've already have done this have like proven that we are worth. Yeah. And I.

JENNIFER: Think it depends on your community. I think it depends on so many things like in Michigan. I definitely felt like we're like, that wasn't even a question like women. Women were hired to adjudicate and to clinic, and to do whatever we were officers on boards. I was only the second female president in 85 years of my district and [redacted]. Away. So, it's still very new, but I never ever felt stigmatized for being a woman. I feel that more in Oregon. But now that more of kind of the Old Guard male adjudicators have heard my groups, I definitely don't feel it as much, but my 1st year I certainly did my second year, maybe a little the second year a little less.

But yeah. And now I feel like people know me, and it's not a question, but I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's really interesting. I'm gonna go back and read this all. And it's a very interesting like direction to take. Because I think if we talk about intersectionality between communities. And it's just that is just so many more levels into what we've talked about, right? Yeah, because every community is going to have their own.

JENNIFER: Expectation and biases, and their own culture and their own clique, and Oregon, Oregon, I think, is clicky, but I don't think it's necessarily inherently misogynistic. I just think that there's because there's actually a lot of high school female directors. But I do think that we're like 30 years behind the rest of the country, so.

Interview 3 (4.18.25)

INTERVIEWER: Where we are now is at the job process, which I know you've been at your school for a long time. So, this is going back to this is your second. This is your second position. Right? You did it elementary. And then. Now you're here.

JENNIFER: Kind of well, so I did. This is my second district. But my 3rd position. So, in my 1st district I worked elementary for a year, and then I worked high school for 21 years, and now I've been here for 4 years.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, okay, yes, I'm getting those numbers backed up or switched around. What? Like in in context of disability and everything. And just kind of like overall you. What was the job? Search process like. And the interview process.

JENNIFER: I'm trying to think back. Well, I can tell you with current school, because that was recent or relatively recent. The school district asks you to write a statement. I can't remember what the statement was. It was supposed to be kind of about teaching philosophy, and it must have had some sort of Dei part of the question, because I remember my essay. It wasn't even just a statement. It's supposed to be a full-page essay I talked about how you know my lens is not the same as many of my students. I approach this as my perspective is as a teacher who grew up in a wealthy white area, who is straight? Who is Cisgender? Who went to private colleges? And then I went to teach in Metro Detroit, which is much more diverse, and I don't. I came to realize that I don't have the same perspective as my students of color. My trans. Students, my LGBTQ2+ students, and even my cognitively impaired students. And then I wove in. But I do have perspective as somebody being a woman in a male dominated profession, and as somebody who has a physical disability because I'm an above the knee amputee. So, it was

just like one half of a sentence in that essay. But when I talked to my principal later, he said that that got his attention, and it made him curious about my story and about how I've built success despite disability, and he made some assumptions about my personality based on the fact that I have been a successful band director in an intense profession with a disability. So, for him it was a positive, and then, of course, that was before he'd ever even interviewed me. He read that statement, so I went through the zoom interview process, and of course that never came up. I went through the in-person conducting interview, where I had to conduct the band, and I did my typical introduction of Hey, I walk weird. This is why I made a few jokes, and then we got to work, and then I had a second interview. Nothing came up, but then the principal zoomed with me a couple of days later, just to get to know me better. We talked for like an hour, and he told me that he was going to put my name forth as the recommendation for hire, and then kind of as an aside, like when we're ready to close out. He was like, hey, can you tell me about your leg and what happened? And I actually kind of appreciated that because he was curious and he wanted to know, and he felt comfortable enough asking me so, and that that's pretty rare. I don't get a lot of questions from adults. So, but that just told me that he was very open, and that he was somebody who would communicate that way with my 1st job within Michigan. I don't remember if it ever came up in the interview process. I certainly didn't put it in my cover letter or my resume. I know that. and I don't. I did wear a skirt to the interview, but it was longer so. I don't know, and like a lot of times when you're in an interview situation, they see you walk, maybe, like 5 or 6 steps from the door to the table, and there was no conducting portion of that one, so I can't remember if I said anything or not, I feel like I probably did. I usually do, because if somebody's gonna be disappointed that they're hiring somebody that's disabled, I'd rather not be hired by that that administrative team. So, I probably said something, but I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: And then you answered both of those at you're at your place of work, and this can look like in any kind of way. But do you receive like accommodations? I know that I had one participant that was in a 2-story building, and they had, if they like, had to cover a class or do like a skill study class. The kids would come to them as opposed to them, trying to get to the kids, and so like that was like one example of an accommodation. Do you receive anything like that? Or do you self-accommodate in any kind of way.

JENNIFER: No, I have a disability parking pass, so I use that. I sometimes park illegally, really close to my door. If I'm carrying a bunch of stuff, and I've never gotten it where I

mean, there's a lot of teachers who do that, though, so nobody's ever said anything, but I've never requested accommodations. I get the feeling that if I needed accommodations and I requested something specific that they would be granted like, I don't feel like anybody here would resist that as long as they were reasonable accommodations. But I also don't feel like the admin team is like trying to find ways to make my life easier. But I don't. I don't know if that's necessarily something that they could legally do. Anyway, I don't know. I don't know, because there's probably all sorts of legal things about asking people about medical conditions, or whatever. So, and I don't think I really project a vibe that I need or want accommodations.

INTERVIEWER: and then do you have any like support systems that you currently are utilizing whether that be like, I know. Like my high school, we had an equipment crew that just maintained equipment. And then that was less of the band director like had to do himself. It could also be like your booster Club is one that's really supportive or just anything that's helping you.

JENNIFER: Yeah, I mean, I certainly. I've especially as I get older. I have been firmer about trying to have students move equipment so that I'm not doing it just because it's hard on my whole body. And like last night we had a bandorama in the gym, so we had to set up the gym for 400 musicians who were playing and all, and probably like 60 pieces of percussion. And I did move a fair amount, and I walked. I actually had my watch tracking. I walked almost 2 miles, just setting everything up. But had, I think, had I said, I'm going to sit in my office and you guys get this done between the kids and my assistant band director, it would have gotten done. But I also know, like she's experiencing some foot pain right now, so I probably did a little more than I would have, because I was trying to save her from being on her feet too much, which is kind of funny, but you know it's some give and take there. So, I do have an assistant band director who's great. The kids are really good. If I ask them to do things, I'm very short. So, I'm constantly asking them to do things that require tall people. And then at games, we have parents who move equipment. So yeah, and I think I really think that I need to be even better about asking for help like that, because once you start getting back pain or issues like that, it's hard to come back from that. And I need to be aware of that, because I don't want my career to be limited, because I'm being too independent and not wanting to ask for help.

INTERVIEWER: And then we're actually like, really close to the end of the questions, which is.

it's always nice to come back and then see how fast we've gotten through some of these. The next one is, do you feel like your teaching style has been impacted by your disability. And that question, I think, can be interpreted in so many different ways. But however, it speaks to you.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no, I. There are certain things that that I do think it has impacted it getting on and off the podium to teach. Like I feel like I would probably teach from the podium less without it. It depends on which class it is like, if it's a class that has a lot of kids, and there's backpacks all over the ground. I'm not teaching from the arcs as much as I am from a smaller class or a class with less stuff to step over and around. I tend to stay more at the front, but I do like to get into the arcs and stand next to kids and hear individuals without like going down the line. And that allows me to do that. So, there's been years where I'm like, I'm going to be really organized. And I'm just going to make a rule that you have to leave your backpacks in a certain place. And I'm just not that teacher. So, our arcs are usually pretty sloppy, and we have to like tear them down and set them up constantly, because our room is used for the jazz bands, the percussion ensembles the symphony, and then all the band classes, so I can't just like leave it set now. At my former district, I actually put tape on the floor in the center of the band, and I had an aisle where no chairs and stands were supposed to go, so I could walk up and down the aisle, but I also had enormous classes there, and that was a classroom management thing. So, if it was just me and 80 kids. It was really important for me to be able to get to the back of the classroom very quickly, so I haven't done that here because my classes, my biggest classes. Well, with the symphony there's like 75. But there's 2 of us in the room. so yeah, so. But that's something I've thought about here is that maybe I need to create an aisle, and then it enables me to get to the to the arc better. I think that also, I mean, from a more cognitive standpoint, I probably teach a little differently, like I'm I think it's honestly made me less sympathetic to kids who want to step off the marching field. And so, I have to like, really stop and think. Are they really injured? And I have to kind of we don't have. We have a trainer here at current school, but the trainers almost never on duty during marching rehearsal. So that's not really helpful. And if I do send a kid to the trainer. The trainer always just is like this, go see a doctor, and don't march for 2 weeks, and that's not helpful to me so in my last gig, I would have a nurse on duty with me during camp weeks, which were we'd March 9 to 9, and so anytime. There's a kid who said they're injured. They'd go see the nurse and the nurse would determine if they could go back to the field or not. I

don't have that here, and so there's always a little question. Am I sending a kid back to the field who really shouldn't be going back to the field. But I think the majority of the kids who come off the field at any high school, or at least the ones that I have worked with are just tired, and so they need to learn the difference between physical and emotional exhaustion and being injured so and so I give them enough breaks to keep them safe. And then they need to develop the musculature and endurance to get through practices. So, I think, yeah, so I think I teach, and I'll talk to the kids, too, about hey? You know I do this with one leg. I'm standing the whole time you are. I marched in high school. You. It's raining. I don't use an umbrella. I'm out in the elements, too. So, and I'm much older and not as strong as you guys are. So, we can do this. So, but you know, kids come in the kid, there's a lot of kids who come into marching man who are not athletes, and so they haven't been spending their summer running or going to the gym. They've been there spending their summer very sedentary, and then they have to jump into a very physical activity. So, I think that is a difference. And then I think that in the classroom I'm probably the opposite. I'm more sensitive and empathetic to kids who might have differences that make things more difficult for them. But I won't coddle them. I'll never I never. I feel like we almost over accommodate some kids, and then they don't learn the skills that they need to be independently successful after high school. And I just wonder, like what happens when they go to college. And then what happens when they're in their place of employment, like you're just not going to get all this extra time to meet deadlines and assistance reading documents and things like that, and I guess it depends on what career they go into. But I really try to push kids to meet their capabilities that that I can see in them. And so many accommodations just can't be done in the band classroom, anyway, like I can't give pressure preferential seating to a percussionist. I'm not going to stick somebody on snare drum at the front of the band. There are accommodations I can certainly make. I've enlarged music for kids who are visually impaired. Deadlines aren't really much of a thing in my band class. So that's not something that that I come across a lot. But the kids who I've got add kids who just need to fidget a lot. And so, I'm a little more tolerant of kids who are like playing with things or whatever. So yeah, I feel like, I'm sensitive to noticing things that are difficult for kids and finding ways for them to be successful. I have a student. I don't know if I've talked about her who plays clarinet, and she has some physical, congenital deformities with her fingers, and they're very short, and they're kind of crooked. And so, she was having trouble playing certain pinky notes that required her to cover the hole in the back of the

clarinet at the same time, and so I sent the clarinet to a person in Texas who is he's an instrument repair Guy, but her kind of specializes in weird problems. And I asked him to create like a saxophone type hole covering on the back. So, he did that, and then he enlarged the register key to make it easier for to get through that, too. And then it came back, and she's able to reach all those pinky keys a whole lot better like they in middle school. They had tried extending the pinky keys with, like you can get those little rubber pencil grips, but it just it wasn't good enough for her. It didn't work, and this seemed to work a lot better. So now we have a buffet. R. 13 clarinet that's modified with like a saxophone hole covering. But when she graduates, I can just take that off and put the ring back on. It'll be fine.

INTERVIEWER: that's actually that's really cool. If you by chance like, can get a picture of that. That would be a fantastic artifact.

JENNIFER: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: Cause. I that's those are the things that I mean. A lot of teachers have questions about specifically adaptive instruments, and it's not like it can't be done, or, you know, give a child an instrument that works best for them. And so that's really cool, that you went out and sought that.

JENNIFER: Yeah, well, and I feel like I see I'm not on the band director, Facebook group anymore. I mean, I am. But I have it hidden because it's just obnoxious. But when I was on it there were always a lot of questions of how to make. How? How can I make this kid successful. What instrument should I put them on so they can be successful? And I always thought, why are you choosing their instrument based on their disability. What do they want to play? And because if they want to play it there you get. There's a guy who plays a French horn with his toes.

If they want to play the instrument, they will find a way to play the instrument. And there's also a lot of temporary injuries that band directors have to figure out. When I was in high school I injured my wrist, and I had to have surgery on it, and it was right before the Allstate auditions, and I just it was my left hand, and I just took my arm, and I rested my trumpet on my elbow and fingered with my right hand and I was able to play the audition just fine. So yeah, there, there's certain things that you can even do without modifying the instrument just being creative and in other ways. So, and the kid, especially if it's a disabled kid, they'll figure it out so.

INTERVIEWER: The next, like 4 questions.

We can. We could do next time, because I think that they require a little bit more of thought. And I can email these to you, too. It's the last 4 that are on the interview document. I can also email that again to you if you need. because I know that everything starts to get buried. But the 1st one is like, what is your relationship with disability? And after going through and talking about disability. I feel like it's kind of for a lot of people. It was recontextualizing it. Now, after all of these questions had been asked and kind of going through. And for a lot of the people within the study, they're recently disabled or recently diagnosed. So that relationship is now starting as opposed to being like us, where it's been lifelong. And then there's 3 advice questions. The 1st one is, what would you? What advice would you have for somebody with a disability? Who's thinking about pursuing a career in music education? And this is like I was 22 when I decided to do music ed. I was a performance, and I was like, that's not at all what I want to do. I want to teach so bad, and then also, for, like your high school students that are wanting to go into music, Ed. The next one is for pre-service teachers, so majors that are already in it. and then the last one is for other teachers with a disability, and that could be framed in kind of like your teacher that just got in a car accident that is now permanently disabled, or somebody with like Adhd that was just diagnosed and is now entering this realm of you know, I'm now understanding what's happening, and it's a new word for me. And so, I feel like that's 4 solid questions to ask next time. That will kind of just tie everything back in together, and a lot of this will mostly go into like the discussion portion of the thesis. Then if it's okay, can I spend like 5 min just asking you just demographic questions? So that way, I could put that in the method part portion. Okay? The 1st one you've taught in both States. Now, do you want to take claim to like the state that you're in now? Or do you want me to say both States. Just kind of what state would you like attached to you?

JENNIFER: I think. Well, I guess it depends on what is helpful to you. It could really go either way. I've spent more of my career in Michigan. But I'm going to end my career in Oregon. I'll be here until I retire. I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER: I could just put both, if you'd like, you know, taught these many years in Michigan. Sorry if how many years did you teach collectively in Michigan.

JENNIFER: 20.

INTERVIEWER: And then the next one is just gender if you prefer to use like she, her pronouns.

JENNIFER: Yup!

INTERVIEWER: And then years, teaching total.

JENNIFER: This is my 26th year

INTERVIEWER: And then subject is, have you just taught band? Now you've also taught the choir right.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no, I've not taught choir, but I've taught. I taught orchestra for a while, and I co-teach the symphony now, but I don't know if I really count as an orchestra director with that. But yeah, I taught string orchestra for about 10 years along with band in Michigan. I've taught music, theory, music, history. I teach a percussion class here. I did the jazz bands in Michigan. I don't do them here. The assistant does that. Yeah. Everything is band related that I've taught except for the orchestra class.

INTERVIEWER: The next question is more like locational. So, if you are in a more urban rural suburban.

JENNIFER: Yeah, we're I. We're urban. We're small city, I would call it. In both of my schools. I would consider small city. So, it's not. It's definitely not the suburbs, but it's not like I don't. It's City's just not a big city, so like, is it a city.

INTERVIEWER: And Oregon standards. It's a city.

JENNIFER: The city.

INTERVIEWER: What's funny is, my hometown is about the same size, and we call it a town for Oregon. It's a city, and then the next one is, what do you want to label your disability as, and that you could just say physical disability. However, you would like it to be referred to.

JENNIFER: Yeah, you can either label it as a physical disability, or, if you want it to be more specific above knee amputee.

INTERVIEWER: The next one is disability onset, which is birth correct.

JENNIFER: Yes.

Interview 4 (4.25.25)

INTERVIEWER: okay, well, we're talking about disability. The I had just liked the last 4 questions of that interview sheet left. But before we get into that I forgot to ask last time. Do you have a pseudonym that you would like to use.

JENNIFER: A what? Oh, a pseudonym? You can pick something for me, I'm sure anybody who reads your paper and is in the area will know that it's me, but it's hard to be incognito.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, I will pick one. Do you want something like feminine? gender neutral? A letter.

JENNIFER: It doesn't matter to me.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

JENNIFER: Yeah, I so K, who's 1 of the music education professors at University of M did a case study on me as a female band director who had babies. I had young babies and children at the time, and even then, like disability, didn't enter anywhere into that conversation. I don't think maybe it did. I don't remember it, but I'm like people are still going to know who I am, because how many high schools band directors have. I don't remember how many kids at that time, but I ended up having 3 children pretty close in in age. So, and I think I was the only one in the entire state like that. So, I'm like you can use a pseudonym. But people will know.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, oh, okay. The question is, is like, what is your relationship with your disability? And you can answer it. However, you would like to. That. One, I think, is especially emotional for the people that are recently diagnosed. But I'm very interested to see kind of what that looks like for somebody that in my job interview I disclosed that I have a disability. I also showed them ocean because I was like we had just answered a question about classroom management, and then I told them that I have a vision impairment when they asked me about my potential bias, and I was like, well, I learned how to walk without vision. I learned how to eat without vision, and it's just it's the day to day, and you are me only like participant that is known since birth, and so I'm very interested to hear your perspective on that.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no I think for me, my relationship with my disability is more... It's not emotional, really, ever. I don't know if it ever even was just, I mean, and that's I don't know what it's like for you. But growing up like this, I don't remember anything different, so I don't find it to be emotional or to take up a whole lot of brain space for me. It's mostly the inconveniences that take up brain space, you know. Even just like getting ready in the morning takes longer to get ready. I have. I have care for my prosthetic takes me longer to get dressed, get everything situated to put on my shoes takes longer, and I've noticed, too, as I get older, so I'm less flexible now than I was even 10 years ago. So, when I tie my left shoe, which is my regular

leg. I can just put my foot up on my leg and tie it, but I can't. With my prosthetic. I actually lean over and tie it on the ground, and I'm like I don't know how many more years I'm going to be able to reach this. So, I need to like add flexibility to my routine now. And so even just health routines and fitness, I have to very intentionally add things that are going to keep me independent as long as possible, and I mean everybody really should be doing that. But for me. I feel like it's even more important that I do that that I have. I have the strength in the right places to have good balance, so that I don't experience falls, and so I have flexibility. So, I can do things like tie my shoes. And just with my gait. I've got so many back issues that I have to take care of that, too. Keep my core strong and keep my back flexible. So yeah, I just I sometimes I guess I'm I wonder what it would be like to not have to think about all these things and not have to have the inconveniences associated with a disability, but I can't say I ever like feel sorry for myself, or you know, I think as a kid, I kind of wished it was different. And now it's not. That's not really my mindset. If anything, I appreciate living a life that's unique because people remember me. And it gives me a perspective that very few people have.

Sorry I'm eating my lunches as we do.

INTERVIEWER: that's okay.

JENNIFER: So, I've got jalapenos. So, it's like making me snuffy. So, it gives me a perspective that not everybody has, which I think adds value to any group. So, and I think anybody who grows up in any sort of minority has probably a similar story. So, but I also feel like as somebody with a disability. It's like, where is our mind? What is our minority group? And what's our identity? Because we weren't oppressed in the same way that the black population was, for sure. But we were systemically oppressed because accommodations weren't even a thing until very recently. So, it's hard to find your identity as somebody who's disabled and relate it to the larger world when there's other minorities who have experienced similar things, but not quite the same that I feel like we don't really have the same voice of I guess asking for rights if that makes sense, because we never had rights taken away so much. It was more that we had rights never offered to us. I don't know if that's help any of that's helpful to you, but oh.

INTERVIEWER: My, my whole 1st chapter is just history, and I like had to keep it to just 19 hundreds, because prior to that we were all anybody with like, and it went from, you know, cognitive, developmental, sensory, physical. Anything that was like outside of the norm were put into jailhouses prior to the 19 hundreds, and then that continued on until cities like

Portland. I think it was 1881 made it illegal for people of certain persons that looked outside of the norm were put into jails. And so, it's very.

JENNIFER: I never knew that.

INTERVIEWER: The going through that history is just like gut wrenching, because, like our Civil rights law was 1990, we were included in the 64 act and so and then there was a couple like court cases that there's like 3 big one that we're like, hey? Why aren't we included in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and so, like we, we eventually progressed. But, like our Civil Rights Act, I think there was still there was still many establishments that like would were legally allowed to deny access to people with disabilities up until 1990, like the service dog laws, I mean States had them, but federally they were not protected, and that's the whole thing of like different States had different laws, and so, like, I would be allowed to have a service dog in like one state, but not another. And so, it's really interesting, because it is absolutely like historically, rights were taken away for a lot of other groups like, you know, you'd come in from one place and you'd have them, and you'd go into another, and they would be like revoked halfway through that timeline. But for many of like people with disabilities depending on the culture you're looking at, because there are certain cultures that, like kind of praise us in a way that's like we take care of our people. And then there's like the Western viewpoint of disability that was, hide it away, put it for many people put it, put them into jails. Yeah, like the beginning of this chapter opens with just like what happened prior to the 19 hundreds, and it was like well criminals. People with disabilities, and poor people were all kept into the same city house. And so, the history is just like.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Cried so much writing that chapter just because of just like it's gross to look at. But then we were not. We were sterilized we were, you know, people would mutilate our autonomy and our body, but we were not threatened with our lives in the same way that other people were.

JENNIFER: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And so, it's really interesting looking at the timeline of things of like nobody's gonna go and hang a disabled person, right? But they were doing that with many other people. And so, it's so interesting to just like, look at that. Sorry, this is me on my soapbox.

JENNIFER: Because, yeah, this is not part of the history that's included in any history books.

I mean, if I don't know about it as a disabled person. How many people do?

INTERVIEWER: Exactly. I mean, we learn about the Jim Crow laws, and you know the 3 fifths of a person and all that, just like roasts part of our history, and we learned about lynching, and we learned about all this. But then I don't think we learned. I certainly did not know much of this until doing my research just like what that looked like. It's interesting in, like the disgusting kind of way. Yeah, no. And it's interesting, too, to think about, like the service dog access and.

JENNIFER: Things, it being different in different states. And I think I wonder if some of that is just well, I wonder if some of it is people who take advantage of that who don't really need service. Dogs and people would, will take advantage of something like that, so they can take their dog places, and they would be the kind of person who would never pretend that they were black to get some of the get some of the access that they could have in that way. You know, I mean, we've had. We've had cultural appropriation even in the music industry. Where white composer uses used a Asian female name to bring some traffic to its music, but that seems to be more rare than people, maybe using a disability placard that don't, that don't need it, or pretend service dog, or in the old days I used to be able to go to Disneyland and get to the front of all the lines just by going to their customer relations thing and showing him my leg, and then getting like a little bracelet or something. And now you have to like, get into this app, and you have to have a doctor's note, and it's all it's crazy.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and they just changed their whole policies. It went from it went from that to then you would go, and you'd get like your booklet, and they tell you what time to come back.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: They have since changed that, and it's now only for developmental disabilities. Unless you go and ask each ride attendant if they're willing to let you do that.

JENNIFER: Are you kidding.

INTERVIEWER: So that whole process changed a couple a couple months ago.

But universal studios are still incredibly accessible. I'll say universal has been by far the best.

Disney just went, I think, because people are abusing it in a way that's like.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Just not reasonable. And then so they took it away from everybody.

JENNIFER: Right instead of finding a way to close loopholes. Yeah, because when I would, when I was a teenager, I would go, and I'd get the bracelet, and I could go up like the exit and just get on. And I would see, you know another teenager using a rental wheelchair and a little ace bandage on their knee, and then you'd see them kind of walking around pretty normally. So, it was. The writing was on the wall that that would happen. But yeah, if you have a documented disability of any kind, it seems like it should be allowed. That's interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I have so many feelings speaking of feelings, what advice would you give someone with a disability who's thinking of pursuing a career in music, education. And this like just giving more context to why, there's 3 different questions. This one is for your adults that are choosing a different field, or your students.

JENNIFER: Yeah, no, I feel like, if you're gonna go into this field as a disability or as somebody with a disability that you need to be able to advocate for yourself. I think that it's important that you have an accurate perspective on what you need to be successful. And having an independent mindset, I think, helps for sure. You're just not gonna get the same kind of accommodations in the workforce that you would in in the schools like as a student. But you are federally protected well, at least, for now federally protected to have all reasonable accommodations and being able to advocate for that. And then also, if there's not great vibes in an interview, I would stay away from any job where I feel like there's skepticism in my ability to do my responsibilities. If that makes sense like, I don't think I'd want to work for a principal that doesn't think that I'm able to do what needs to be done. like when you get hired in City, you're hired by a big panel, and the final say is going to be the principal and also the music coordinator. So, if either one of them expressed any sort of skepticism, I don't think that I would want to be here. That was not the case. But yeah, I think it's hard, because, like everybody's gonna have different needs. And somebody who's not in your position isn't going to know what you what you need in order to be successful. And there's gonna be people who are not going to think, to offer anything. And then there's going to be people who are going to be overly helpful. So being able to like, define the boundaries is important. I think that kids in the in the classroom are like the least of the worry. So, it's gonna be a matter like things that you were saying like, Can I can? Can

I do this job safely? can I? What do I need in order to be able to do this job safely. Is there any aspect of my job like when I'm on the marching field, I liberally use my staff to demonstrate things. I can't demonstrate marching techniques that would in any way that would be useful to the students. I know exactly what they should look like, but I can't say, you know, here's what your forward step one needs to look like. So having people around you that can kind of fill in the gaps is important, too. But I also wonder like, what if I said I have to have a staff in order to teach a marching band like? Is that a reasonable accommodation? I have a staff here in my former job I had a very small staff. so, but I know that there's jobs where it's just you and the band, especially in like rural areas. You just don't have that kind of assistance. So, what kind of accommodations are gonna be required and accepted when you request them. So, I think being resilient, too, is going to be an important character, and I think especially people who've lived with disability for a long time. Resilience just becomes part of your character, because you're having to figure out how to live in a world that doesn't really work for you all the way. So, but if you want. If you want to do it, you'll find a way. I think people with newer disabilities. It probably takes time to build up that resilience, I think, because resilience comes from hardship, and if you haven't experienced hardship, then how can you build resilience. So that those were all very random answers. But those are the things that come to mind.

INTERVIEWER: The next one is for the pre-service teachers, advice for current music, education, majors that have already chosen a school. Because I love, essentially, you said, build a village is what a lot of that kind of summarizes into and picking a community that will believe in you and give you the support you need. The pre-service one is my like. How I view this is the ones that I've already chosen, a college that are now in the program.

JENNIFER: So, okay, so what? What's the question about the pre-service teachers like, what advice for them? yeah, I think when I was when I was in. I don't know. I just never doubted that I could do what do what I needed to do. I'm not sure if I'm the best person to give advice, because I feel like I just enrolled in college, decided I wanted to be a music, Ed Major, and I never doubted for a minute that I could do it. The doubts all came when I started teaching, and it had nothing to do with my disability. It had everything to do with my abilities as a teacher. So yeah, I think that if you have a vision, a clear vision of what you want to do and who you want to be. That's going to be the most important thing. And then it's just building a ladder to get there. So, and yeah, and surrounding yourself with people who are positive and supportive, and I think

that having an identity outside your disability is important. I know that there are people who very closely identify with their disability and want that to be part of their public persona, and I don't necessarily think that's wrong, but I think it becomes more difficult to build a village that way because then it's I don't know. I think you make more connections when you have a multifaceted identity and that's just one little piece of it.

INTERVIEWER: For a lot of people with like Adhd and autism. It's like they've had this forever, but are just getting the validation, many of them into adulthood, or the person that did just become disabled. What advice would you have for them?

JENNIFER: Yeah. I think somebody who the greatest thing about living today is that it's so easy to find other people that that share experiences with you. I think it was much harder when I before the age of the Internet. But even then, like I skied on a disabled ski team. But there were no kids. I was the only kid on it, but finding other people that have experienced what you experience will help validate what you're going through and also encourage you that you can get through it. And even if it's online forums, but I also think that it's important not to wallow in all the things that you're you feel like you might be missing out on so trying to find trying to find things that you can be successful at, despite your disabilities. I think it's different, too, because my disability doesn't involve a lot of pain. There's certainly some especially related to my back, but I think that for people whose disability involves a lot of chronic pain, that's just a whole, completely different conversation, because it's hard for that not to be part of your identity, because it's got to be consuming all the time. So, but yeah, trying to try to find the find. The other people who have lived your life, and you can share ideas with and collaborate with is probably the most important thing. And just to know, I mean, no matter what your perception of people with disabilities, you're going to be surprised about how much you can continue to do and contribute to society.

INTERVIEWER: That's okay. that was actually all the questions I had. Is there anything that you want to share, or that you want like added, outside of what you've been writing in your journal.

JENNIFER: Hang! I've got those pictures of that clarinet. That you remember we talked about last time.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

JENNIFER: And I can just text them to you might be the easiest thing. yeah. So, the pictures. It's just 2 pictures of the back of the upper joint of the clarinet. And you can zoom in on the key that's underneath the register key, and that's so. That key was built to cover the F hole. And then the registered key was made larger so that she could access that easier, too. So that's that. Yeah, I mean, I don't know. Well, I'm glad that you're going. I'm glad that you're doing this because I don't know if anybody has before right. And were you able to find anything? Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Pre-service teachers. Nothing that is in service, and especially nothing. That's music related, and I'm weary to say that. But I I've looked really hard. I've had other people look really hard. I have not found. I've looked ProQuest to see if there's been another thesis or dissertation on it.

JENNIFER: Wow. So no, I think it's important. And I think it's important that we that this job is seen as something that can be done by somebody with a disability, because it absolutely can. I think certain disabilities are going to have different challenges than others, for sure mine are all physical. But somebody with add is going to have to figure out systems, to stay organized. Somebody with other mental health issues is going to have to figure out how to stay balanced throughout the year. I mean, we all have. I think this job can actually start mental health issues if you don't have them. But yeah, just there, there's just gonna be different challenges for every disability going into this profession. But it's not impossible

INTERVIEWER: I think a lot of what the narrative has said in terms of like what pre-service teachers have said. Oh, their names are slipping my mind. But there's Parker and Draves are 2 researchers. I can't remember somewhere in the Midwest that are doing a lot of research on pre-service teachers, and they've also alluded to needing in-service teachers voices in this, which is where I that's a lot of where I got this like. I'm seeing this. But then these other people are saying that, and I feel, yes, this is what we need. But a lot of it is just. We need representation. And we need to like. Just tell people that you can, especially after years of being told you can't, or laws saying and kind of just society, essentially pushing, that you can't. But there's people that do. I mean, you have for the last. What is this year? 26, or 27.

JENNIFER: It's like. Yeah, even if nobody tells you, you can't do it. I think that we're systemically conditioned to believe that you know. Believe that there's barriers, and so like I was lucky enough to grow up in a family who I was the youngest of 4 kids, and my parents didn't have time to make any accommodations for me other than taking me my doctor's appointments,

or whatever. And so, they were going to say, no, you can do that just like your brother and sisters can. So, I mean, and that might not be the right the right way for everybody. But it certainly made me pretty independent, especially as a Gen. Xer, too. I mean, right, there is no helicopter parents back then we were all latchkey kids fending for ourselves. So, I think there's something to be said. I think the pendulum needs to swing back that way honestly. So.

INTERVIEWER: I was raised by Gen. XI did BMX. As a kid and wrote quads and played soccer. I should not have done any of that.

JENNIFER: Like. I'm too protective of my own children, you know, like we moved to Oregon from Flat Michigan, and my son is asking for a bike, and I'm like, I don't want you riding on those hills. You've never done that. And then I'm like, what am I saying? So yeah, I mean, and if you're if you're given the opportunity to do things that people think you can't do it. That's when you break down the barriers. So.

INTERVIEWER: Awesome. Thank you so much for your time that that is the conclusion of everything that I have. And so, I will submit this paper in 2 weeks from today.

JENNIFER: Well, good luck with everything goes well, and I hope that you land somewhere that you would like to be and get a good community.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much. I will share this with you. I sent it for review for my committee in 2 weeks, and then on the I defend my thesis on May 23rd, and I'll be recording slash, live streaming, at least recording it, and so I can share all of the above with you, if you'd like. Just.

JENNIFER: I'd love to see it.

INTERVIEWER: I'm really excited. And right now, I feel really scared because there's 2 weeks, and I am putting myself in thesis jail.

JENNIFER: That's good, though. You'll feel better when it's all done.

INTERVIEWER: I am so glad I chose this path. I had an easier option. I did not choose. No, that is so, me core just not choosing the easier path. This feels very rewarding, so thank you for being a part of it. I appreciate all the time that you have given to this.

JENNIFER: Yeah, well, I you know a lot of times during our conversations. I feel like I'm not disabled enough for this. So hopefully, there's useful things for you.

ALEX

Interview 1 (2.17.25)

ALEX: I'm from Georgia, still live in Georgia. That's where I teach, I did my undergrad at a conservatory model school down here. It's a conservatory model school meaning they still get state funding, but they operate like a conservatory. As a result, I became a very good musician. It also landed me with a PTSD diagnosis because undergrad; I was told on day one, you will play like a performance major, or you will go somewhere else. I was only one of two ed majors in my studio, and at one point the only ed major. I really internalized I was the worst member in my studio, until I went to UGA for my master's where I realized being the worst at a conservatory means you're pretty damn good everywhere else. My fiancé talks about sometimes, you're so weird when you talk about your time there, because it's all this really terrible stuff and then you find a sense of pride in it, like oh yeah because I feel good when I play well, and I can walk into concerts and sight read. That feels good. Then I went to UGA for my master's which currently I'm working on a doctorate at Augusta. It is not a music degree; it is an education degree with a focus on music. As a result, I'm the only music educator in my cohort. It is the easiest degree I've ever done. It is easier than my undergrad by far. Everyone else is like "oh my god it is so difficult" I'm like nobody has yelled at me until I've cried. No one has made me run laps. I did drum corps. I marched several seasons of drum corp. It was bad. I'm like this is nothing. This is writing papers. It's not that serious. During grad school I got married and then started working and maybe a year or two after I graduated and got my masters, my ex came out as trans. I was cool with and made me have to reevaluate my whole identity. Ya know, being a woman and having a wife is pretty damn gay. So, I identify as asexual because I don't really care. Ironically, she cared I was a woman. I was like, are you divorcing me because I was straight, because that is so far out of left field. That is not usually why people get divorced. She is not attracted to cis women, so uh. And our relationship was really unhealthy and stressful. She was suicidal for a lot of it because she was repressed and being repressed makes you depressed and that made me depressed. So that kind of contributed to my PTSD stuff. during the time I also got diagnosed with ADHD which she was not supportive of. She was like you can't make everything about your ADHD, but like I kinda can because it impacts how I think. It impacts everything. I was also diagnosed at the same time with an anxiety disorder. At the time I was

teaching chorus. My first teaching job was really terrible. That band went through seven directors in four years, and I was number three. My assistant was number four. She quit teaching entirely like fuck that I can't do this. So that was really rough. I took the first ticket out which was chorus which I did not love. So, I went from an unhappy marriage teaching chorus undiagnosed to within a year or so I was back in band, I was diagnosed with a lot of things which made life easier, I was in a happy and healthy relationship for the first time in a long time. I'm actually getting re-married in two months which is cool. Some point during that time, there's a lot of overlap between ADHD and autism, and the memes were getting a little too relatable which was like, on the autism side. I did a lot of my own research, and I have felt like I have some symptoms that were just not covered by the ADHD diagnosis. There is a lot of overlap, I talked with my therapist about it, and she said I might want to get evaluated. Got evaluated for autism and got diagnosed with it. She asked what makes you think you need this, and my answer was let me talk to you about my criteria about what is an acceptable spoon. She immediately started writing like I know where this was going. And so, a lot of that impacts how I teach both my identity as someone who is not straight, and someone who is a different neurotype as some people effects my practice. We always say people teach the same way they were taught. Theres many things I do lift from previous teachers, but there's a lot I change because my experience in k-12 school is the result of a lot of trauma because it was not built for me. I had to force myself to be a square peg in a round hole. That does not work for the square peg. And like I unintentionally got really good at masking. My mom's exact words when I got diagnosed with ADHD was "there's nothing wrong with you, you're just like me" and I was like oh mom. you know its genetic right? Theres a strong genetic link for all of these conditions. She got diagnosed with ADHD at age 52. She is still insistent I do not have autism, and I think that is because she doesn't want to acknowledge she may also have autism. But like now she is like, Adderall is awesome! I told you.

INTERVIEWER: what is your relationship with the word disability and disabled.

ALEX: I view myself as having an invisible disability. And I am almost offended when people say, "I never would have thought that". My response is always "no shit Sharon, that's on purpose". Someone said it, I'm also a black belt and that's also a big part of my identity. I just succeeded my sensi, as I'm now teaching and that's been an interesting experience. In the Dojo I am freer to be myself and I have a physical outlet that Is not socially unacceptable because

everybody is doing it. I'm running around and active. You don't see a lot of my stims because I'm not anxious here. More of them come out when I'm anxious. Everyone here info dumps on the special interest. We all have this very niche special interest of martial arts. Theres probably a lot of autistic people who fly under the radar because their special interest is football. And that's socially acceptable in America. All these guys who have memorized stats and I'm like you're not normal. That's not a normal thing people give a shit about. No one cares who the quarterback of the eagles was in 1983. That's just you, but because its football, its socially acceptable. So, I view it as an invisible disability. Most of the things that are "problems" in how autism and ADHD are both diagnosed are actually not problems for me, it's how my disability irritates other people. For me that's not a problem. If you're irritated with me, you're free to not talk to me. Just get over it, it's not that serious. But there's some aspects where it impacts my life that has nothing to do with other people. For me it mostly has to do with things like eating. I have a lot of disordered eating habits. Not because I have an eating disordered because I want to be skinny or look a certain way, but because the texture of that food feels weird, and I can't eat that food because it feels weird. Most of the time it's about feeling, it is not about taste. I will go through cycles of this food is a safe food until it is not, and I'll never eat it again. Usually after I buy a shit ton of it. It's like my brain knows. I pay a lot of late fees, miss a lot of deadlines. Which is partially a societal problem and sometimes deadlines are just deadlines. I wish society did not punish deadlines to the extent it does. I did not miss it on purpose. It's not that I don't care. that's what I was told my whole like, that if you really cared you wouldn't do this. The line I got all the time was "well you're not stupid so you must not really care" or "you're not stupid so you must have just not been trying." I knew I cared so for a very long time I thought I was just really stupid. So, I actually have actually really embraced that identity because it means I'm not stupid. It means there's not a morale failing that I have committed. Theres no wrong thing that I've done. My brain just doesn't work the way that everyone else's brain does. If it weren't for the food thing, I would honestly say this is not my problem, this is everyone else's problem. As someone who is autistic, I do not have a problem with clear communication. Everyone else has a problem with communication because I say exactly what I mean. Because I have ADHD, I say everything that I think. I say everything I think and mean everything that I say. You just can't handle that I'm direct. That's not a me problem.

INTERVIEWER: do you identify as having a disability, or do you identify more so as having conditions. What does it mean to you?

ALEX: I definitely identify as having a disability. I hate when people call it a superpower, or differences or exceptionalities. I am different, and in a lot of ways I am exceptional. I can sit down and turn out a full-scale band work in about four hours. I wrote the first three chapters on my dissertation and passed with no revisions. Most people can't do that. However, I cannot make a sandwich. It's too many steps and it's too long and I'm too impatient and the consistency has to be the same in every single bite and that's very hard to achieve. Eating a salad takes me an hour because every single bite has to have the exact same ratio of combination of ingredients. So, I might be exceptional in some ways, but I feel like calling it an exceptionality or difference or superpower downplays the difficulties. There are even things like, I hate going to honor band events because they give you a t-shirt you have to wear that day, and I can't go home and wash it first. the feeling of unwashed fabric makes me want to crawl out of my skin and die. And that's a problem I'm going to think about all day. Even if I make myself do it, I'm going to be shorter and more aggravated with my students. Even when its sunny and 90 degrees I wore a t-shirt under it to layer it to avoid and now I'm just hot. And I'm dehydrated and I'm hot. I teach at a school that is predominately not white, and the kids were concerned because I was turning red. I had to be like no, I'm just white. Theres nothing wrong with me, I'm not dying. You really don't understand the amount of distress it brings me to wear the shirt. And it's part of why I wasn't diagnosed at a young age because my mom gave me an absurd, I don't think it's absurd, of freedom in how I dressed and what I ate as a child. If I didn't want to wear it, I didn't wear it. If I didn't want to eat it, I didn't eat it. My mom was like as long as my child isn't underweight, I didn't care. I was allowed to control my sensory environment pretty much since I could talk. And tell them what I wanted. To me, having an identity and my diagnosis is very freeing. Again, I developed a lot of self-loathing a lot of very negative self-image before I was diagnoses and this has given me a lot of freedom to accept those things and observe myself of blame because I used to just blame myself. Especially coming from the band world. My high school band, when you fucked up, at the end of rehearsal, someone with a list would call out to the whole band with how many laps you owed for the fuck up and everybody would watch. There was a lot of shame that came from these mistakes. I was unform officer and I marched two games in my socks because I lost my own shoes. So, there was a lot of shame that came from

that like this is literally my job and I'm the only person who screwed this up. I really strongly identify with those labels because of the freedom they give me. I also use them as kind of an armor because a lot of people don't like me. They don't like me because I'm autistic. Thet just don't realize the reason they don't like me is because I am autistic. So, I make sure to say it. Like now you're going to have to make a personal choice on whether you're going to be ablest or not, but you're not going to know that's why. Youree not going to fly under the radar and say well I didn't know.

INTERVIEWER: do you use PFL or IFL?

ALEX: identity first. Like I said it impacts the way I think so it is fundamental to who I am as a person. I understand why people prefer PFL, it just is not for me because at the end of the day I am autistic before I am anything else. It impacts everything, every part of my awareness, every part of how I think, how I feel. So, it is central to who I am. This is the first year I have sought ADA accommodations. And it's for a very specific faculty member and I was told in my ADA accommodations that I just needed to manage my time better. Keep a planner or something.

Interview 2 (2.23.25)

INTERVIEWER: Okay, the last time we talked a lot about just kind of like identity. And what a diagnosis means. That's kind of what I got from that. The next question I have is, why did you go into education?

ALEX: Well, honestly, I kind of had to be told it was an option for me. I'm a band director, which you know is not, there's not a lot of women. And I was talking to my high school band director. I was a junior, and I remember saying, I love band so much. I wish I could just do it forever and my high school man director is comically tall, like he's almost 7 feet tall and I'm only 5 feet, so he kind of like bent down like. Got all the way down on my level, looked me in the eye, and he was like; why don't you? And I kinda looked at him, and I was like, oh, oh, that's what you do, you do, band. Every day I could do band every day. Excellent. Okay, yeah. Then I'll do that. I'd never seen a band director that looked like me. Not a high school director. I'd seen elementary music teachers. I'd seen choral directors. I'd seen a handful of middle school directors. That's not what I wanted. I wanted marching band. So, someone had to kind of tell me that was an option, and I I've stayed in it. I feel like it is the best way that I can have an impact on the world. My worldview is very heavily influenced by existentialism. I don't believe we have

a higher purpose beyond what we make of ourselves. And to me, that's my purpose. It's the best way that I can have an impact that's positive on this planet. I almost went into math instead of music. But if you teach math, you get kids for a year, maybe only a semester with music, you get it for 3 or for 4, so you can have a longer impact.

INTERVIEWER: You've discussed your conservatory and kind of what that looked like; could you describe your teacher education program? Like the like music Ed side of things?

ALEX: Yes, so we have a small program within a small conservatory and our conservatory had its own music campus. It's downtown. So, it's completely separate from the rest of the college. Because it's like a conservatory within a public school, so we still get public school funding. But conservatory, status, conservatory, curriculum and they made that change while I was there. We went from not a conservatory to a conservatory while I was there. It's cool. I was told, like from the beginning. You will play like a performance major, or you will go somewhere else. So, we had all the normal education requirements, the observations, the service hours, the extra classes, the homework, but on top of all of that you are still expected to be outputting performance at the same level. So, my experience was still very heavily performance dominated. We had only 2 music education faculty. One for the choral and elementary side, and one for the instrumental side. and everything education wise. And this is true with, like most music Ed programs, is very like surface level. You know, you get one credit hour to figure out how to teach every woodwind instrument, which means you only get like, 2 or 3 weeks per instrument. So, unless you're actually seeking out performance opportunities on that instrument... You're out of luck. and I sought out extra opportunities. It took me 5 years to graduate because I did extra stuff like. For example, we had one class to learn how to teach marching band. In my high school career, I was in the front ensemble, so I never really learned how to march. So, I could be a high school director. I did drum corps because that one class didn't cover any kind of marching actual technique. It was just like how to run a marching band. So, I had to supplement elsewhere. And that's where I also really learned how to play a brass instrument… Was through drum corps, not through my brass methods. In class I butted heads with my instrumental music education professor, quite clearly to the point where he called me a bitch to my face in a formal evaluation. and I remember having a thought, or I was like, did you call the only other student who's student teaching in band a bitch? But you didn't, because he's got a beard. And she only called me that and like we got into an argument once while I was on the podium being filmed for

like an assignment because we had to arrange a piece as if it was for 7th and 8th grade band and then can film ourselves conducting it. And I wrote the clarinets over the break the whole time and he said, they can't do that. I'm a clarinet player, and I was in the composition studio. I did a whole like senior recital, just for composition. and I was like, yes, they can, and he was like, no, they can't. They'll get tired. I'm like that's not how Clarinet works your face should be doing the same thing in the lower register in an upper register, so higher notes shouldn't make you tired, or you're doing something wrong, and he was like, no, they'll get tired. They'll get tired. You can't do that. And I looked at him, and I was like I taught 6th graders how to do it last week. So, if a 7th grader can't place above the break, then you're a bad band director. and, like the whole class is just sitting there like frozen holding instruments wide eyed. Because I'm on film telling my professor that he's bad at his job and I was like, respectfully, sir, I played this instrument for more years than you have. They can do this. So, I felt more prepared to be a performer than I felt prepared to be an educator, and most of the preparation to be an educator I felt like was because I put in extra time and extra money in a lot of cases. Drum corps cost me a pretty penny. I'm still paying off debt from. I put. I use student loans to pay Drum court tuition. I'm still paying off. I feel like I didn't get a lot of actual teaching experience outside of student teaching beyond what I sought out. Because our school is small, you know we didn't have non audition bands. It was only you playing your primary instrument. We didn't have a lot of avenues to practice conducting outside of our actual like methods classes which were very small. and of course, everyone cooperates because they're conservatory level musicians and not 7th graders who are trying to figure out how to ask somebody to the Christmas dance. you know, because they're just not cooperative, even when they're not meaning to be because they're 13. So yeah, it. I felt more prepared to be a performer than I did to be an educator.

INTERVIEWER: I know your diagnoses have all come in pretty recently. But did you find any support within your teacher training program.

ALEX: I was not diagnosed at the time. Not really there is only one instance I can think of where someone actually mentioned, twice... actually, someone actually mentioned, anyway, symptoms in a way of getting help. One is, I don't have a diagnosis for this because I had abnormal test results, but my doctors think I have narcolepsy on top of my other stuff to be diagnosed with narcolepsy. You have to do a 24 h sleep test, and you have to fall asleep with an average of 9 min or less, and mine was 10. I had one outlier. and they were like most people do

not fall asleep at all during the nap test. So, there's definitely something wrong. We just can't give you the diagnosis. And there is one instance where I slept straight through class because I didn't wake up or didn't fall asleep until about like 7 in the morning. I panicked and emailed that professor was like, I am so sorry like I pulled an unintentional all nighter. I didn't mean to, and I was terrified. She was going to yell at me, and instead, she was kind of like, have you tried this? Have you tried that? Have you tried, you know, like stuff like different teas? And what is your eating schedule look like? And you know. Obviously, she can't give medical advice. but was like, obviously they're struggling with something. And I was like, oh, someone's actually trying to help me instead of just yelling at me for being late or missing something. And then my applied professor. I, and I was afraid to show personality in my private lessons until at least like Junior Year. My applied professor was very. She's 1 of the nicest people in the building, but she's very intense. She. Power walks everywhere like very stern expression. If you cry in lessons, she kind of awkwardly pushes the tissues in your direction and then leaves to go to the bathroom. Just kind of let you cry. She would throw you out of lessons for things like if you had a word in a foreign language on your music, and you didn't know what it meant. She would say something like, you're wasting my time and yours because you didn't bother to read the directions get out and like and like, all right, that's fair. I didn't read the directions. There's very intense. So, I didn't show a lot of my anxiety. I didn't show a lot of my struggles and lessons, but I did have to miss a performance which is a big deal. Because I had a court date suing my own dad for failure to uphold the divorce agreement he was supposed to pay for my undergrad, and so I had to go testify that he was not actually doing those things. And so, I had to tell her that like, hey, I have to miss because I have to be in court, and she kind of was like, hey… most people do not have to do that. If you want a faculty recommendation to the Psych Center, it will put you at the top of their list. I won't do it if you don't want it, but if you want it, I'll do it, and it will… It will bump you up their priority list because it was, you know, otherwise a hello, otherwise a very long wait to get help, because it was a small school, and they only had a couple people on staff, and I turned her down. I really shouldn't have… I turned her down. But that was like the only time anybody really offered me help or support related to like mental health or anything diagnosis Wise. Everything else was kind of just like you need to figure it out… You need to manage your time better, I even to the point where I used to block time like schedule it in my schedule to cry because I couldn't just have a breakdown that didn't fit within the schedule. So, I would block out

specific time, like, I'm gonna have a breakdown from 8 to 8 45 pm. And then I'm gonna have 15 min to pull myself together because I have a rehearsal for chamber music at 9. And I'm gonna block that in because I don't. Otherwise, I'm gonna lose sleep like I gotta block that in. And that was kind of like the expectation. There wasn't really any support with students, either. In fact, another student like very seriously offered me the advice to just like… Do Coke. if I was running out of time, because then I could stay awake for longer, like, yeah, just do cocaine and go practice at like 3 am. That's what I do. And I was like, oh, no, dude, that's not.

INTERVIEWER: Oh!

ALEX: That's not a that's not a good solution to this problem of me, not having enough time to manage all my shit if cocaine is not the answer, my Guy?

INTERVIEWER: That's a lot. Yeah, that's a lot.

ALEX: Very toxic culture. That was that thing, and like that was just normal. That was all very normalized. They actually made the school of music one of the only professors that was really truly supportive in effort for context, we, my roommates and I had a custom cards against humanities, deck for the School of music, and one of the cards was specifically crying in this specific professor's office because everybody does it at least once, no matter what your problem is, you go to your office and you cry about it. She fixes your problem. But she ran convocation, which is, you know, the class that everyone has to take every semester, and it usually is like you just show up and attend performances. But it has a couple of modules, 0 credit class, and one of those 0 credits, like modules that we had to do. One year was mandatory drug and alcohol counseling for the whole school of music because it was such a problem of people learning to cope with this pressure by substance, abuse. So, I guess, like I received free drug and alcohol counseling.

INTERVIEWER: there's so many themes in music school that I'm like, wow, I go to school on the opposite side of the country, and music School is music school. Sometimes, for better or for worse. Currently. Just like kind of shifting gears into like a different realm of life. Does your community know about, like your disability and the identities that you hold.

ALEX: For the most part. Yes, I'm very loud about it. I don't have a large circle of friends, but I have a very close circle of friends. Like. We're the kind of group that you know. We say I love you after every conversation, you know would drop anything to go help each other out. No questions asked very touchy, feely with emotions, and most of them have their own

diagnoses. So, it's not something because we're all like neurodivergent for the most part. I find that neurotypical people do not vibe with me very well, or even when they like me, they can't take me in large doses. I'm overwhelming and even to the part I do have a close friend who is neurotypical, and when I 1st met him one of the 1st things I told him was if I'm too much you can just walk away, and it won't hurt my feelings. You can even say to my face; this is too much right now. I need to be alone and just go away, and that won't hurt my feelings. It does hurt my feelings if you make yourself sustain it, and then talk bad about me later, or complain about it later. I'd rather you just tell me to my face this is overwhelming, and walk away because I know I'm overwhelming, and he kind of like sagged with relief, and he was like, oh, thank God, I already know he's like, I'm an introvert. This is already like I didn't wanna be rude, and I was like. No, no, it's not rude. You just gotta tell me to my face and. Like we are never... We hardly ever had problems like he never really had to do that all too much. But there were times where he's like, yeah, I'm gonna go to my office now, like, all right. Bye, we're good. My family is not amazingly supportive. my dad and I have not spoken in almost 10 years, so he doesn't know. My dad doesn't believe in mental health or in any of those diagnoses, so he would probably just call me a slur. Honestly. My mom does not want to believe it. In fact, when I 1st got diagnosed with Adhd, her exact words were, there's nothing wrong with you. You're just like me. And I was like, hmm, what does that mean, mom? Cause you know, it's genetic, right? And that was when I was just diagnosed with Adhd, and she got diagnosed with Adhd at age 52. And now she's like, oh, Adderall is awesome. I'm like I told you so. But she does not like my autism diagnosis has told me that I need to get a new doctor. That that's not really true. My grandmother does not know, and that is because in my 1st job I was not diagnosed with autism. Yet I faced a lot of extreme harassment from my administration in particular my principal, and it culminated with him, telling me he thought I was autistic in a full faculty meeting with a bunch of other people present and then he tried to cover it with being like, oh, well, there's nothing wrong with that, I mean, I'm pretty sure my son's autistic, and he's fine and my grandmother's an attorney, and so I went to her for advice on how I needed to contact Hr. And when I got diagnosed the Adhd. Her response was, well, I guess he might have been right then. Huh? So, I just didn't tell her about the autism diagnosis, because I don't want to deal with that. My fiancé is really supportive. He had the jokes on lock. So, the day I got diagnosed like we were already joking about it. Which is something that, like I needed and appreciated like it wasn't jokes at my expense. It was jokes with me. My

students are typically very understanding and supportive. They know. I am upfront, I tell them, on the 1st day of classes, because it affects how I teach it affects my facial expressions. So sometimes I tell them like, if I'm mad at you, I will say I am mad at you. Don't infer that I'm mad at you because of my face. Sometimes my face is very flat. And that's because of the autism thing or like, I will visually stim like I tap my wrist together. I touch my face, I touch my nose, my hair and sometimes I'll have kids be like, what's that? I'm like, oh, that's a that's a symptom of being autistic. And for the most part they just go. Oh, okay, and they move on because their kids don't really care. In re coworker friends are supportive and are mostly neurodivergent as well. My administration is not… my administration is very hr. language.

I get asked a lot. What's wrong with me? And every time I have to answer that's just my face. I'm autistic like I, my immediate supervisor asked me always to like, Oh, ALEX, what's wrong. I'm like again, Porter. That's just what I look like. That's just my face. It's a Tuesday. I don't know what to tell you. It's just Tuesday. This is my Tuesday face.

INTERVIEWER: I, I, try, to remember exactly what you said, but something along the line of cause. Of course, my notes are all jumbled and will only make sense for the moment. Is, I know I'm overwhelming. Is that something that you have self-given? Or is it something that people have given to you?

ALEX: Both. Even when they don't say it, I can see it in their face. There is a look people get when I've officially become too much. And I know that is a very common thing, especially for women with autism girls with autism that we're told a lot is that we're too much because we're not expected to take up space right as women. We're not expected to be a lot. Boys will be boys, but girls are more mature. We're not supposed to be like that. So, there's a look people get when I've officially crossed that line up too much. And I have people tell me that. I strategize around it in social situations like at parties. I don't spend more than 30 min with one group. I bounce around, and so I'm always known as being like really fun at parties, because I go around. I entertain people, and I tell animated stories, and that Adhd comes out. I'm very bombastic. I'm very expressive. I'm very loud, and because I am neurodivergent, I guess a lot of very strange things happen to me all the time. People are reared around me. So, I have like stories that are entertaining. But I can't stay with one group, because that's a lot. And usually, if I meet somebody in a social situation like that, and then I meet them again. Outside of that situation. I'll see that look when they realize. Oh, you're just like this all the time. That's not just

because we were at a party. You're just like that. And like it's, it's almost like a look of shock, or like that overwhelmed. Look people get, and there are very few people in my life who have never given me that look. It's a very short list. It's my immediate friends. My martial arts. Sensei. Who's my main teaching mentor, and essentially like my grandma. I've studied with her for 20 years, and she actually just retired. I succeeded her. I'm now teaching myself. And my high school assistant band director is one of the only people who never made me feel like I wasn't too much. That's the that's the whole list, even my mom, like a lot of times will tell me to quit yelling. I I'm very loud not to be like I'm not yelling. This is just how I talk. So again, like it's just. I'm a lot. I'm sensory, wise. I'm a lot for a lot of people.

INTERVIEWER: I experience this a lot especially being both visually impaired neurodivergent like you throw it in a bucket, and I have it. And so, I experience very frequently that, like, I'll tell a story, and people will be like there's no way that happened like that's real, but not like in like a disbelief, but in like a failure to realize that could happen. Do you experience something similar?

ALEX: Yes, I once had someone, it was immediately after a performance I used to teach a medieval and Renaissance reenactment choir, which was a thing I ended up in charge of, because I went to a free meeting for the pizza, and I somehow ended up in charge of it. It was again just like strange things happen to me. So, I ended up in charge of this choir for, like 3 or 4 years. It was actually a really cool experience. We were at a reenactment event, and we had just finished performing, and it was at a campsite, and we got back to our cabin, and I'm on this like performance high, and a girl comes into our cabin and was asking me about the performance. So, I'm already excited. I have all this adrenaline she's asking me about the thing I'm so excited about, and as I'm talking she takes her hand like this and pops me in the middle of the forehead and says, Off, Button! and if I stepped back, and I looked at her, and I was like, Excuse me, and she said, Well, you realize you're a bit much right. I cussed her out. And now this is in front of my choir that included some of the high school kids that I was student teaching with. I was student teaching at the time, and I looked at her. And I was like, yeah, I know I'm a fucking lot. That's why I don't have any fucking friends. You didn't have to fucking. Tell me that. And she looked at me, and she was like, oh, I didn't mean it like that, and I looked right back at her, and I said, I'm sure you are fucking didn't. Why don't you get the fuck out? And sometimes when I tell people that they're like she really touched you in the face like, yes, she really touched me in the

face like. Hold on! Pop me in the forehead, or sometimes I just get the general disbelief of like, even if it's not about a specific event. People will make a comment like, why do all of these weird things happen to you? And I'm like, I don't know. I don't know if it's because, like people inherently sense that I'm different or weird, that they can be weird around me, or that they can mistreat me like it's inherent. We've noticed that you're different from the norm kind of thing. But like people do and say weird stuff around me all the time I get a lot of weird. And maybe because I put myself in weird situations because I'm not picking up on something… I don't know. Maybe it's all of the above. But I've got a lot of very strange stories, because weird stuff happens to me.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I can be full on see that happening? it's fascinating to me, that people think that they have permission to touch people.

ALEX: Oh, yeah. What happened… Once at a grocery store. This old lady comes up behind me, and she, full on like almost spooning me, cups my elbow and like whispers in my ear, and she's like while I'm distracting you right now. A man could be stealing your purse out of your buggy, which was sitting like a couple of feet away, and it had my jacket in it, which was a hand me down jacket that doesn't even zip up anymore, and some applesauce, and that was it. That was the only thing that was in my buggy. I am a black belt, and I teach women self-defense classes. I'm like. I don't need advice from a random stranger on how to defend myself or protect myself. There's a reason there was nothing in that buggy… but I almost decked her. My default response to somebody touching me like that was to like, pull my elbow back and jam it into her ribs, and I stopped myself at the last second. And because I'm autistic, and I don't like being touched. My skin was crawling the entire rest of the time, and this is why I don't like to go to the grocery store by myself. That was one of the only times that I went by myself in the last year. And I'm like, because when I'm out by myself, people feel like they can just be weird. I don't know why, and she thought she was being helpful, but I'm like I don't need you to help me like that. I don't need you to touch me. I don't need you to talk to me. Don't touch me. What's wrong with you? Why would you touch a stranger? So frustrating.

INTERVIEWER: I, this is now just like me, sharing. I use a cane; I use a guide dog have a cane and it's like the modality changes. But prior to me, having a dog, people frequently would love to like, pick up the end of my cane and walk me like a dog to take me places. I'm

like, did you? Because we don't teach anything with children on like how to interact with people with disabilities.

ALEX: I wasn't Taught how to do that, but I would still never touch somebody's mobility device. What the fuck.

INTERVIEWER: No. People love to like to touch the tools or like. It's so fascinating the like, because people touch me all the time, I 100% could see that someone has bopped you.

ALEX: Oh, my God! That is, I would never touch somebody without their permission, even like in my Dojo. Like, if I'm going to move somebody like they're in the wrong position. I say something like, I'm going to move your arm now, or can I move your arm now. like, or you know in the band room like, can I? Can I readjust your elbow like I don't just touch somebody without stating my intention and asking if it's okay.

INTERVIEWER: People fascinate me.

ALEX: It's like they feel entitled because they view us as not competent on our own, and then they get offended when you say, hey, don't touch me, or hey, don't touch my wheelchair, don't touch my cane, don't touch my whatever. They feel like you're they're being insulted because they were just trying to help you when you didn't ask for that help.

INTERVIEWER: I've been screamed at like yelled at, and it's we have this place called the hirons, which is like, if you can imagine what you if you could put a post office, a pharmacy, a knickknack store, and a chocolate place all in one store. It's very overwhelming, and I was in there printing pictures, and I like had my guide dog like set on a down stay like at the display, and I turned around, walked 2 steps to the cashier to like, ask for a code. And these girls were, I like turned around for 2 seconds, and these girls are petting my dog. I go. No, no, do not touch him. Sorry. He's working right now, and this man just screams at me for not letting these girls like touch my dog like absolutely berates me, and I'm like this. You just stand there and go. Okay, sir.

ALEX: Again. That's guide, dog 1. 0, 1! You don't touch the dogs when they're working. They're working. They have a job that's…It's the same as like you don't go hang out your buddy when he's on the clock at work. He's working like you don't. That dog has a job like he's doing his job. Oh, my God, I mean, I know that's what happens. But it just is infuriating when you hear about it, because it's again, regular folks just feel entitled to. And I guess folks with disabilities get it more because we're not given things that normal people already have. So, there's already

like that loss of entitlement like. I'm already not treated normally so I don't feel entitled to like anybody else's time or space.

INTERVIEWER: I tell my friends, it's like living as a human science experiment between, like the medical conditions I have going on and whatnot. It's constant human like social experiments. I don't want to take up more of your time. And so, if anything comes to mind this like this would be like a really good time to just start like if something comes up, take a voice, memo, and send it, or write something down especially like, if you like, have an interaction with the student of like From what I'm seeing and hearing you do a really good job of normalizing, just like this is the thing, and there's nothing to it.

ALEX: Talk about it with them as if it's just like a fact about my life like I'm short, or I have 2 cats. I also have autism. And I found, like a lot. One of the biggest things that I didn't realize is that a lot of my kids with diagnoses do not have IEPS, or 504s. And when I say I'm autistic, I get kids who look at me and go oh, me, too… or they're they'll share stuff with me that they've would not have otherwise. I even had a kid last year who really probably needed a 5 0 4, Iep who did not have one, and I created accommodations for him. and we had a sub once who was an actual musical sub. So, he was going to leave rehearsal, and it was a half day. So, as I was leaving this kid said, Hey, will you? Will you talk to him about me and tell him that I'm different. And I was like, Well. I can't, because of laws like I cannot tell him that you have a diagnosis, you know, and he was like, well, will you go with me to talk to him and like just me being there like he like advocated like for himself. But it's because I think that's because, like, I helped normalize it. And I even gave him his 1st year. He struggled a lot, and I gave him most improved at the end of the year and I usually describe the kid getting the award before I say their name, and I caught the moment he realized it was him, and he, like lost his mind because I was describing. I was like this kid really works hard. And he went from really struggling to really great, and he knows I know he works hard because he's always the last one to pack up, and I have to tell him 3 or 4 or 5 times like no pack up, because he just wants to practice that much. And when I said I have to tell him multiple times to pack up. That's when he was like. He knows he's the last one to pack up. He knows he's the last one to put his instrument away. so that's something that I've really liked about being able to share it with my students is that it has helped normalize it. And it has helped kids advocate for themselves. In like I, even, you know, have talked kids about reducing stigma and I'll have to tell you about toast some other time. I could

talk about toast for like 4 h. He's my favorite student ever goes by the name toast because on day one of class I walked in, and these are kids that are randomly assigned to me. At the beginning of the year, I was teaching chorus, and everybody was sitting very still, very quiet. I was at a mostly not white school, and I was just a strange white lady, and they didn't trust me, and they didn't know me, and he's like doing laps around his chair. And I was like, hey, Bud, would you like a fidget spinner or something? And he looked at me and was like. Yes, that would be very helpful, because I have autism. And I was like, Great Bud and this is before I was diagnosed. At the very least with autism. I don't know if I've been diagnosed, Adhd yet, no, yes, I was. And we were kind of like 2 peas in a pod. So, he was actually like one of the 1st people that I told I was like, Hey, man, I'm like you. He would do random stuff like dismantle an entire percussion thing and then put it back together in the span of a class, because one screw was a different height than all the other screws on the board stuff like that which is like a really cool kid. That, you know I'm happy that I can share this diagnosis with them because they and kids are more understanding about it than adults. Kids don't feel entitled like adults, and only once have I once or twice have I ever really had an issue? This year I told the kids like. I tell the truth; I always tell the truth. I feel a compulsion to tell the truth and they were like, you know, I was like, if you ask me. Something's bad, I'm gonna tell you, if it's bad. And they were kind of like poking fun like, oh, well, do you like his shirt? Does he look good? And you blah blah! And I had to be like, you're making fun of me that doesn't feel good. And they went, oh, sorry. for kids who use like the R slur... And I'll say something like, hey, you know, that applies to me, right? And they kind of go, oh, sorry and like learn to police their language, because that is that is like normalized is using that that slur. I also have pride flags in my office, and in my last school the kids even started policing themselves like they would not use homophobic language around me, even if I knew they used it outside of the school, and if anybody used it, they would kind of like, look at me and look at the flags and be like Bro. We don't say that in here. Even though I don't tell them anything about my personal life or my identity. And even if they asked, I was like, well, does it matter if I'm gay or not? Does that impact? How you how you play your instrument? And they go well, no like. Okay. And then you don't need to know. and my best friend goes all to all of my concerts. And she was my roommate for a while. So, a lot of kids were like your roommate. Got it? No, gosh, she’s, my roommate. She's just my roommate. Like I know. She has big, gay energy. She was just raised by Lesbians. Her parents are Lesbians, I promise she's straight. She's

just my roommate, like she just wears a lot of flannel and beanies man like it's she does her own car stuff because her mom's a mechanic. It's okay, like she's not. And but the kids were just like, got it. We got it like, Okay.

INTERVIEWER: And kids also have a hard time understanding people can just live together.

ALEX: Right there, and so they would like police themselves around me by the time I left that school. And that was like kind of a sweet thing that like., I know, that helps bleed over into their personal lives. But it started because they were like, oh, we know somebody that that language affects. And it's somebody that we care about somebody that we respect. So, we're gonna make sure it doesn't happen in here. And then, not happening in here, bleeds into not happening elsewhere. And even toast ended up in a psych ward for suicide ideation. His 8th grade year because he came out, and his best friend like bullied him for it. But this happened the week I was out from a car accident with a really bad concussion. And his mom called me and asked for advice and what to do, and she was like, I don't know what to do, but I know my son trusts you. What do I do. And I was like, oh, you were not calling him, calling me for him. You're calling me for you. Okay. you need reassurance. And she was like, and I know you're di-different, and I'm like. I'm not straight. Yes, we can. We can go on that assumption like that's fine. You've pegged me correctly, ma'am, I will. I will share that with you, because this is a situation where it's relevant. Normally, it's not relevant. This is a situation where it's relevant. And toast is actually one of the only students that I did share my identity with. For that reason. I talked to him about my ex-wife coming out as Trans and I talked to him about her being suicidal, and I talked to him about just a lot of things related to that. Oh, and I also think it's funny we get the…Sorry I'm taking up your time now.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's okay.

ALEX: But the stereotype, right? That autistic people don't have empathy. And that's not true. We just express it differently. You don't see it on my face, and I don't follow. I don't follow social norms that I don't understand the purpose of like. I'm not going to ask you how you are, because you're not going to be honest with me. So, there's no point in me asking that question. Now, if you are going to answer that question honestly, if I know you're going to answer it honestly, I will ask it to you. But I'm not going to ask it to like the front desk, lady, because she doesn't give a shit. She's not gonna tell me the truth. I we went to a marching band competition

where we played the National Anthem with my middle schoolers and this kid that we called trombone kid from another school, stood at the top of the stadium and played super high pitched notes on the trombone, and like blast decimo for like 3 straight hours, and I had to tell him to knock it the fuck off like 4 times, and eventually just went and got his band director and was like, I'm gonna push your kid down the stairs. All right. We are at that level. I am literally about to push this kid down the stairs. Make him stop, and he got in trouble, and he got mad at me, and actually came and confronted me about it. And I was wearing my core jacket because it's a marching band event and you only get your core jacket if you complete a season, and it's expensive, and it's a big deal, and I marched 3 seasons before I got one because I couldn't afford it. And I told another alumni friend of mine that I always felt really jealous when I saw the new Marchers come out with their core jackets because I couldn't afford one and he got together with a couple of people, and they bought my car jacket for me, and one of the people who did that was my section leader, and the last thing I said to him before he died was, how much I appreciated that jacket. And then he had a free card attack at like 35. And died in a sleep. Trombone kids stole my jacket, and I didn't know who stole it. I just knew it was gone, and I cried in front of my middle schoolers, and I tore the stadium up and down. I asked everybody I took my kids home because I had to, because the buses were waiting, and then I drove all the way back and looked for another 2 h and couldn't find it but on the bus, this was literally a week after toast got out of the hospital, and I told him he didn't have to go but he went anyway. And he was the only person kind of sitting with me up at front. It was obvious I was still like sniffly, and I told the kids why I was upset that I was like. This isn't just because it's a jacket. It's because my someone that I cared about really deeply gave me this jacket right before he died, and I can't get that back. I can buy a new jacket. I cannot get this gift back. And he didn't hug me. He didn't say it's gonna be okay. But he kind of looked like not even looking at me. And he said, I guess my mom is right. And I said, what do you mean? And he said, sometimes really bad things happen to good people. and there's just nothing we can do about that. And like to me. It was like a real show of empathy that he was. It was a quiet understanding that he understood that I was hurting, and it wasn't like how most people show empathy, but I felt seen and understood in that moment, whereas, like somebody else, just being like, oh, I'm sorry, doesn't really do that and even I told him I paid for his District Honor Band Fee, because that fee was due while he was in the hospital, and he had signed up, but I was like, look, man, if you are not up to it, there is literally no pressure to

actually audition. I paid for it so that you had the option. I didn't want you to lose the chance if you wanted it, but you don't have to do it. And he did it, anyway, and he scored really like well, he didn't make it, but he still did. Well, especially considering his circumstances. And I was like, man, you didn't. You really didn't have to? And he spoke but I did you… You paid for it. And I'm gonna treat that seriously because you did something for me and I'm going to treat that with respect. And so, like there's a lot of empathy that went back and forth. Even if sometimes he was blunt, he would just say, like really blunt things. There is a lot of like understanding and empathy that came from that kid. I actually knew I wanted to leave that school. But way before I did, I stayed through his 8th grade year like on purpose. I was like, I'm gonna stick it through Toast's 8th grade year, and then I'll leave. And really, I was very close to that whole graduating class they were. They were very upset when I left. I wrote them a piece and we were gonna perform it, and I was gonna cut it because it was too hard. And there were a couple people who weren't treating it seriously. And I was like, I got really emotional rehearsal. And I was like, you know what I know. There's 30 min left in class. But just go ahead and do whatever you want. I don't care. We're cutting it. And I went, and I sat in my office, and the entire jazz band came into my office was like 17 kids, and my office was not 17 kids big. and they were like, we'll do it. Schedule it after school, and we'll do it. Put extra rehearsals in and we'll do it. And I was like, y'all realize that means we're gonna have to rehearse on Fridays, because that's the only day left where we don't have something, and they said, we'll do it on Fridays schedule. We'll do it. And they did, and… We performed. It was the last piece on our concert, and they were crying because it's their last concert of 8th grade. So, they're crying and be like, I'm so sorry I missed notes because I was upset, and I was like. It's okay, like it was our performance, and we will. I will never have that piece performed that way again. It will never be performed by anybody else like that ever again. They're usually very understanding adults, aren't. I even had a kid once I did a stim, and she was like, what is that? And I was like, oh, that's part of me having autism! And she looked at me and was like, Oh, my God! I'm so embarrassed! My brother has Tourette's, and he does stuff like that. I should have known better than to question that. I'm so sorry I was like, girls. Okay. I could literally talk about toast for the next, like 6 h really cool kid. And just we vibe together a lot because we're the same strand of neurodivergent.

INTERVIEWER: if you have anything like that's like physical that would be a really good artifact like that's something that like.

ALEX: I will try to take. Most of my stuff is at my office. I will take some pictures of some of them. I keep all notes from students, and I put them on my wall, and I had. I have a couple that might stand out in ways that, like I treat my students like equals as part of me, really valuing existentialism, too. They are my musical equals. When we play chamber music I don't lead, even if I play with them, I let them lead, and I ask them opinions, and even if it's not mine, what my choice would be. Musically I let as long as they can justify their choice, and not just because I let them lead their ensemble in that direction like I wouldn't put a crescendo there. But if you want to, that's fine, because you have this reason. But I've had a couple of students write in their note's things like. I don't treat them like normal adults. Treat them. or I never yell. You know I don't yell at them. I don't like to yell things like that. And I think it's because I'm neurodivergent that I treat them differently. Most adults talk at children. They don't talk to them. I make an effort to talk to children just because they are 13 in a cocktail of hormones does not mean they're incapable of emotional maturity. And, in fact, it's our job to guide them into being more emotionally mature. So, I might take a couple of pictures of those. There's yeah. And I right? That was when I think about quitting, because they remind me that there's a reason, I do this and like there's a couple of them that make me tear up each time. There's 1 kid who I studied abroad in Japan. Japanese is my second language, and the piece that I wrote for my band I originally composed for choir for when I left my 1st teaching job, I taught band and choir, and I wrote it for the choir, and the lyrics are in Japanese, because they have words that don't exist in English. Not same way, like Sayonara, does not mean by it. Means farewell like, we're not going to see each other for a long time. And when you ask, how are you, Scott? Genki means like health. So, if you reply that you are not. In fact, Genki, somebody might try to take you to the hospital. So, the main refrain of the piece was Sayonara in the words like, until the day we meet again, be Ganki, be well, be good. I told the man like this is what the lyrics for the original mean and why I'm I rewrote it for band for you. and one of the kids learned how to write my name and learned how to write Sayonara in Japanese and put that in her note. And even though it's not a language she speaks because I because I wrote that out I, her cousin. I believe they live together, so they have more had like a civil relationship. Was in my group, and he was like you could hear him cussing out teachers from down the hall like in trouble all the time, but with me it was always yes, ma'am, no, ma'am. like always in line, because I gave him space to deal with his big feelings, and I didn't talk at him and I thought he was gonna quit band because he played flute,

and his friends were like calling him gay. And so, he was like, I'm not gonna do banana, high school flutes gay. And I'm like, Come on. But he didn't think that like 3 months ago. I just got word like, maybe a month or 2 ago the High School director contacted me and was like, hey, did you have? One is, is, did you have a kid named Jason. I was like, yeah. And he was like, Yeah, you just told me he's 1 of your best flute players. And I was like, who was he was, and he was like, and I was like, he's got a little bit of a you know problem with authority. But he's a good kid, and if they would be good for him, and he's like, oh, yeah, we had an attitude adjustment. But you know he's here and he's thriving, and I'm like that makes me feel really good. So, I might take a couple pictures of those.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that would be awesome.

ALEX: Yeah, I will make a note in my phone

Interview 3 (3.1.25)

INTERVIEWER: you. Last time I feel like we cut off short. Did you want to speak a little bit more? You were really excited to talk about toast.

ALEX: Yeah, I mean, like I said, I could talk about talk about toast for ages. I feel like I can have the ability to connect to the kids who nobody else does like. I'm usually quite popular among kids who are not well liked by other teachers for various reasons. Like. In fact, this week I had one of my one of my really good 6th graders. He really struggled when the 1st got in. He plays tuba. He struggled to match the right note. I started with like 4 6th grade tubas, and now I only have 2 and he's the only one who really can hit the low B flat. He comes in like every morning and practices. But he was failing for a large, for most of the semester because he wasn't turning in his homework. He was coming every morning and practicing, but he wasn't turning in the homework that he very easily could do, because he'd rather practice and one of his other teachers reached out to me and was like, hey, like he's missing a lot of homework for us. But he says he has to keep working on this band project like, oh, he is. He does have a project, and he actually still hasn't turned it in. It's late, since it's a 0 right now because he started it late and he started it late, because whenever I gave him class time to work on it. He practiced that and the teacher said something kind of ableist to me about it because he doesn't have an IEP or 504 does not, does not, as far as I know, does not have a diagnosis. But she was talking about him, not being able to prioritize. And I was like, Yeah, you know, he's always working. He's not always working on the thing he really should be working on. You know, we're working on that. She was

like, Yeah, he might be autistic or something and like said it like kind of like, in a very way that very much implied. That was a bad thing, and I just kind of looked at her. And I was like, I'm autistic and she just kind of like kept going like, I don't think she even realized that what she was saying sounded negative. Or that this kid is frustrating to her, and I'm like he's not frustrating to me. Fact that he wants to practice is not a bad thing for me means I have to redirect him sometimes to like actually work on the thing he's supposed to be working on but like I'm not upset about it. And like his, she's saying the mom is like, well, I don't know what he's supposed to be working on. So how am I supposed to like helping with stuff? And I'm like he knows what he's he should know what he's supposed to be working on. He should know what he's supposed to be working on whether he's actually doing it or not. and like they very may well be a sign that he has something like Adhd or autism, because he's having a hard time regulating his attention span and especially in the face of a special interest, or something that he finds much more interesting that could very well be a symptom. It could also just be that he's 11, like he is just 11. So. But often problem students often succeed with me, and it's something that you'd think other teachers would celebrate a lot of times. They get mad about it. I had a student at my last school where you could hear him cussing out teachers from down the hall screaming top of his voice, fuck, you bitch fucking! Listen to you, fuck you just on and on and on, and well, the 1st time I heard it I was like, who is that you're like? Oh, that's Jason. And I was like. No, like, you're pulling my leg, really. Who is that? They're like? That's Jason. I was like. He's never to me, never. It's always yes, ma'am. No, ma'am, always on task, always doing the right thing. Section leader doing what he's supposed to helping out other people. he was… I only had 2 8th graders show up to 8th grade night that year, because it was on a Saturday and I couldn't get a bus, and the kids couldn't get rides. So, there's a school where, like a lot of kids relied on a single parent to drive and after he went to high school, he was like Bando commando, and he would tune the whole section every day, and I was like there's no way. That's him. And it turns out that teachers would warn the next set of teachers every year. Oh, you're gonna get him! You gotta watch out for him. They'd already have this perception, and I just I didn't know that. And so, I treated him like I treat every other kid and whenever he did have big feelings and emotional dysregulation. I didn't shut it down because I have emotional dysregulation. That's a symptom of both my diagnoses, and I have PTSD and an anxiety disorder. And they're not always logical when I have big feelings and like I'm able to recognize that they're not logical. But there, that doesn't make

them less valid. They're not there. And so, I would give him space to feel those feelings and give. Try to give him tools to work through those feelings, and so for me it was always respectful. It was never, never! You know, this this big deal like it was with everybody else, and they were like mad at me for that like oh, well, so he cannot write. He just doesn't for us, and you're just blah blah, and it's only because you're banned. And the kids like band. And I'm like, look, if you're not cool, that is not my problem. The kids don't think you're cool. That is not my fucking problem. Okay, you could try to be less of a dick like that's literally it. I'm just. I'm popular with children because I talk to them like they're adults, and I talk to them like they're people, and you know. And I talked to them like that because I hated it that I wasn't talked to like that because I was very smart. And I had a lot of part of me being autistic. I got a lot of processing power. I'm very smart. I can't make a sandwich because it's too many steps, and I struggle to eat a salad because everybody has to taste the exact same when I eat it, which is a labor to manage, but, like I can I wrote my 1st 3 pages of my dissertation in a month, or 1st 3, 3 chapters, I mean 1st whole, 1, 3 chapters, 115 pages in a month. and most people can't do something like that, so I hate it. When people talk to me like I wasn't smart and especially at that age. I had a college reading level by the time I was 13 I was very smart. And I talk to the kids like they're smart and a lot of times they are, and they're emotionally smarter than most adults like to act like they are. The reason my cat almost died was my fault. I was doing laundry, and I didn't notice. She got in the dryer, and I turned it on, and our dryers old, and it made noises like an uneven load. But it's an old dryer, so I just walked away. Shouldn't make any other noise. She was in there for about 10 min, and I was really upset because it was my fault. and I wasn't paying attention, and it wasn't careless. It's not that I don't care it, but I didn't notice, and I felt like I was at fault, and I told, like I had to miss school to go to the vet. And so I told the kids like, Hey, you know this happened with my cat, and I had a student who is suicidal a couple of weeks ago, and we had a really in depth conversation about it because I was the person that he told, and he said he told me, because he felt like I had maybe experienced some similar things, and he didn't elaborate on what that meant. I'm feeling it might have to do with the pride flags in my office. He didn't specify but he opened up to me about it, and I was able to get him help, and when I told him he looked at me, and the 1st thing he said was, how are you doing mentally? And it was like a very serious question. It was not an off the cuff. And I was like that kid's asking, because he knows

because he knows like I'm not okay, and he's emotionally mature enough to pick up on that. And that means something to him.

And toast like displayed some of the same empathy when I was having a hard time at that job. And I'm like, we don't act like these kids are emotionally mature, regardless of their disability or not. We don't act like they're mature at the middle school level, and they can be. They can also not be. They can also be like a total asshole, not even meaning to, because they just don't pick up on the fact. That's not a thing they should say. But kids like toast kids like Jason kids like the kid whose suicidal kids who are different connect to me in a way they don't connect to most of their other teachers. So, it's a boon for the most part, like my disability while teaching is a when dealing with kids is a boon when dealing with adults. It's not when dealing with adults. It's a disability, because adults are assholes about it. The kids aren't and even like I because I had to go to the vet Thursday morning, for like follow up blood work. The vet was fine, but I was a mess all day because my routine was upset and so I did a lot of stemming a lot of visible stemming. And kids asked about it. And I talked about it because I was like, well, this is like an autism thing. And it's because, you know, my routine was upset. And even though, like today's been fine, the fact that my routine is different is stressful. And they were like, Oh, okay. And like one kid was like, oh, I don't do the thing you're doing. But I do this other kind of stim. It's like, yeah, everybody stims and the degree to which you stim might be impacted by certain diagnoses. But everybody stims and it just. And it looks different for other people, and sometimes for me as a band director. It looks like drumming on my stand. It looks like buzzing on a mouthpiece. It looks like fingering through scales. And a kid was like, oh, is that why you're always playing when we walk into class, like exactly why I'm playing when I want. When you walk into class, something to do with my hands prepare emotionally for the next like performance, because teaching for me is a performance to a certain degree especially when I am very spread, thin or stressed out or upset. I have a very flat affect, and like kids will be like, you're mad at me, and I'm like, I'm not mad. I'm not mad. I'm really happy to be here. This is a great day at work for me but it's like. That's how it comes across. Even conducting like I could be conducting the most intense, beautiful love song, tender moment. And it's just with a face that it's not resting bitch face. It's resting, depressed face. People be like what's wrong. And I'm like it's just Tuesday like that's just what I look like. I get my pre direct supervisor at work all the time is just like **ALEX**, are you okay? And I'm like again, Dr. Porter it is. It is literally just a

Wednesday. My dude like that's just what I look like when I'm here. classroom. I don't look like that, but we're in the hallway right now. I don't have the energy to pretend that I'm not autistic right now. It's not a priority.

INTERVIEWER: I'm really sorry about your cat.

ALEX: Yeah, it's I mean, she's okay. And that's the important part. And she fucked around and found out. And she no longer tried really fire. So, you want to walk by it, and I feel really guilty that I feel guilty, that not just that she was hurt, but that she was scared. Yeah, But the important part is that she's okay, and that I know we now have new systems in place to ensure that it doesn't happen again, namely, that if I do laundry, I pick her up and put her in another room that is shut, and she does not get let out. We call it jail. She does not get let out of jail until the machine, like the machines, have been shut. She is very curious. She wants to get into the dishwasher. She wants to get into the oven that one at least has like a built in. It's hot when you open it, and so she like is like, oh, never mind that she's very curious, very destructive. She likes to pull thumbtacks out of walls just we'll pull them out and drop them onto the ground. I don't know what that's about, very destructive and yet masking. Masking for me is usually not a conscious choice. In fact, unmasking has to be a conscious choice for the for the most part. I know people like oh, well, if it's so draining, then why don't you just not do it? I'm like I don't get to decide not to do it. Like for the most part and like in not doing it as its own thing, and it's honestly being a doctoral student has not been difficult in terms of the classwork. It's actually the easiest degree I've ever done because it's not a music degree. It's an education degree. So, nobody screams at me for missing a key signature like nobody, you know, like I don't have to practice, you know. It's only about combined with my actual job. I only work 60 HA week, 70 HA week. That's nothing. you know. I compared to my undergrad, I was working easily, 100 combined with like homework classes, actual, paying my bills and playing my instrument easily 100. What's difficult is showing up for 12. We have 4 h of class Friday night and 8 straight hours on Sunday and it's back-to-back, and it's for me it's a drive. It's like a 3 h drive. So that's bookended by you know, 6 total hours of driving. That is a long time to mask, and I can't do it that long. So, it's distressing. Because I’m, forced to unmask in a situation where I’m not comfortable and or I'm forced to mask for a disproportionately long time, and the is the incident with my cat happened the day I got the day after a class weekend very burnt out. Very not mentally present. Because this is a long time. It's a long time to pretend that I'm not autistic, and I have

experienced some really intense ableism from my cohort members that make it very not fun to be there. For a group project. We have, like a full cohort group chat that I no longer participate in and have muted. No, all notifications, for. So, I don't see it, because it's very triggering. But I was asking some questions. We're just talking a lot in the group, Chat. Not a lot of other people responding. But you know, it's a group chat. Its people aren't available times a day. So, you know, whatever. But a member of our group project texted the group and not whoever she meant to text, and said, Oh, my God! Is Alex ever going to shut up? I bet the only reason she talks to us so much is because no one else in her life will listen and sent that to the group that I was in. And I was like, Hey, that's really hurtful. It's kind of not cool. And she doubled down and was basically like, if you weren't so annoying I wouldn't have said it. and no one else said anything in the group. 2 people messaged me privately, and we're like, hey, that kind of wasn't cool of her. But no one actually said anything like publicly. And then the next day she sent a message to the group that was like, I'm sorry if you were upset. I like slash love you, and I'm like, no, you are fucking, don't. And that's a weird way to say that, anyway. But no, you don't, and that's not an apology. That's you're acknowledging my feelings for her. But you are not apologizing for doing the thing that hurt my feelings. And then later on, we had to send in a form to somewhere, and I couldn't find the right email. And I say you might know the email we're supposed to send this to. And somebody sent the email which I want to very clearly delineate that they sent the wrong email. That's important for this. They did not send the correct email. They sent a typo. I had to go find it myself, anyway. And I said, thanks, and she replied, you really need to start writing this stuff down. And I replied, I do write stuff down. That's why my condition is a disability. It's if writing stuff down worked, it wouldn't be a disability. I know how to write stuff down. I literally can't remember where I put the note. I can't remember where I saved that file. I can't remember. You know where I put that that's what makes us a disability. And she replied back. Oh, my God! Are you serious? I'm texting you, and sent me like an essay that was like, how am I supposed to know how your bill disability works? How dare you make me the bad guy? You should know that I'm the only person who wants to deal with you, because I'm the only one who replies to any of your shit anymore. Everyone in the cohort is tired of you throw throwing your disability in everyone's face as an excuse to be a bitch all of the time and that.

INTERVIEWER: These are education, majors, right.

ALEX: These are professional teachers who are working on their PhD. These are grown adults. The 1st one is old enough to like, be my mother older than my mother, and the other one is like a mom of teenagers like these are grown as adults. And she like tripled down when I was like, that's really upsetting. Like. If you don't know how my disability works, why, the fuck! Are you giving me advice on how to manage it? And if and if you don't want to deal with it, don't reply like No, no one made you reply to me. But she didn't like it. She got called out and looked like a bad guy, and she's in this class that I took, and that I'm currently taking. And it's just like a dissertation check in class. It's really stupid. I have to drive 6 h to sit there and write when I could just do that from home. But one of the other members brought up the fact that I'm getting married, and she was like, I didn't know you were engaged, and I kind of just like looked at her like, why would I tell you about my personal life? And are you really so surprised that someone likes me enough to marry me just because you can't stand being around me doesn't mean other people don't. Like. There are very few people in my life that I feel comfortable, not masking around full term. And it's my fiancé and my best friend, and that's the rest of my friend group, too, which is very small. That's pretty much it. They're the only people that's like 4 people. Total. Everyone else gets a filtered version of me. And like so even like these people, I'm like, you're not even getting the real version like the full brunt of my disability. You're not even getting that. You should be thankful that I'm not dumping that on you. So, you're already. You're annoyed at how much you're having to deal with, and it's not even the full amount. But like that, that's like a. It was a really triggering thing for me like that whole experience. My students were actually it triggered like a whole PTSD episode. My students were what helped pull me out of it, because it happened the week of my birthday, so it would have been last year. My birthday was this week. It was the week of my birthday, and my students last year made a really big deal out of my birthday. We're like. I make my own method book, and I have in the method book a full band, like a basically a quartet version of happy birthday. So that oh, when it's our principal's birthday, we can call them down to the banner and play happy birthday and then ask for more funding, you know. But they knew it was in there, and my advanced band insisted on playing it, and they were like, you're not allowed to conduct it because it's your birthday, and I let students conduct warm up sometimes. But we've never done anything in 3, and so my oboe player was like, teach me how to do this in 3 right now, so I can conduct it. And they made me get off the podium and did happy birthday for me, which is cute. I had a kid. She actually sent me an email yesterday. So,

one of my former students sent me an email, but for my birthday or Wednesday. But she hung back in the band. I didn't notice. She stayed in the band room, after class. And then when I got back in the main room, I was like, why are you still here? And she was like, oh, thank you for joining us. Go ahead and sit in the audience, please, and made me like sit in the student seat, and she stood on my podium and played me happy birthday. and she was so like scared to play it that she had, like accidental vibrato and, like another, I had a beginning student, teach themselves a very out of key, happy birthday, but they taught it to themselves and played it for me, and it was they were so sweet about it that it like reminded me. I am not the most hated person in the world, because that's what it felt like. It's like these people hate me so strongly because of not just who I am, but like what I am, and I can't change that. I feel really awful. And this, and part of what feels awful when I get those kinds of responses in particular in areas where I work is that I am very earnest, and I'm a hard worker. So, when I get like professors and people in the academic situation that don't like me. I'm like I get that. I'm irritating. But I'm honestly doing my best, and I work really hard. I'm a very earnest person. I mean everything that I say, and I care about people a lot. So, when I get those things, those like situate like reactions from people. It feels really bad because I'm being, I'm being authentic.

INTERVIEWER: There, there's I have like a couple follow-up questions. Also, happy birthday. That's really exciting. When you're teaching? And you're in that environment. It's something you're good at and something you're doing. Do you feel disabled?

ALEX: not necessarily. No, because, like I said, when I'm teaching, it's not for the most part it's not a curse. It's a boon. Now. There are times when it does because of things I can't control like next week we have 2 half days for parent teacher conferences, and I'm not going to be a good teacher those days. I know I'm not because my routine is gonna be different. Schedule is gonna be different. but oftentimes like me being autistic is what makes me a good band director, because that's my special interest, my hyper fixation. It is part of what makes me really good at what my job and it's part of what makes me unique and skilled at certain areas that other people are not. It's why I work best. I feel like in a team because I cover a lot of people's weaknesses. And then neurotypical people cover mine. like, I, I had a really strong working relationship in my last school with the works for director or work besties. And there was once I like, helped set up some kind of. It's like a sub plan or something. It was a worksheet. And I created something was actually like useful. But I did it really quickly. And he's like, Oh, ALEX,

you're amazing. How do you do that? And I looked him. And I was like, it's the autism. And he was like, oh, yeah, I forgot and even we had an interaction once. It was the day of scoliosis screening, and I was like God. I really feel awful today. And I'm just being mean to the kids. And I don't know why. And I was like, I really, just today sucks. I don't understand why I'm so bad today. And he was like, cause you're autistic in your routine changed. And I was like, Oh, yeah. I forgot. And he's like, aren't you glad I remembered that you're autistic. And I was like, Yeah, thanks, man, that makes my whole life make a lot more sense. Actually, because when I'm when I'm on the podium is when I'm in my element. It's not something I have to think about. Until somebody points it out. Adults that do not kids.

INTERVIEWER: Have you observed? I'm guessing this could. In all facets. Have you observed a change in your community with how people view disabilities, overall.

ALEX: I mean, I grew up in the 2 thousand, you know, when, like the R slur, and it was just like socially acceptable to use the word gay, for like any kind of insult, you know like, and I feel like a lot of that has changed like American society overall. I see a change, small scale change within my classrooms. Typically, with me being open about my diagnosis. My kids start to police \ themselves with language more because I pointed out like, and I see it more so with homophobic language. But like I get it with the disability language, too. We're like you know, kids still use gay as an insult, but at my last school, because, like as after I put the flags up, you know, when some time passed. If kids said something like that, they kind of like, look at the look at the kid who said, and look at me and be like, Hey, man. We don't. We don't do that in here. And so like. Usually when the kid drops like some ableist language or something like that the 1st time, I'll say something like, hey, you know, that applies to me right that you know that bad word you just use like that's a slur that applies to me. I really like it when you use it and they use other oh, and like, in my last school it took a while, but like they stopped doing it. I noticed like that would start to bleed over into times where they didn't think I was there. They didn't think I was listening. not just when they thought I was listening. So, it spreads from like, we're going to stop saying these things or acting this way because someone we care about, or someone we respect doesn't want us to or doesn't like it or makes them feel bad to. We're just not going to do that anymore. So, like that those spreads. I feel like with our current political climate. American society has almost gotten worse. Because to me the biggest one of the biggest dangers with the current administration is not even the policies that they enact. But it's that people feel very calm

uptick in people feeling like they can just say ableist stuff to me or homophobic stuff to me. The same day that I had the person say the ablest autistic thing to me. I had a fellow white woman at work tell me that she, as a conservative Christian white woman, is the real societal victim. because people demonize her for being both Christian and conservative and I was just like she even used the word like, shove down our throats referring to like gay, gay folks. And my response, I was just like, I'm not straight. I'm just gonna I'm just gonna say that. And then she was like a little awkward about it. And I'm like. I don't know why you thought I guess cause I'm white. You thought you could say that to me. but I'm kind of not cool with that. I've noticed, too, that I've had an uptick in that specific kind of scenario since I started working in predominantly, not white areas, that the few white people in those areas feel like they can come. Talk to me about feeling racist or saying, you know, being racist. And I'm like. why do you work at this school? If you're racist, my dude like, why don't you go work at a white school? If you don't like brown kids. Yeah, no, it's. And so like, I feel like, I've just gotten an uptake in general for all of that stuff. But within, like my specific bands. The kids do better. Probably for a lot of them. They don't know anybody with that diagnosis like explicitly.

INTERVIEWER: Have you noticed a change? I mean, you've said some things that you're… When teachers are not thinking about the words they're using, but it that way just plainly being Dicks. Do you have you noticed that because you are in this position, and you were very open that you've seen them react differently to both, like students with disabilities, but also maybe other teachers with disabilities.

ALEX: Unfortunately, I feel like sometimes I get the experience of like doubling down.

Or just like ignoring it completely like when the lady this week, like just kind of ignored it, and like just kept talking like, I don't even think she realized it was a negative like way that she said it. I do see the wheels turn sometimes, and some of the reason why I am so open about it, and I do say it is. I'm like, I want you to know that the reason you're being mean to me is because you're ableist, because if you know, that's my diagnosis, you can't ignore it. Now, if you don't know, that's my diagnosis, you can say the reason you don't like me is because of all these symptoms and still pretend that you're not able is because you don't know it's a symptom. It's almost like it. It is armor like I'm gonna say it before you say it. Then you can't be ugly about it. So, and the only thing I'd say the orchestra guy that I was work besties with I would never say he was ever ableist, but he was homeschooled and then went to a very small university, was very

sheltered. He's also very religious and we had a conversation very early into me working there. Where? He spoke. I love everybody because that's part of my religion, but I just don't support that lifestyle. and I made a face, and he was like, oh, you made a face, and I was like, I mean, you know, I got a wife right, and he was like, oh, no, I didn't know that. And we actually had like a really in-depth conversation about it. And I really feel like I was the 1st not straight, friend he'd ever had, and some of, and I think, like I don't know if I fully changed his religious beliefs surrounding it. But I do think I changed how he looks at that sort of thing. And we had like a lot of conversations about me being autistic, and Adhd while I was there. and stuff like he would be like, hey, I don't know if you noticed this silly social queue somebody was putting out like just figured we might talk about it in case you didn't notice, you might just not have cared. You know that sort of thing. And like, when we 1st started working there, I was talking. I was talking. I was like, hey, if I'm too much you can always walk away and just say you need alone time, and it won't hurt my feelings, but it will hurt my feelings if you force yourself to stay around me, and then you know, talk bad about me later, and he kind of visibly deflated and was like, oh, thank God! Because I'm an introvert, and you're already so extroverted and like so out there like I felt I don't wanna be, you know, be a dick. And so, like I feel like we were able to talk about those things so like I said, when I know I overwhelm people, and I can see it in their face, me saying that instead of he never got that look, he would just say, hey, I need to go back to my room now. Which, like I really appreciated We ended up like really close by the time that I left, I actually, really… we have a. It was me, him and the former band director. We were like a really tight knit group. We had we still have a group chat called the Neapolitan Trio. That was a joke, because we were playing trios together, and someone asked what the name of our group was, and I'm white. The former band director was black, and the orchestra Guy's Filipino and the Filipino guy was like, We're the Neapolitan trio, because we're 3 different colors. Then he was like. And I'm chocolate, and I was like strawberries, my favorite color, and the last guy was just like man. Y'all like I'm not vanilla. Y'all suck. So, like that's the name of our group chat, and we still, we still talk quite frequently. But like he and I have talked a lot about like how my disability like manifests for me and was like a really good source of support at work. And it's not that I thought he wouldn't have done that before, but like I said, he was really sheltered growing up because he was homeschooled. So, I think me us being like work friends like changed some of that for him.

INTERVIEWER: Does it kind of seem like, you are noticing change when people are open to seeing change.

ALEX: Yeah, like they have to be. They have to already be open to it. Like then issues I had with the people in my cohort, like, you know, I read the whole message, change both of them out to my therapist because I was like, they're acting like, I'm crazy like I'm overreacting. And I want an outside perspective. And they were like, you're being so like understanding and chill. And like, you're really explaining your symptoms and disability in such extreme detail. And you know, they're like they're the ones not being chill about it, so they're not open to receiving it. It's not gonna matter and that's what I mean by like, even though my former coworker may have had some opinions that I don't agree with… He was willing to be open because he's not like a bad person. He's not a closed off person. He just doesn't have like, didn't have those experiences.

INTERVIEWER: And I keep thinking. And then I keep not thinking. It's leaving that's we're like about halfway through a little bit more than in terms of like the guided questions that I have. Next time I'll ask if there's anything that you want to throw in, I've kind of along the way have asked like, this is what I'm noticing. I'm gonna start the coding process very, very soon. I've I'm actually up to date on all the transcriptions which is wild. I feel like I've ignored the other papers in my life, but.

ALEX: Yes, understandable. I'm in dissertation jail the next 2 days, because I was supposed to have, like a whole chapter done. But you know by this point. But with the cat thing I just I missed like a whole 2 days of writing, And I work 2 jobs now, so I don't. Get time after work, because I get home at like 9 Pm. Every day so I only write on the weekends.

INTERVIEWER: That's a lot. I'm so sorry.

ALEX: Yeah, it's alright. I mean my second job. I teach a martial arts class.

and I really enjoy it. So, I spend 2 days teaching and 2 days in somebody else's Dojo still studying and practicing, so I can be better. So, it's fun, like it's something I enjoy doing. But it means that I can't right.

Interview 4 (3.9.25)

INTERVIEWER: So how has your week been with the chaos?

ALEX: Work. Wise was pretty awful this week, because this normal routine was disrupted for 3 out of 5 days and autism wise. That's always really upsetting for me, even if I'm prepared for it, even if I know it's happening in advance. Just my routine being upset makes my

day not great. Wednesday and Thursday were half days with parent teacher conferences in the evenings. So, our schedule was completely flipped around. I think even Tuesday we had. It was a normal bell schedule, but 7th grade, and 8th grade were flipped. And so that's like a minor disruption. But I was still just like, Wow! I hate this. Go away. You're not supposed to be here yet. You're somehow a billion times worse at the end of the day, because you're not used to being here either. And then Friday, we were at the elementary schools recruiting for half the day. So I even like explicitly told my 8th grade, because I normally have them at the end of the day on Friday I was like, Hey, I'm worse today, my temper is shorter, my patience is shorter because I had my routine upset and like, because I'm autistic, I'm I just need you to like stop being a goblin for like an hour. If you could, because I'm gonna be, I'm going to be impatient with you. So, like that was that was annoying. And I'm gonna have to do it again. One of the principles was like we don't want fine arts present today; we just want steam to present today. And they're like, Well we're here today. And she was like, well, the kids aren't gonna want to ask you questions. We want you to come back on a different day and do the presentation 10 times by going 10 different classrooms instead of an assembly which they're doing today. So, you can do whatever you want today. But you need to come back. And I'm like that. And she was like, kids aren't gonna want to ask questions. We had to cut off their questions. They had so many questions. They had a thousand questions, and they were more than willing to answer them. So that was irritating. Cause, that means me! And the day that she wants us to come back is 2 days before. Lg, I'm like that is not the day for me to be losing rehearsal. Time. And yeah, it was just an interesting week at work. It was the orchestras Lg. And our orchestra teacher kind of stepped on some toe's admin, and other teacher wise and pulling kids for rehearsal without permission, and stuff like that. And when things go wrong with one person in our department, we all get the consequence. Typically… There were some issues with a concert that was not mine in December, and as a result, I'm not allowed to have a normal spring concert. I can't have it after school. It has to be on a weekend with much more oversight It's weird at first, they said, you can only do it during the school day, and I was like, waited till the end of the meeting, and I waited. I let everybody else leave into my Ap. I was like, is this about the band? Or is this about somebody else? And he like kind of wouldn't give me an answer which I understand you might not be able to. And I was like, Okay, well from my perspective. This is what you want to have. Happen then. My view and vision for this band program is different from Administration's view as such. Can I count on you

as a letter of reference, as I start to apply to other jobs that might share my vision. And all of a sudden, a lot of our problems got fixed after that. So, I don't know if that's because I threatened to leave or if cause. In the general meeting with all of us we were all kind of like. No, like, that's bad and dumb, and everyone hates that. And the kids are gonna hate that. And they're gonna feel like you're punishing them.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, because then their parents can't be there.

ALEX: Yes, and that. And that was my point. I was like a lot of parents won't be able to be there.

like that's not fair. They didn't want 6 and 7th grade to perform at all. And I said, that's gonna hurt my recruitment and retention. I had a kid do A reflection form with them, and we reflect in class verbally after every performance. And one of my kids put for his. One of my questions is what your biggest challenge in this rotation of music was personally, and they can't just name a piece. They can say something specific about a piece like measure 17 to 25, or the articulations at Letter B, or whatever but one kid put that his challenge? Was he struggling to keep his embouchure because he was smiling too much because he was just so excited. To play. And I was like [student]. You're little. You're just a baby like you're so little like it's a 6th grader. And it was such like a pure response. And he plays clarinets, you know. It's tight corners. And he was trying to smile. And I was like, you're gonna take that away. You're gonna take that away from. And I specifically cited that I was like, you're gonna take that away from my kids, and they're gonna no matter what I tell them. They're gonna feel like this is a punishment. So that's it was been. It's been interesting at work. I'm lucky in that. My, my chorus counterpart part is also what she describes as neuro, spicy. So, we like powwow a lot. And sometimes I'm like, is this reasonable? And she's like, I think so. But I'm not normal. And I'm like, oh, yeah, oh, yeah, I forget. I forget there's a reason we vibe so well.

INTERVIEWER: What is? What is the thing you said? [redacted]

ALEX: Lg, large group performance evaluation. So different states call it something different. But you know most states have some. Some call it festival. Some call it contests. Some call it.

We call it large group performance evaluation, which some parts of Georgia still call it festival I taught in South Georgia my 1st year teaching and my booster Club president, I said, Lg, PE! And he said, LGBT, don't that mean lesbians? What the hell are we doing with lesbians

around our kids. And then anytime I said it. After that he would go lesbians and laugh, and I'm just like, oh, my God, Ben, your kid is gay like, why are you like this? This is why your kid doesn't talk to you. God! Oh, my God! You were so insufferable! And it wasn't even like he was trying to be ugly. He's just liked a child about it, like he was like, literally just thinks the word lesbian is funny, and that word isn't even the word lesbian. It just reminds him of the word lesbian, and that's enough to giggle in a meeting like but it will if you're not familiar with it, or for any of your readers who aren't familiar with it. [redacted] is an evaluated concert in Georgia. Our kids get scored on rankings of one to 5 on 3 pieces. 2 have to come from a prepared list that are graded by level one through 6, 1 being the easiest and 6 being like collegiate or professional level. And the 3rd piece on stage has to is technically called a warm up piece, and it's very, very strongly encouraged that that is a march and then they go do sight reading where they're given a piece one level lower than what they played on stage 5 min to look at it without practicing, and walk through it with their director, and then they perform it. Each judge. There are 3 judges for the stage portion, one for sight reading, and they, the stage judges grade each piece, one to 5, 1 means superior, 2 means excellent, 3 means good 4 means like I don't even remember the exact name for it. Not good. 5 means bad. I've never seen. I don't even remember the real names for 4 and 5, because I've never seen anybody get lower than a 3 the only person I've known to get lower than a 3 on something was a former chorus teacher that I worked with, who walked for sight reading, walked in, had the kids sing a major scale and walk out, didn't even attempt it. And she was also someone who like strongly advocated for like corporal punishment and that there was a lot of stuff I was just like, you don't need to be a teacher. You really shouldn't be here. And she was not a new teacher. She was a veteran teacher and a veteran administrator. She'd been a vice principal before. I was like you shouldn't work with children, in my honest opinion and I, I honestly do not care about the ratings the numbers. I tell my kids that my criteria for a successful performance are different, because a lot of kids will get a 2 and be upset because 2 is not the best. A lot of directors will get a 2 and be upset because 2 is not the best, and I'm sitting here like 2. Still means excellent. I even had an administrator. We got twos, and he told the school over intercom and announcements that we got ones because he didn't like that. We got twos, but that was at a school where I had $40,000 worth of mold damage on instruments that forced me to check out instruments that were not moldy, that were in bad condition. So, I had students. My entire trumpet section, frozen tuning slides pushed all the way in. I had kids with instruments,

with duct tape, with zip ties, with Scotch tape holding keys in place. I had kids who could just straight up. Couldn't play certain notes, because I was like, well, there's a leak on that key, so I had to tape it down so you can't play a flat. But you know thankfully, we only have, like 6 of those in this piece, so just don't play the A flats or, if you can pitch, bend you're a down enough to be in a flat. You can figure it out. But you know, we are just I was like to get to do have judges who do not know that that was also the year of a band director change. It was my 1st year at that school, and I only had my kids every other day for 50 min a day. So, at most I saw my kids 2 and a half hours a week, and I was like with only 2 and a half hours a week. Busted instruments on the year of a band director, change a panel of judges who do not have any of that information, thought we did an excellent job. That to me is not failure. That is a success, and I don't care that that's not a 1. I tell my kids my criterion for success is, did the music challenge us to grow as musicians? Are we proud of the performance that we that we made with that music? And did we enjoy doing it? And if those 3 are a yes, it's the success. If even one of those is a no, then we did not succeed. It has to be hard enough for us to grow, but if we're not, if it's so easy that we're not proud of it, or we didn't enjoy doing it then it's not right. and even I had in Georgia you can select certain pieces that are labeled so difficult that if you select that piece, you do not have to play anything else. That is, it. That is the only piece you play. Carmina Burana is one of them, and we did Carmina as a masterwork, all 13 movements, and it is today one of the most memorable experiences I've ever had in my music career is performing carmine as a masterwork. We dug in deep. We went through history stuff. We listened to recordings and composer notes and director notes and dove really deep into this music. We even did a full singing run where our euphonium soloist had listened to it so many times. The full orchestra and choir version that he sang his solo in Latin. He memorized the Latin because of how many times he had listened to the piece, and we got twos. And that's okay, like, I don't care that we got twos. I'm we had plenty of performances where we got ones, and I don't remember what we did. I don't. I don't remember at all but that performance where we got to stuck with me and it was really formative for me as a musician, so I don't care about the numbers. But lots of other people do. Parents, do administrators do kids do, and I try to tell them away from that. But, unfortunately, in certain districts in Georgia, too, you may be required to provide your Lg. Scores when applying to jobs, so it can affect your employment as well. and certain counties require you to submit your scores. My last county, you had to submit your scores, and if you were getting consistently low scores,

you might have an intervention or a consequence, which also the [redacted] list that you can pick from is 88% written by white men and my students are primarily not white. And so, I've had kids before. Look at me and say, why are we doing this shit like? Why are we playing? Why are we playing this music? And I'm like, because we had to pick from a list. And you know of the list. Then we had to filter through what works for our ensemble, you know, meaning this other piece may have culturally been a better fit for us, but it has an oboe solo, and we don't have any oboes. So that's not a good pick fit for us, or this has a really high trumpet range, and our trumpets are on the struggle bus right now. So musically, it's got to be a good fit. It has to be from the list, and it has to be from a certain level. So, we're restricted on what we can do. And then we're restricted by budget. You know, I can buy sometimes new music, but I don't necessarily want to buy all 3 pieces new, because, in addition to the piece, you have to buy 3 copies of each score for the judge. If you're buying all 3-brand new. That's an expensive endeavor. So, you know it. In my research, I found for my dissertation that women are reported as receiving lower scores than men, and one of the potential reasons why is that we define our success differently. that it's not about contest numbers and placement. And I'd like I don't know how, for how many other directors. That's true, but that is true for me.

INTERVIEWER: That's a really interesting question. I'll ask you when you're, I think, maybe answering in 2 different perspectives. One is like, you know, starting to get into the field. Maybe pre diagnosis, because I know it was recently a diagnosis for you. But then, you know, you telling your administrator, you know, I think we have different perspectives, and are you willing to serve as a reference? What was the job process like search process and interview process all of it like before? And what kind of would you anticipate it to Look like now?

ALEX: So, when I applied, I was nervous about not getting a job, because my 1st couple of rounds. my 1st round audit, like interviewing for jobs. I didn't realize that a lot of principals are not actually going to look at the applications. They check their email. So, it doesn't matter if you fill out the application online, a lot of them don't check that, they check their email. So, I put out 60 applications and only got like 2 or 3 interviews, and in that job crashed and burned in horrible, fiery flames. That school went through 7 directors in 4 years, and I was number 3 so it was. It was pretty awful, and I took the 1st job I could get, and my admin at that 1st school told me they would not give me a good reference for band only chorus, because I taught band and chorus for them and which I thought was really unfair because a lot of my issues with that band.

Is that what I was doing was very different from what the band had done in the past, because that's what the principal wanted. He didn't agree with the previous band director, but then the kids bucked me, and the parents bucked me in. The community, bucked me, and then I was caught holding the bag with admin, saying, well, you're not paying attention to the needs of your community. I'm like, no, I'm doing what I'm told to do. I'm following directions. So, their plan backfired, and I caught the back for it. So, I thought that was unfair. I took the 1st job I got because I needed to be out of that school. I needed to be out of that community desperately, and that was a middle school course position, and I didn't hate it, but I did not love it either. The 1st year was 100% virtual. So, it wasn't even really like chorus, because that was the year right, you know, when Lockdown started, or right after Lockdown started because it started in the spring of 2019. So that was the 2021 year was 100 virtual. The next year was chorus, and I was like, damn, I really don't want to keep doing this, and I was lucky in that. The band director that I worked with at that school was really excited to basically have a band director right next door, because people would ask me, what did I do for a job? And I was like, I'm a band director. They're like, oh, you teach band. And I'd answer. Well, no, I teach chorus, but I'm a band director like that's what I am. I'm just teaching chorus, which, like I knew that didn't make sense. I knew it didn't make sense, but I did not feel like I was a chorus director. I was just a band director that was teaching chorus at the time. So, I did a lot of their after-school rehearsals. He let me conduct a piece on their spring concert. I was basically like the assistant man director, and I just wasn't. During the school day. It was all after school and he got a job at his Alma mater in the same district, which was a high school, and they more or less asked him to come in because the band had dropped to be less than 10 members and he walked into our principal's office and said, The bad news is that I'm taking this job, and the good news is that I already have a replacement for you and the principal's like Oh, great! Well, who is it? And he was like, it's ALEX and the principal was like, well, I don't know about that. And weirdly, the VP. Who liked me the least, he asked her, what do you think we should do? And she said, Well, hell! If she wants it give it to her. And so, I was able to move laterally in the same school. From band director. So, it was less of like a job Hunt, and more, just like an opportunity landed in my lap for this one. I got a job offer early and took it, and I kind of regret not holding out. It was in my top choice of district. which was part of why I said yes, and it's where I live which my main reason for leaving my last job was that I had to cross Atlanta every day, which you may not be experienced with Atlanta

traffic. Atlanta drivers do not care if you live or die, they just don't, and all of Atlanta forgets how to drive if it rains for 10 min. So sometimes my commute was an hour, and sometimes it was 2 h one direction, so I was driving anywhere between 2 and 4 HA Day heavier on the 4 side. I was burnout I was having after school rehearsal 3 to 4 days a week, and then driving home 2 HI did not see my apartment in the sunlight and as much as I love the kids, I couldn't handle it. So, I applied, started applying early. I didn't even sign my contract. I was offered it, and said, no, I know I'm leaving, no matter what And I mentioned my disability in the interview. I was explicit. when they talk about, you know they ask, you know, what are your strengths and weaknesses? I list it as both. It is something that makes me, you know, really passionate, really explosive. I benefit autistically from my special interest being band. I can work long hours without burning out as much as normal people do, because this is like something that fuels me but at the same time, I struggle with things like rules I don't agree with. If I agree with the rule, and I understand your reasoning behind the rule, I will uphold it religiously, but if I do not understand your reasoning behind a rule, I am such a rebel. I am such a rebel, and I am very aggressive about it, and I'm very outspoken about it, and I've almost got myself fired multiple times for multiple jobs by being outspoken about it. And I really, I feel like it is ethically wrong to not be honest at all times, and that gets me in trouble. That's an autistic thing that gets me in trouble because other people don't want that. They want their feelings to be protected. And I just think that's not the right thing to do. And that's partly because I don't read between the lines very well, and I always feel very hurt when I realize that something someone has said to me is not what they actually meant. I feel betrayed and lied to. And so, I'm always honest with kids. I'm honest in a positive way. So, you know, I might not cut off and say, wow, that sounded awful damn like just bad dog shit terrible. I'm not gonna say that I might say, hey, that was better than last time. I can physically see more people putting down the right fingers. And I appreciate that. Now let's work on controlling our volume and our embouchure. Now that we're putting down the right fingers, because that's all true. I just didn't. I didn't say. The reason we have to work on our embouchure is because, goddamn, that sounds bad. So, I was explicit about it, and that kind of shocked me when that most of the ways that I have gotten in trouble this year or I have gotten criticism have been things related to me being autistic, and that to me was a little shocking because I was explicit about it in my interview. I told you it would be like this and if I, you know. Maybe you didn't understand me, or maybe you underestimated the level to which that was true. Maybe I

need to be more explicit. In future job hunts but and I. I already signed my contract for next year. If I get an offer somewhere else, I might consider it, but I told my I was very upfront in that conversation with my VP. And I said, this year has been really bad. I don't feel supported. I don't feel like I've been given the opportunity to be successful. If you're telling me that part of the reason, they said we weren't allowed to have concerts after school is that our quality of concerts was bad and I said, I know that wasn't my best concert ever, but I don't think it was bad now. Other. I didn't go to the orchestra concert. I cannot speak on that. I was told the orchestra concert was bad. but I wasn't there, so I can't judge that And I'm like. That's why I asked, is this because of somebody else? Or is this because of me? And the principal told me to my face that she was proud of the band, that we did a good job. Now it was not what I would consider to be my, you know my standard. But y'all didn't put students in my class until mid-October. I didn't have instruments and students' hands, not all of them, until literally 2 weeks before the concert. It wasn't going to be my best. You haven't given me the tools to be successful, and you haven't given me the time to be successful. This is my 1st year here, and both the chorus and orchestra person. It's only their second year. A rebuild takes time. At School. I went from 40 students who had none of which had experience none, because they had with our previous band director, they before the one before me they did half a year of recorders, 2 months on band instruments and then lockdown started. Then they had a whole year. That was virtual. So, then we came back in, and it's like the 8th graders had 2 months on band instruments, and that's it. So, we went from 40 true beginners to. By the time I left we had over 120, and my end of your concert was 2 and a half hours long, with 7 performing ensembles at the middle school level performing high school level music. I did that in 3 years, but I did not do that in year one that was not the case. Year one was a lot worse. And I was like, so you have to give me time to rebuild this, and this is a rebuild. And I even said, I'm not trying to criticize the director before me, but she was very much a percussionist, and we very much have different ways that we want to run our bands. And you know that's okay. But you're going to have to give me time to make this what I want it to be. And if you're not going to give me time, and you're not going to give me the resources. Then I'm out. If you can promise me that next year will be different and that you meant actions to make sure that next year will be different. I can stay, but I'm not going to stay. If it's going to be like this again, and so far, he has done things that are moving towards the direction. If it's going to be different. He told us that he's going to prioritize our scheduling 1st over everyone else, and he's

already collected our names for 7th and 8th grade. Who's 8 a who's B Day? And like. So, like that, I think, is gonna be more positive. But next year is gonna be a trial run. If it's not better. I'm not going to give him a second chance. This is the second chance.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I have followed up question. I'm currently going through the job process, right? So, a lot of this is like both research, but also like, speaks so truly to my heart.

the being transparent about your disability within your job interviews. Do you include all like all like, I know you have autism and Adhd correct? Do you include that as well, or you just kind of stick it to the both of them. Okay.

ALEX: Both, and I am aware that that may mean that someone may not hire me for that reason, because they don't have to tell you the reason they don't hire you. Technically, legally, they can't say I'm not hiring this person because they're autistic, because that's discrimination. But they might say, oh, I just feel like she's not a good fit and in their head they're like she's not a good fit, because She's neurodivergent, but I don't want to be at a school that's not going to hire me for that reason, anyway. So that's a way for me to weed out what would be a hostile work, environment or a bad work environment, because if they're not going to be chill about my disability. Then I don't want to be there anyway. And something that I think I might start doing moving forward is. I turned my camera in my job interview so that they couldn't see my pride flags, and I regret doing that because I've had issues at the school with the fact that I don't even tell people what I am. But the perception that I'm not straight has caused problems. And so, I think I might start being upfront about that, too. Because if I'm going to be in an environment where that being loud is going to be a problem, even if it's not from administration that's going to be a problem with the community or with the kids. Then that's probably not a good fit for me, because I'm not willing to bend on that and if that means I don't get a job it means I don't get a job, and my family has strongly encouraged me to continue to hide that. But I'm not willing to do that. I would rather go back to food service than make myself smaller, to be more palatable to somebody else, and something I said to somebody the other day is. if me being the way that I am, if me, being autistic is a hard pill to swallow for somebody else. Then they can just choke. I'm not going to make myself smaller, make myself different for that. And it may mean that I have less opportunities, and that's just how the world is. And it's I'm not gonna say it's okay, because it's not okay. It shouldn't be like that. But it's outside of my control. And I'm gonna let go of being upset about that. And like I said, I don't even think some people fully realize the extent of

what that's gonna mean for me in that job because I interview well, I interview very well. I put on a great performance, and that's what it is to me. It's a performance, and teaching is a performance. It's just as much a performance art as it is like a science or anything else. When I'm on the podium. I'm a persona. I'm different. And I've had people talked to me explicitly about that before I taught a summer camp. I wasn't even teaching. I was the rehearsal assistant for one of [redacted] summer camps for the one of the choral ensembles, and I had a kid walk up to me afterwards to ask me a question, and they kind of looked at me and took a step back. And they were like. Oh, you're really short. And I was like, okay. I've been standing in front of you for a whole week. At this point I didn't get shorter, and they were like, well, you just seem so much bigger. When you're in front of the group. When you talk, you seem big. And I'm like, Yeah, I have a big personality, a big persona I'm very explosive, and how? How I present myself. And like I've had sometimes people, too. I've had students look at me and go. I don't know why, but I'm really intimidated by you and I'm like, I'm super nice. I call you Bruh like, for God's sakes, like I'm only 5 foot tall. You're literally a linebacker in the football team. Why are you afraid of me? And they go? I don't know. There's just I just feel like I shouldn't cross you. I feel like I shouldn't disappoint you. There's just. There's just a reason why I should not fuck up in here. And I'm like, you know what? That's okay. I'm glad that you feel motivation to like not to be a goblin. That's fine. I'm not gonna bite your head off, man. In fact, I get more formal and more respectful the angrier I am. So, if I start calling kids, ma'am, and, sir, they know like shit hit the fan, if they all of a sudden, or sir, and not like Bro. What are you doing? If it's like, what are you doing, sir? They're like, Oh, shit. Bad. That's bad abort. Go back, do something else. So, you know I'm explicit about it because I can't hide it. I can't hide it long term. I can hide it in an interview, but I can't hide its long term. Even one of my vice principals, the one over connections every now and again will ask me, he's like, ALEX, what's wrong? Are you okay? And I'm like Dude. It's just Tuesday. That's just what my face looks like, and I don't have the energy to mask that in the hallway. I'm not going to have this face on the podium. I'm not going to have this face while I'm walking around my rehearsal, and because I walk around my rehearsal a lot, I don't stay on the podium especially at the beginner level on 8th grade. I spend more time on the podium. Like beginners. I'm walking around. I'm fixing percussion. I'm talking to them from the back of the room. I'm like that is a different face. That's an explosive, expressive face. Me in the hallway. I can't. I can't be asked to pretend that I. I give a shit about being happy and kind, and

whatever, and like not being autistic. So, I have to be upfront about it, or else. People think that there's something else wrong with me and I'm having a bad time, or that there's something you know, wrong in my life, and I'm like. No, I'm just like that. It's what my face looks like.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And I know in like your doctoral program, you've asked for accommodations in terms of like communication desires, like reasonable ones. Absolutely. I'm sorry reading that back. I'm like that is ridiculous. Do you like? Do you ask for accommodations within your job of employment or in terms of like? Okay.

ALEX: Year that I did, and it was just as disappointing, if not more disappointing, than it was at the university level. So, you're right. Most of what I've asked for. Accommodations are just like something that you should be doing anyway for everyone, because that's basics of professionalism. You should not be the reason I asked is because I felt my boundaries were being pushed and violated in ways that were unacceptable. For example, with the scheduling shenanigans. We kept getting called into emergency meetings with less than 5 min notice, and having a bunch of stuff dumped on us, and one of my requested accommodations that was denied was that you give me 24 h notice of any meeting just 24 hours. Just give me tell me, the day before that you want to meet. And they said, well, Admin may not know. You know I was like, well, fine put an exception in there for emergencies. But this isn't an emergency. Why are we, you know, and provide me a description of what the meeting is in about? I just want I would like to meet with you tomorrow during your second planning block regarding your schedule. That's it, that's all I want. And that was not being provided even when I asked for it, and then Hr. Shot me down and said, That's an unreasonable accommodation. You just need to learn how to manage your time better. and I was like. That's not what this is about. That's not what this is about. This is why I have an anxiety disorder, because you can't behave. And I was told a lot of the things that I were requesting were unreasonable, that it was just me not being able to manage my time, that they could not provide these things to me, and it was just things like we have something we call ELT extended learning time, and that's they. They work on ungraded assignments that are core classes, and they make all of the connections. Teachers push into other classes, particularly for the teams that have high numbers of like English language learners or IEPS, and 504 etc., etc. I am not certified in English, and my Spanish is like rudimentary at best. I study every day, but, like the kids know that mine is bad, and so like they'll sometimes I'll be able to answer questions and give directions. But, like sometimes the kids make fun of me for it,

and like, I'm not the teacher that I am partnering with his. I've actually the main benefit of me going to ELT is that I, my Spanish is getting better because he delivers every direction in English and Spanish and like I'm not actually contributing. I'm not doing anything. I am not useful for the children beyond like I got them a pencil, or you know I like, sometimes the kids are like, is my answer correct? And I look at him like fuck. If I know dude, I'm not certified for Ela. I barely speak this language like and like, especially a lot of it like that's about like metaphor. And I'm very literal. I wouldn't say like, I don't understand explicit metaphor, but like. I just feel like I'm not useful. And so, one of my accommodations that I asked for was the week of a concert. I would prefer that the day before the day of, and the day after. I do not attend ELT. It's only 40 min. It's only 3 days, twice a year, 3 times a year. and I was told absolutely not. That's an unreasonable accommodation. That is a part of your job description that's part of other duties as assigned and I'm like, are you fucking kidding me? You can't give me what essentially an hour and a half an hour and a half, 3 times a year to prepare for process and then decompress from a concert, and I explicitly listed like, because the concert is an abandonment of my normal routine. And it's a high-pressure situation, autistic wise. I'm asking for a large part of that day, and that is very difficult. I'm asking for the day after to decompress just to like. Be in my room alone, for like an extra 30 min that day would be a huge help, and I was, I was told, that was just unreasonable. And then, if I couldn't manage my time to plan a concert, then I needed to. This is what I was explicitly told. You'll love this one. I was explicitly told that my psychologist needed to redo their evaluation of me, and mark that I was not actually able to complete my job descriptions so that they could reallocate me to a better fitting position within the county. And I was like, I'm not doing that because you're gonna make me not be a band director. I can be a band director. That's not what I'm asking. That's what they were asking. And I told my psych that my psych was like, I'm not going to redo my evaluation because my evaluation was correct, and to redo my evaluation based off someone's opinion who is not a medical health professional and not your therapist, and not a part somebody that I work with would be a violation of my ethical criteria, and I could lose my license. And she was like, did they put that in writing? And I was like, oh, no, they did not. They made sure that was a verbal direction. So. They were like, well, you know, if you need to decompress, you can use the staff wellness room, and I was like, I don't know what that is or where that is. You never informed me that that exists. and you don't give me the time to go there like, yeah, I have planning time, but I have shit to plan. I can't go to the

decompression room, or like. Right, which are. And they were like, well, you're saying that these meetings are a problem, but you only have faculty meetings once a month, and I was like, we have full faculty meetings once a month. We have department meetings also once a month. Then we have collaborative planning with our team. And then we have all these extra meetings for scheduling and planning and recruitment and blah blah blah blah blah like I have meetings every single week. sometimes multiple times a week, sometimes multiple times a day. There are days in which I get 0 planning blocks, because y'all call so many goddamn meetings, 70% of which could be a fucking email. And honestly, I would prefer it to be an email because I have verbal processing issues. I have audio processing delays courtesy of autism which I have informed you about in the beginning of the year. My VP asked me, what ways can I support you? And I said anything that's important. I would very much prefer it to be an email or to be in writing, even if we discuss it verbally, so that I have because I have a system with emails. and I hate that we use outlook because the system gets fucked up because outlook is not conducive to my system, and I have not found a way to better adjust my system yet. Gmail will only display 50 emails at a time, and I only keep things in my inbox that are active problems or things that require an action from me. Once the action or problem has been resolved, it gets filed away and archived into an appropriate folder. So, I can reference it later, when I need receipts, when somebody says you didn't tell me that. And I can say actually, on Tuesday, August 14, the at 7 53 pm, I sent you an email that said, Blah blah, to which you responded, okay, sure. Which means you read the email. So, I keep a system. And I'm like I need, even if we go over it verbally, I'd prefer for you to send it to me via email in that doesn't happen either. It's not nothing that I asked for, nothing like the accommodations they gave me. I signed off on, because it's basically nothing. I can't even really tell you all what was on that form, because it's not stuff, I'm gonna use or need. They were like, we might give you extra coaching or guidance when it comes to concerts and stuff. And I'm like again, I don't need that. I don't need that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, also from like, who.

ALEX: From my VP. Who has not had any background in any connections class period, much less fine arts. He's an academic guy. He's a math guy. And it like to be fair for he, I think he went to bat first, because he got the principal to change the mind instead of saying concerts during school day, we are doing a massive festival with all 3 groups performing where they're gonna admin is going to pay for and rent a bouncy house. They're going to provide a barbecue

and charge for play. They're gonna print our programs for us. And we're gonna put advertisements in it, and we get all the proceeds. So, we turned a punishment into a fundraiser essentially. So, I'm like, okay, cool, like, he can run that kind of event, that's, fine. But whenever he does observations so far, the only truly good observation evaluation score I've gotten from him where I did not. There we're given. My district uses a completely different system than the rest of the State. So, it's not even like what most people use. You get graded on each category. One to 4, 3 is good. 4 is like outstanding teacher of the year level shit, but a 2 is bad. If you were constantly getting twos, you might be put on a professional development plan. You're expected to be getting at least threes. I've gotten a 2 on almost every single evaluation, except for my last one, and it's the one time he stopped by where I was not teaching a performance lesson. I was teaching a history lesson an academic lesson. That's the only time I've been given, because so he just doesn't when one of the other ones he was like, well, you didn't check for the vocabulary, and I said, yes, I did, and he said, but you didn't ask them any questions, and I was like I didn't have to because it was on the page. Forte was on the page. We're covering dynamics right now. They played forte. I didn't have to ask if they played too soft. I would have stopped and addressed it, but they played forte when it's forte, and they played piano when it was piano, which means they understood the vocabulary. I didn't have to ask. And he was like, oh, well, you need to ask. So, it's just he. It's not even malicious. He literally just doesn't understand. We actually, he assigned half of my department for mandatory coaching from the district this year on what our district calls it quality plus teaching strategies. It's School district's system, and it's different from everywhere else and the coach showed up, and she was like. I have a feeling you didn't know I was coming until I showed up. Is that true? And I was like, yep, and I'm mad about it. I'm mad about it, and I'm very mad about it. And this is actually the only positive things happened to me regarding accommodations is with her, and she was like, I want. I had a feeling that was true, and I also have a feeling that you probably are already doing quality plus teaching strategies, and that the real issue is that your Admin doesn't know what that looks like for a fine Arts class. So, what I'm going to help you with isn't how to do the strategies, but how to how to spin it to your admin, so that they understand, and I shared with her in that 1st meeting. I was like, I want you to know that I'm really mad. But I'm not mad at you, and I know it probably looks like I'm mad at you because it's showing on my face, because I don't mask that very well, like I'm autistic, and I can't control that. But I'm not mad at you, and I'm not upset that you're

here, and I'm gonna try to get whatever I can get like from you. But I'm just not mad at you and I don't. I don't want to like make you feel bad because you think I'm mad at you or taking it out on you. And she called me the next day, and she said, thank you for sharing your diagnosis with me. Is there anything I can do? Accommodations wise to make this a more effective experience for you? And I was like. Oh, my God! I didn't even ask you for anything, and you reached out to me for it. And I said, you know what, honestly, the only thing that I think I really need or would benefit from is, you know, the PowerPoint that you used. If you could just send me whichever PowerPoint you're going to use like a week in advance so that I can read it, because I'm honestly going to get more out of reading it than I am from listening to. You. Talk about it, and if I can read it beforehand, I'll be. I'll better be able to talk to you, because I've had time to process it, and like clockwork a week before every single time she sent it to me. And I got accepted to present at our State Level Conference this year, and she's like the instructional specialist for fine arts for the whole county. And I emailed my admin and said, hey, this conference that I'm going to. I was actually accepted to present at it. My research. Just so that you know I'm representing the district, and I'm representing our school, and my admin didn't say shit. But I CC, her on that email, because, you know, the district likes to show off teachers who are doing it. She sent a response back and was like, Hey, that's amazing. Just so, you know, we also offer support for people doing presentations like just for everybody. And if you want to, you know, book an appointment like you can, you know. Do your whole presentation to me, and I'll give you feedback, and support and blah blah and I replied back, hey, thank you so much, and I really appreciate that you are encouraging because no one else said shit about it. And I was like, I'm working with me. It's my dissertation research. So, I'm already going through that with my dissertation chair. So, I'm probably not going to use the district supports. But I really appreciate that you let me know that was there, because I didn't know it was there. And then she came to my session and took pictures and then send me.

INTERVIEWER: Sweet, yeah.

ALEX: That's like. So, the support from the district has been like the fine arts part of the district, not Hr. Hr. Sucks ass, because Hr. only cares about protecting the school's image. They don't actually care about protecting me. So, until I say the word lawsuit shit's not gonna happen the district support has been great, and, in fact, I had to invoke Hr. Earlier this year, and I was really nervous about doing it when we came back in January my schedule was super fucked up.

Kids who had been kicked out were put back in kids who were kicked out for calling me. Slurs were put back in my Tuba section leader, my clarinet section leader, my trumpet section leader, and 3 others of me. My top kids were all just randomly removed because the person doing scheduling didn't understand that band was a full year class. And so, kids were put back in because it's like, well, it doesn't matter that they didn't have band in the fall whatever. So, it was all fucked up and then, in the process of fixing it, she kept fixed like fucking up other kids. And so, I kept sending in corrections. And I got an email that, said ALEX. You've been sending a flurry of emails. And that is so unprofessional, and you need to step back and just let them fix it. And I replied back, actually, that is not the case. What is happening is that more mistakes are being added to the list, and I am adding the corrections. In addition. Hr. Made it very clear to me at the beginning of the year that, due to my perceived sexuality. If I lose enough students, my employment could be threatened. Also. You have spread across my competition students, my Lg students across 4 ensembles and removed some of my best players which is going to impact my scores which could impact my future employment should I need to seek it as you can. Imagine, these things have made this a very negative experience for me that's beginning to impact my mental health in a very severe way. If you would like a copy of my communications with Hr. On that matter, I would be more than happy to provide them to you. All I want is for this problem to be fixed, and so I can get back to get demand. So, anything else I can do to be supportive in this endeavor. Please let me know. Thank you and I got a reply back. That was Miss **ALEX**. Thank you for your clear and consistent communication. I appreciate it as do the schedulers. Please feel free to focus on our conversations without involving Hr., thank you. And I was like it's what if I, yeah… That's what I thought, you wanted to push me around. And I said, no, and if you continue doing that, I'm gonna invoke Hr. And I'm going to be a big pain in your ass whether or not it actually ends up doing anything nobody wants to have to deal with. Hr. That's how you lose your job. And I was like, I and I put in there. I emailed you a completed list on this date, and it was not fixed. And then I emailed corrections on this date, and it was not fixed. And then I emailed you this date and it was not fixed. So, I put in the email, my paper trail. Very, and I manage. I also made sure to CC the connections head, not just my VP, my department head as well, so that it was not just him receiving this email. And I'm like I shouldn't have to do that. And it made me cry. Sending that email made me cry, and my fiancé was like, why are you that upset about it? He's like, yeah, he was being kind of a jerk. But like that shouldn't be that upsetting. And I'm

like, it's this upsetting to have to deal with conflict, and it's upsetting to have to invoke Hr. And it's upsetting that I feel like I'm going to lose my job. Or this is just gonna that I'm going to have to keep dealing with kids who are being ugly to my face. And like part of it is that my Spanish is good enough to know they're talking about me, but it's not good enough to know the word for Dyke but I can infer from context clues that that's what you called me. I can infer from the rest of the sentence that I understood that this was about. You know me being LGBT, so they're like, well, what did they say? I'm like, well, I can't tell you, because I don't. I don't know that Spanish word, but I know that it was negative, and I know that's what it was about. And when I asked them, what did you say, they said, oh, I was asking for a pencil, and I'm like, no, I know the word for pencil, and that wasn't it. Word pencil was nowhere in that sentence. I know the word for pencil.

INTERVIEWER: Something to there's been. I wish the literature was more because it makes it to where it's like we're at a point of lived experiences but not documented experiences. There was Parker, and Draves did another study. It was like their earlier one of music majors before they got into Antoine and I forgot what her name was, Lindsay. They kind of looked into what are the essential functions. And when we read these job applications and job descriptions. A lot of them will directly counter what our disabilities are me being visually impaired. There's a lot of job descriptions that put in essential functions, depth, perception, close vision, far vision, small print, ability to like, hear and speak and do all these things. And it's sometimes they get so descriptive, like specifically to physical disabilities where it's like being able to lift your right arm, lift your left arm, lift your right leg like they will get down in the nitty gritty. Have you felt that this is true also for neurodivergent disabilities.

ALEX: I feel like the one that really is the problem, for that is the one that says other duties as assigned, because most of the problems I've had have been in. It's not even that any of the job stuff itself. No individual task is too much. What's too much is all of it together. And that's the other duties as assigned like, that's they can just keep piling shit on, because that's part of your job description. The only other thing is some band director positions like list things that I don't think I have a problem with communication. I think I'm very direct and very clear. I say exactly what I mean, and I say everything that I think that's a combo of the autism and the Adhd autism means I mean everything I say, and Adhd means, I say, every thought. I think there's no filter. They just they're born verbally, not internally sometimes. And I but you know, autism

comes with the stereotype that we're bad at communication. I'm not the one that's bad at communication. Neurotypical people are bad at communication. They're the ones who don't say what they mean, who speak in between the lines and expect you to play some kind of elaborate guessing game as to what they really mean. Like you didn't tell me to fold the laundry. You spoke. Gee! What a nice day it is, or to hang the laundry outside you said, gee! What a nice day it is! You wanted me to hang the wet laundry. That's not what you said. That is not what you said. so. But in the band director job description sometimes, especially with high school jobs, there's the stuff like managing booster clubs and things that fall under like these social categories that for example, in my 1st job I was told that I had a problem communicating to parents that I wasn't communicating clearly. I had a weekly email letter that went out every single week. I had band parents who would do phone trees for stuff that was really big deals. I had every single announcement projected onto my board. Every single day I had printout calendars that I gave children, and I verbally went over it with their children every single day, and they told me that my communication was not clear and that parents were not getting relevant information and I literally sat there, and I was like, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to tattoo it onto their child? Do you want me to send carrier pigeons smoke signals like, what else am I not doing? I also had a website that had a calendar posted on it. And I was like, it's also on the calendar on the website that they can link their phones to. They don't even have to like. All they have to do is click one button. And all of a sudden, every band event is pre-programmed into their phone, and they were like, no one's gonna read your stupid little website. And then when I left, I got a text that was like, what's the login for the band website? And I was like, it's actually tied to my Facebook. So, you can't have it. And they were like, but it's the band's website. And I was like, you told me, nobody was gonna use that website. So, fuck off. Y'all are terrible like you can't have. If you want the website so bad, build it yourself. I spent hours and hours and hours building that website from scratch. Oh, we also had social media accounts that I managed and posted weekly updates put like everything. So, I was like, what? But it's not a neurotypical way of communicating. I guess I don't know what that even means. I don't. I don't understand how anybody thought my communication wasn't clear, but that's the stereotype that I feel like affects us the most is people thinking that we're not clear and in reality, I can only think of a couple times in my career where I feel like I truly just have not clearly communicated my expectation to kids. One was this past week. I changed my mind on what I wanted the kids to wear, and I wasn't

very explicit about it, and I ate shit for it. I had a parent get in my face and tell me that our kids looked unprofessional and awful, and blah blah, and the other bands look so much nicer than us. And then another parent, a white parent told me that our mostly black kids looked really Ghetto on stage, because they weren't wearing the same level of uniform as everybody else. They were all wearing the band polo shirts, but I didn't. I told them it didn't matter what they wore bottoms. Wise I should have been explicit, and I should have, and later I was like, you know, what scratch that make it concert black bottoms. But some kids didn't get the memo, and that's my fault I wasn't. I said it, but it wasn't what was written, and then I had it written in another place differently. So that's like one of the only times I really feel like I've not been clear, and it's because I changed my mind because I was overwhelmed. And I'm doing this district. And this was a pre [redacted] event, where you have mock judges. Come in and judge you. And at my last school this was just done like in the cafeteria with the judges, and that's it. I didn't realize this was going to be a full auditorium. Full audience spectacle. Because that's not what it was like in my last district, my last school. So, and then I had another. I had another parent actually blame it. She came to me. She sent me a message, and she came up to me and was like you put it in the letter that went home that they should wear black bottoms. I didn't read it clearly. I am so sorry. and I'm like, you know what I was, unclear. And I told the kids something different verbally. It's on me, too, she was like, but it's on us as parents to make sure they have the right thing, and I should have. You were very explicit, very clear in your letter, and a lot of kids were like my parents. Don't read the letter for every event. I have a letter and itinerary what to wear, what to bring, where to be addresses, emergency contact stuff, and then they have to fill out a permission slip that says, I have read and acknowledged all of this information. Sometimes parents don't even sign it in the right place because they don't even. It's like you have to initial statements. They don't initially or they check. No, instead of yes, and I'm like, well, you can't go on the trip because they check no, and the kids have to go. Oh, damn it, and I have to go back because parents are just signing shit which can't really blame it, for my mom didn't even sign shit when I was in school. I signed it because we have the same initials, so I just signed in with the 1st letter of my name and my last name, and I never had to learn how to forge your signature, because it was just mine. My dad taught me how to forge his signature because he didn't want to sign shit so he like sat there and taught me how to forge his name so. But I was like I sent home paper, you know it's so clear, and that's the one that I feel like really gets people. Everything else is

manageable. If you know how to work, it right. I have elaborate part of the reason. Part of the reason I was undiagnosed so long is because I had systems in place. And then I read something that was like, if someone asks you if you struggle with X, and you say but no, I have a system. You should say yes, because most people don't need a system. And I'm like, oh, yeah, there's for everything. And part of me. My struggling this year at my new job has been that because it's a new job I'm having to change the systems because the expectations are different than my last district. And the social dynamics are different in a very weird way. All the teachers go by each other's 1st names. It's a little weird. My last district. It was all last names all the time. I was told that part of that is a difference with it being a black school versus a white school. In my last job the teaching force was mostly not white. But my current job, even though the kids are mostly not white, a lot of the teachers are, and I don't know if that's still the difference, because it was a shock for me going to last names. But then it was a shock going back. and part of that I feel like is also being a female band director, having a gendered 1st name, even though my name is by gender, like I find them in the band world. I prefer to go by ALEX, not by ALEX, because that's or like. I didn't even realize I enjoyed that until somebody called me I oh, my God! Somebody down there called me Alexander, and I like looked at him just like what the fuck and he was like. Oh, my bad! And I was like. I mean, it's don't call me that. Don't call me that not even my mom calls me that. Don't call me that. It's like you. In fact, you've been demoted. You can't even call me ALEX anymore. You have to call me ALEX because you use my full 1st name. You've you lost 1st name privileges. Stop it. So, my mom is like, I tell people I don't go by Alexander, even though she called me ALEX from the day I was born.

INTERVIEWER: There's also like band culture outside of school culture, like we.

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: In our world a whole different thing, and choir has something different and.

ALEX: Yes, yes, they. And because main culture is military, a lot of people go by last names and band culture. And even like me, my work besties the band director, who, like, got me into his position when he went up to the High School level. His name is TM, and the only time I ever call him T is when I use my ultra–White Valley girl voice as like a joke, and I'll be like, Oh, my God! It's my BFF Bestie T, and he every time he's like, oh, ALEX, stop it! I'm like what's up,

Bestie, and I'll even put it like I put sparkles around it when I text him that. And he's like I know exactly how you said that. So, it.

INTERVIEWER: I love this.

ALEX: So, yeah, I think that's the only thing in the job descriptions that's really unmanageable. Some of it is difficult with those disabilities, you know, maintain organization and blah blah. And I'm like, yeah, those are difficult. But it's not outside of my abilities. I'm not unable to be organized. It's just sometimes more difficult, or my organizational structure doesn't make sense to other people, but it does to me. As long as I know what's going on it doesn't matter. Everybody, as long as I know, and the kids know what's going on. It's fine. I find that I'm often more organized than other people are because I have to accommodate my own miss. I even sometimes tell kids like the I designate areas as like the dumping ground for shit. So that doesn't pile up everywhere, and you can tell how bad I am how bad I feel by the height of the shit on my desk, the taller that pile gets the worse. Things are going for me right now, and it usually progressively climbs until we hit a concert, and then I deal with all of it, and it goes back down, and it's like closer to the next concert. It rises up, but it's quarantined. It's in my office. It's not in my room. It's away from my inventory and my music library, and all those other things that I need to be like pristine. I actually got a con a contract offers. I was afraid they wouldn't offer me one for next year. Happened, right now. Yeah, with all the stuff that was with them, like being denied disability accommodations and all the extra training, because they also made me do additional classroom management training when like I don't. I've not written anybody up all year. I've had like a couple of minor incident reports, which is just like a formal thing we have to put in the computer system so that you can justify why you write somebody up later. You said, this is a pattern of behavior. But like I don't. I haven't had to send anybody to the most issue I've had is these kids need to get out of why are you putting me in classroom management training unless you're trying to prove a case for? Why I shouldn't be rehired. So that's where what I was thinking. And I talked to another band director that IA female band director, that I really respect. Who's also new to School district, but I've known her outside of School district. She actually like got me a job offer after I accepted that really terrible job down in City. Which sucks? Because if I just waited a week, I would have had a much better experience. But I asked her like, hey, how's it going? And she was like, these are the worst evaluations I've gotten in my life. And I was like, damn, and I was like, because I feel like they're trying to build a case against me. And she's like,

honestly, that's how I feel, too. So, it's not just me. And I was like, I really hate that. You're experiencing that. But I'm glad to know that it's not like a just me thing. And our chorus director was like me and the orchestra director do like way we're like the stuff that you're getting dunked on. We do that, too, but we're not getting dumped on for it or punished for it. And they know we did like she's like; I don't get the same level of criticism that you do, and I don't know why.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that comes? Do you think if you didn't say…. do you think if you didn't disclose your disabilities, it would be different. Or do you think that this is just.

ALEX: No, I think I can only hide it for so long. That's why I'm explicit about it, because the mask slips eventually and especially on the long days on concert days on field trip days. I cannot keep that mask up. I feel like it's if I say it out loud. I can wear it like armor. Because if I don't say it out loud you can. You can justify your dislike of me because I'm annoying if you know that I have, Adhd, and that that's what's annoying to you is my symptom. Then you're ablest. if you if you list that as the reason why you don't like me. So, having that externally is like an armor, because I can't keep it hidden. And most people know like I, I even had people where I was like, hey, I got diagnosed with autism, and a lot of people were like, oh, you didn't already know that I'm like no idea. Told me. No, I didn't know that I thought it like this. I thought everybody had a very elaborate system, for how they put on socks I did not know that that was not normal. And so, a lot of people were like, you didn't. You didn't know, because we all knew so I can't hide it. I weaponize it.

INTERVIEWER: There's. It's been interesting because there's people like there's no person within the study that is similar, which has been really nice in a lot of ways. But one of the people that is in the study is somebody that I've known for a really long time, and the way that they put it was, I've seen how people talk about you to you, and I've seen how people talk about you to your back when they don't think that we're friends and whatnot, and that like that experience has led them to not tell people that.

ALEX: I actually had several experiences this week where somebody said something to me not realizing I fit into the category of people they were talking about in a very negative way.

One was with autism, where we have a shared student, that comes in and practices every morning but was failing because he wasn't turning in his homework multiple classes, and then they'll be. It's not that he's not doing work. He's just working on the wrong thing. like he's

prioritizing. She's like, yeah, he has trouble prioritizing. He's probably autistic or something. And I was like you said you said that with a tone I'm autistic, too. You know, there's not like a problem with that human wasn't related to disability. It was related to both race and sexuality, and that I think she thought because I was a fellow white woman, I would agree with her, but she said that she, as a Christian conservative white woman, is the real societal victim. because the woke Gay left just keeps shoving it down. Everyone's throat and she said, she didn't believe in like diversity doesn't believe in it. I was like as like concept like, what do you mean? You don't believe in it like what you teach it at a mostly not white school. Why are you here? If you don't like these kids. Why are you here? And I, her response. She was like shoving it down your throats. I was like what you describe as shoving down everyone's throat is just me living my life as someone who had a trans wife and she was like. Basically, her response was like, oh, but you're one of the good ones, and I was just like. The first, best time to not say this out loud was before you started talking, and the second-best time is now. Stop it, and she followed me down the hallway like we just kept talking about it. And she was like, and then people demonize me because of my faith. And they just act like, I'm gonna be ugly because of my faith. And I was like, because you are and because 95% of my interactions with people who are severely religious. When they find out that I'm not straight. It's a problem. And they're ugly. And I even told her. The only place where I have not felt judged in a religious setting has been an alcoholics anonymous and addicts and addicts anonymous because my I'm not an addict or an alcoholic, but my dad is an alcoholic, and my best friend is both an alcoholic and an addict, and so I have spent many, many like throughout my childhood doesn't like hundreds of hours in Aa meetings, because my both my parents, like were self-employed and ran their own businesses. And so, I went to work. I went everywhere with them like if my dad went to Aa. I went to like. And that's the only place where I have not felt judgment in a religious setting is from people who get are judged for who they are. Essentially so it I was just like I need to get a shirt or something that just has something on it. So, it's like, please don't say able to shit to me, or just a shirt that says I am autistic. Don't I need to dress gayer at work. So, people stop saying this shit to me like I don't know what I can do to make you not be like that. But yeah, I hate it. When people say things like that. They think I'm going to agree. Or they say something negative about one of my students in a way that they think is acceptable or appropriate or even just dismissive. I have a student who requires a pair probe for medical reasons. He's got physical disabilities and requires, like a

catheter and several other things, but he works hard, and he plays his music, and he learns his stuff, and he's very diligent, and if he has a playing test. He comes to me not the other way around. And not only that, even though he has mobility issues, he doesn't stop stacking chairs until all the chairs are stacked. My able-bodied students will stand there and talk, he continues stacking chairs, but he could not go on field trips that a pair pro in the school won't provide one. So, I did. I paid for it out of the man Budget because I had to, and I had to explain to admin why it was important for him to go on these trips. Why, he deserved to go, and I shouldn't have had to see that.

INTERVIEWER: Access, equality.

ALEX: Yes, for his, for his contributions to be valued for me to say he's a valuable member of this band, and he needs to go on this competition trip. And his mom has been very appreciative of it and I'm like; I disclose my disability to her. I was like, look, I get it. My disability is not visible, but I get it, and I'm always going to advocate for equal access and rights for my students. And I think it's off and like I didn't find out before a winter concert until it was too late for me to get a pair pro and I and she ended up bringing himself and doing it herself. And I was like, I am so sorry, and I really wish that I've been told before, and I don't blame you for not telling me, because this is his 8th grade year, and no one has ever provided it before. But I promise you I will make sure that he is provided for moving forward. I know that you didn't know that you could tell me to expect differently, but I'm gonna make sure that happens for him.

INTERVIEWER: That is a lawsuit like waiting to happen.

ALEX: Oh, yeah, like, why? And it's like, oh, well, he doesn't play an important part. He doesn't need to go or one of them. He didn't. She opted his mom, opted him out of one of our field trips in the fall because it was at a football game, and he was gonna have accessibility issues in the stadium with like getting in and out of the bleachers and stuff like that. So, she just opted for him not to go, and I was like again, like I can get a pair of probes like they have ramps like they have to meet disability requirements to a certain extent, and whatever else her needs like, please tell me, and I will like do everything in my power to make sure we get it. But it was too late again, too late! At that point. And I said, I don't understand why that's not the default.

INTERVIEWER: It's ridiculous!

ALEX: And the schools are. We're not paying for the trip because it's outside of the school day. If it was during the school day we pay for it, but it's outside of the school day.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay, sorry. I'm digesting it. All.

ALEX: Yeah, no, and it cost me it cost me a hundred $50 per trip. For him to go, which, like is not. it's absolutely worth. It could be even way more expensive than that. It would still be worth it to me. But it's a significant portion of our yearly budget to pay for him to go on all these trips, and I'm like the school really should be picking up that bill and not the band. Oh, but if the school's not going to take care of it, I'm going to take care of it.

INTERVIEWER: There has to be something I need to read like what 5 0 4 says. But I'm pretty sure thing in there that is like that is.

ALEX: I think they kind of wrote it off as like. Oh, well, he's probably not that interested, anyway, because he plays percussion, and I don't. I've never been given his 5 0, 4 or Iep. I'm actually he's got a meeting for it in a month, and I was invited to that meeting. So, I'm gonna go. But I was just given based my expectation, based off the parts that he played last year, which was just bass drum. Only bass drum, that's it. and with the kind of idea that, like he can keep steady beat, and that's it. But don't give him like he doesn't need written music, or, you know, not like a real, you know, real contributor to the he's not playing real music and through talking to him and getting his homework assignments. I was like, damn! He's doing really well. Why does he begin being given parts like he can't do well, and even if there's like a mobility issue with playing some of the mountain equipment like we can adjust that like, if he needs to sit, I can lower a board if he need like, can't play notes at a certain tempo. We can readjust the part if he doesn't have the dexterity to do it, but it's not that he doesn't. I? Though he. The understanding I have was that he didn't have the intellectual capacity to play it based off what the previous director like provided for me and that's just not the case. And because I wasn't given a 5 0 4 Iep I didn't know, and his pair pro doesn't understand music, so she wasn't able to like advocate musically on his behalf because she didn't understand the music, anyway. I've been giving him more auxiliary parts like I still put him on bass drum a good bit, and have been kind of like working in other stuff and like doing someone's playing tests on balance and things like that, so that he can get a more well-rounded, an actual music education as a percussionist and not just a I don't know what to do with you, so here's a part that you can't screw up. Too bad.

INTERVIEWER: When I was a kid, I failed all the vision tests because

but you know, in California they do them every other year. It's like vision, hearing, vision, hearing all through elementary school and my ophthalmologist, I think, just never figured

that he should advocate, and so I was told I would drive until I was like 16. I was told I would see, and my vision is like it is noted in the medical books like albinism does not improve. There is no treatment for albinism. There's no world where it gets better, and I don't know if this information just wasn't out there in 2,000, but we were advised to not seek out assistance until my mom worked at my high school and in special education, and her coworker was like Terry, what are you doing? But I realize now, like, had I been put in into a program because of a physical disability, I would have been segregated into the special education classroom and away from the other students. I was advised to not take ap classes. I was advised to like not to do all of these things. There's something up here, but there's nothing on document up here. Everything I have on paper is physical, and it is especially at the time. It is appalling to me what people do with physical disabilities. They categorize them in separate locations, that they don't exist.

ALEX: And I think sometimes people perceive him as having more intellectual issues than he has because he has difficulty talking. But I and again. I don't even know what his real diagnosis is. I haven't been involved in any of his meetings yet. I will be by the end of the month, but because he has a harder time expressing himself. People assume that there's something intellectual, too, and I'm like, but if you look at his written work. It's very obvious that it's not even if there is something up there. It's not impairing his ability to complete the work that we're asking. So, there may be an intellectual thing. But there's not theirs, not some there's no reason to treat him like he can't do this. And especially like he. He works hard, and he's very diligent, and it's obvious that he cares, and I always try to make sure that I acknowledge his positive contributions, even like when it is just like, okay, we don't have a I don't have a mallet board that I'm gonna have to buy a stand. We don't have one that goes low enough for him to sit. And so sometimes when we're working on scale stuff, he'll stay on bass drum and keep tempo for State people be like, hey, thank you for providing a steady beat like I appreciate that that actually like really helped some folks up here are having trouble counting for. So, you're a boon right now. And, Yeah, just I don't feel like it. Shouldn't I feel like some? Maybe it was from the previous band director valuing performance over student experience. I don't know. Maybe it's that she just didn't feel like she was equipped with the tools to be able to adequately provide for him. Maybe she was just sticking to her guns and being like. No, the band doesn't need to pay for this. The school should. I don't know. I don't know why he wasn't given equitable access.

Interview 5 (3.16.25)

ALEX: my dissertation research at 2 separate conferences one Friday and one Saturday.

INTERVIEWER: How did that go?

ALEX: It was fine. Most of the people I presented to were on my committee. In the conference where I actually had, like one was a poster session. One was like an actual like room, and the room one. They forgot me like me. They accepted me. I registered, and then they just did not put me on the program. And when I emailed, they replied back. We're just like sorry our bad. We'll amend the program, but they never put out an amendment for the program. And in the opening keynote thing they were like, oh, some people didn't show up like these. And so, the person who's originally my room didn't show up. So, they listed. That person saying is not showing up and then said. but there's probably something in that room at that time, so y'all can just still choosing. So, people didn't know what it was. So, I was like, nobody's gonna come because they don't know what's in that room. And my chair was leading a class at the time. That's like multiple cohorts in one class, and she sent the cohort. That's like the oldest out to go to my session. So, the only people in my session were like, because my chair sent them, so I didn't have like a room of people. It just was like, really stupid that it's only because my chair saved the day. Essentially.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that's really frustrating.

ALEX: Yeah, and I was like. And at 1st I was like, is this because of my disability, as in not like, because they're discriminating against me. But like, did I fuck up the registration? Did I fill it out and not hit? Submit? Did was there another form? I was supposed to submit, because there was a thing that was like, if you're presenting if you're presenting like, upload your PowerPoints to this using this form. And I was like, is it because I didn't upload a PowerPoint because I didn't see that they're like, and then we'll make it available to the people for the conference. But talking to other presenters, it sounds like I'm not the only one who is like screwed over, so I don't think it was me this time, which is rare. It's very rare, for like a big screw up like that, to not be my fault like. Before I was diagnosed. The way I viewed myself, and like this is like harsh language. This is the actual language I use like towards myself was that I was just a fuck up, and then it was only a matter of time before I fucked up again. and I, no matter what I did, no matter how many systems I put into place, no matter how many times I double, checked, triple, checked. I was just delaying the inevitable, which is that I was gonna fuck up and knowing that, like those are symptoms, and that like I, I can, I can put systems in place that control those systems.

But they're not like foolproof. They're never going to be foolproof. because the more stressed out I am, the more systems I need and the more support I need has allowed me to like, forgive myself and kind of like change that narrative of I'm not a fuck up. There's just something wrong with me, and a lot of people like when I say that there's something wrong with me. They go. Oh, there's nothing wrong with you, I'm like, no, there is. There's something wrong with me, and that's okay. And it's not my fault. And it's not a personal moral failing. There's something in my brain that does not work the way most people's brains do. And that's okay. And as much as it is like, you know, I hate when people like, oh, it's a superpower. I'm like, no, no, there are positive effects. There are very positive effects. I can write a 63-page paper in 2 days. That is true. I can do that. Most people cannot do that like that is, that is something that I can do. However, I cannot make a sandwich. It is too many steps. It is too many things I have to get out of the fridge. It takes too long. It is so difficult to make it so that every bite of the sandwich tastes the exact same. Everything has to be an even distribution. I just end up not doing it. I can't make a sandwich, and I have a lot of disordered eating that as a result of these disabilities that I'm like, no, that's bad. I let a lot of food go bad because I either. I bought something in bulk, and then it's not a safe food anymore. And then I can't eat it. And I have to either figure out how to offload it onto somebody else or throw it out, which I don't like to do, or I forget about food, and I cannot, you know fridges come with drawers can't use those. It's like the best place to hide something from me like I tell you know, partners and roommates like. If you want to hide something from me, put it in the fridge drawer, because that shit does not exist to me that is not real. That is like a different dimension that I'm like forbidden from accessing like it's just not there. I like the fridges where, like they have the drawers, but it's seen through like that's the even then, like I still forget it's there, but like that's the only way that it's not a useless space. And then I can only put in things in there that like either don't go bad or don't go bad for a very long time like alcohol can go in there. Because I'm not gonna use it except for and it usually someone has to remind me, like, if I'm like, oh, we're having a party. We should buy alcohol. My fiancé has to be like. It's in the. It's already there. It's in the fridge, for like oh, damn! I didn't. Well, how long has it been there? He's like since last New Year's a couple of year ago when you bought it, and I'm like fuck. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: I'm curious how you would view this, because I definitely those moments where somebody else makes a mistake, I think it's my fault. Do you think that that is like a response like a I don't know if it's just like a PTSD response of like just constant, like intrinsic

and intrinsic.

ALEX: Yeah. And especially since I wasn't diagnosed for close to 30 years, you know, and especially because I was high performing. You know, we don't like to use the words high functioning, low functioning, because those were, you know, kind of coined by the Nazis to figure out which ones of us were exploitable, but I was typically low supports because I self-managed and I came. I come from a neurodivergent, undiagnosed family like my mom wasn't diagnosed with Adhd until she was 52. And there are a lot of things that I was just allowed to have freedom where most parents do not allow their children freedom. That meant I didn't have meltdowns. I could choose what I wanted to eat when I wanted to eat it. What I wore. How like it didn't matter. There was no fight of. It's picture day. You have to look nice. You need to not wear your dinosaur rain boots with mixed match socks and a turtleneck sweater in April. Because if I wanted to do that, my mom just let me do that. She was like if you want to look like an idiot. That's your own problem, like I don't care. My kid is still me. Is my kid fed and clothed and healthy. Then it doesn't matter. So, a lot of people like criticized my mom for those decisions. And she doubled down and said, no, as long as my kid is healthy, it doesn't matter. It may have taken her 6 h to eat a plate of chicken nuggets, but she ate the chicken nuggets like who cares? So, I didn't have meltdowns that a lot of like autistic kids have, because they're forced to deal with sensory inputs that they don't. They can't cope with like my best friend was talking about how her stepsister's kid, before he was verbal, would have huge meltdowns at Bath time, and they didn't understand why. And now they found out it's because he has sensory issues. And even though the water felt fine to them, to him it was excruciating because the temperature and they didn't know, because he wasn't verbal. He couldn't articulate that the water was too hot or too cold, or too whatever, and they just didn't know So because I performed well at school, and I wasn't having these meltdowns at home. That pointed out to anybody that I had a problem. Whenever I did have a problem, it was always phrased as well, you're smart, so you must just be lazy or you're smart, so you must just not care. and I knew that I cared more than most people cared. I care a lot about most things, and all of my feelings are big feelings. For the most part and I knew that I was trying. I knew that I was trying very hard, and so for a long time my internal narrative was that I really just must be stupid, because everybody said, you're not stupid. So, you must just be these things that I knew I wasn't. So, I really thought I was just stupid or defective, or broken in a way that most people weren't, and that was very damaging. I think, to like hearing that narrative, that internal self-talking that external narrative over and over

and over again, that there's something wrong, that you're bad, that it's a moral, failing right, being lazy, being not caring being, you know, those are all moral failings. So, everyone telling me that I had these moral failings and the internal narrative that actually was probably just dumb. We're very damaging, and I think it leads a knee jerk reaction of like something is wrong or bad. And we've talked about how people feel entitled sometimes to do things that they would not do to a non-disabled person to touch you, to give you unsolicited advice on how to manage your symptoms. I hate that one. Have you ever just tried a planner like? Do you think I don't understand the concept of sticky notes that I really don't understand how to write shit down. But that's not the problem here. The problem is that I write shit down, and then I lose where I wrote it down, or that, like, I don't even know where I saved that file on my computer or that. Sure, I saved it in my phone. But I, fucking, lost my phone for the 4th time. Today. I need that shit tied to me like, you know, it's so frustrating that there's this constant negative reinforcement from the outside world, that in fact, there was somebody in my cohort who I don't engage with my cohort socially at all anymore. I have all of the group chats muted. I do not attend events with them. I do not want to take group pictures, and it's because of 2 separate incidences, and one was I was posting in our group chat a lot, and I don't care that people don't reply to every message like that's normal, and I tend to send text messages instead of one long text message, I send 10 small ones. So, you know I'm sending messages. I I'm thinking that I have for the 1st time a group of individuals who actually like me and appreciate my company. And I was in a smaller group chat for a group project, and someone sent a message to that group chat that said, Oh, my God! Is Alex ever going to shut up? I bet she only talks to us because no one else in her life will listen. And I was like, replied back, hey, I think you texted that in the wrong group chat that's actually really hurtful. And she basically doubled down and said, if you weren't like this, I wouldn't have said it. And then she followed back. I guess somebody said something to her, because the next day she said, I'm sorry your feelings were hurt. That wasn't my intention. No, I'm sorry I was a bitch, but I'm sorry you had a reaction to me, and I didn't really reply. And so, then she pulled me aside later at like in person, was like, well, you're going to be you, and I'm going to be me, and we should just deal with that. And so, everybody else was like. Oh, well, she apologized to you. I'm like no, she didn't. That's not an apology. And one of the people who was in that group Chat who messaged me to say. I think she was out of line, but didn't say anything publicly, did not defend me publicly. No one defended me publicly except for me. I posted a question in the same group chat that was like, hey, we're supposed to send this form

to somebody. Does anybody have that email? And she sent. And this is the part that kills me the wrong fucking email. It was not an email that existed. It was a typo. So, she didn't even send me the right email. She sent the email and said, you really need to start writing this stuff down. And I replied back to the whole group, chat. It's not how that I don't write stuff down. That's why it's a disability. If I just needed to write stuff down, it wouldn't be a disability. What makes a disability is that I can't remember where I wrote stuff down. And you know, I that's what makes a disability. So, I appreciate your help. But that's not a helpful statement and she sent me, and she sent a reply that said, Are you? Are you serious? I'm sending you a text and then blew up my inbox with a whole lot of criticism. But her just was, how dare you make me the bad guy for helping you when I'm the only person who's willing to help you. No one else replies to your messages, because everyone is sick and tired of your throwing your disability in everyone's faces off to be as an excuse to be a bitch all of the time. That's a direct quote. We're sick and tired of you throwing your disability in everyone's face as an excuse to be a bitch all the time and that was really hurtful, because this was somebody. This was a group that I thought. we're my friends and I don't know who the 1st person was. Message intending the message instead of the group chat. But she was messaging somebody that she thought would agree. And this is now a second person who has said that. So, I just pulled out, and one of the other members of the group. Chat is of our cohort is pregnant and I saw her physically this weekend, and she said something about it casual. I said, oh, I didn't realize you were pregnant, and she said, oh, I put it in the group chat, and I said, oh, I have that muted for this reason, and she was like, I'm so sorry. I really hope that I've never made you feel that way, and I really hope that my, she we do. I'm working alone because no one wanted to work with me. But in my program, you do your dissertation in groups. No one wanted to work with me, so I found out because I was the last kid picked at Dodgeball. Everybody formed groups and nobody said anything, and I didn't realize groups have been formed yet. And so, like that was also like, Oh, I'm the last. Okay, that's fine. I guess I'm just working alone but she's like, I really help me, and my partner never made you feel that way, and I was like No, and internally I didn't say this, I was like, but you have had the look, the look that people get when I'm too much, and it's not meant to be hurtful. I don't even think they realize they're doing it. But there's a there's a look people get. When I officially crossed the line of being too much too loud, too explosive, too big feelings wise, and part of the way I mitigate, that is, in social settings. I don't engage with more one person or one group for more than about 30 to 45 min, because that's about what people's limit is.

So, at parties, everybody thinks I'm great because I show up. I tell funny, engaging stories. I'm big. I'm explosive. I'm dynamic, and then I go away. And then it's when people hang out with me, one on one where they realize. Oh, you're just like that all of the time. This isn't because you were drinking, or and I'm like, no, I was actually sober when we had that had that interaction. You thought I was on the same level of intoxication as you. No, no, I was. I was phone cold, sober. I'm just like that. And so like, that's all very, very damaging. They're only a handful of people in my life who have ever been able to sustain interactions with me for long periods of time without me being too much and I'm not even like upset about it when people are up front about it, and I have a coworker who's extremely introverted in my previous job, and I could see it on his face. And on that 1st day. And I was like, hey, when I'm too much you can go away, and it won't hurt my feelings as long as you tell me, or as long as you know you're not talking behind my back about how awfully annoying I am! But it won't hurt my feelings if you say, hey, I need to be by myself for a while, and you go away, and he like visibly deflated, and was like, Oh, my God! I didn't want to be rude, but, like you are, you are very like stimulating, and I'm like. No, no, I get it like that's fine. And we actually ended up being very close and like I never felt like hurt or anything by anything he said, like there was one time he was like, do you want me to give you advice about this weird interaction we just had with somebody else. And I was like. and he did. And I was like, Yeah, I don't know how to tell you that I knew he didn't want to talk to me, and at the end of the day I just didn't care, because if I ended up caring every instance in which someone didn't vibe with me, it would be too much to handle, so sometimes I just don't care. I choose not to care if he can't man up and tell me that he needs to like to disengage from the conversation. That's his own problem, not mine. It's not my job to manage his emotions because I, that particular interaction was a work one where we were talking about work, and I'm like, I'm not out of line by having this discussion, but if I'm too much for him, he needs to walk away. Some adults.

INTERVIEWER: At your current place like where you work. Now I know you have. Is it the choir director that you're good friends with?

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What other kind of supports do you have there that may help you unmask or, is it just the choir director.

ALEX: So, I, yeah, it's really kind of just the choir director. And she is not diagnosed. But she strongly suggests she is also like Adhd. And like, quite honestly, I agree, because I don't vibe

with people like that. If they're not, if they're neurotypical there's always like a certain like point where, like we pass that 30 min mark. If people are still vibing at me or vibing with me, I kind of look at them, and I'm like. So, what's up with you like? What's your diagnosis? Cause? There's no way we're continuing to be chill. And there's not something like, up with you. So, like what what's up with you? And I usually find there's an answer like it happened to me like last weekend, where I was like talking to somebody at a work event. And like, he's like, Yeah, I'm pretty sure I'm also autistic. And I'm like, there it is. There it is. Yeah, we're vibing, too. Well, my dude, you probably are, or something. Yeah, my, I don't even necessarily call it masking when I'm on the podium it's performing, because it's not me hiding elements of myself, which is what I typically consider masking. I am expounding in highlighting specific aspects of myself that are related to the disability to the Adhd. I am and extrovert most of the time. But on the podium, I'm explosive and dynamic and big, because I'm trying to elicit a certain response out of these kids where I need them. Especially like, I'm you know, we're trying to play something with high energy and forte and big and explosive, and I'm trying to get that out of them, or I'm trying to get, you know, extreme cheesiness out of like a lyrical moment where I'm so I'm doing it a certain way, and that's that takes energy to do so when I step off the podium, I'm typically very flat. And I have, like my vice principal, who manages me like every now and again I'll stop at home and be like ALEX. Are you okay? Like what's wrong. And I'm like, it's just Tuesday. It's just Tuesday. That's just what. And I said this to him multiple times where I say, I'm just autistic. That's my face and I'm like, and you don't see that when I'm on the podium, when you come, observe my classes because I'm performing teaching is a performance as much as it is like a science like that when we say like, teaching is an art, that's part of the art is an art of performance. And so, I don't get a lot of supports. Our school has like some kind of room I've never been. It was like under construction or renovation, or whatever when they did the tour of the school, and I don't even know where it is. It's supposed to be a when you're stressed out or overwhelmed. You can go to this room and sit in comfy chairs and whatever. And I'm like I don't. I'm not leaving my room to do that. I'm just gonna make my office a space where I can do that. But even then y'all give me so much work to do. I don't have time to go do that. I don't have time to go decompress, because I have another class coming in 20 min and even when I have my planning breaks like that's time to eat lunch and get shit done so that I'm prepared to teach that next class next year. I'm assuming I know it's going to be a lot easier because I spend a lot of time in my planning right now, setting up systems so that

next year won't suck like

There was no, there was an inventory list, but none of the instruments were tested, really, or the last time they were tested. Play tested was a long time ago and my predecessor was a percussionist, so she knows when something's wrong with the wind instrument like this is in 4 pieces, and it's only supposed to be 2. That's a problem. But she didn't know like, oh, this has a leak on the lower joint, 3rd pad down, and I can test them and know that. So, like, I have some instruments that are broken. But I'm like, but I can check that out to a 6th grader, because we're only playing on the upper joint right now of the clarinet. We're not using the lower joint and the leaks on the lower joint. So, if I need to. I can check that out to a 6th grader, and we can make do until I can get that repair done. So, I was like trying to check out instruments to kids pulling out an instrument. Nope, that's broken. Pull out an instrument. Nope, that's broken. Pull out an instrument. Nope, that's broken, and the exterior cases were not labeled. So, I'd have to open 4 cases to get the flute that I wanted to find the right serial number. So now everything's play tested. The spreadsheet is labeled with their exact condition, and every outside of the case is labeled with a tag flute, one flute, 2 flute, 3 flute 4. So, I'm like, all right, I got a new student. Flute 4 is the only flute I have left that is working. I need flute 4. Easily done. Now I'm working on the music library, where all the boxes are. Horrendous terrible condition, mislabeled, I'm re, and some stuff was not even boxed. So, I'm boxing new stuff. I'm labeling stuff. A lot of our library has duplicates, triplicates, quadruplets of the same piece. I'm getting rid of those to condense space. I'm tearing out the insides of cabinets, reorganizing it, labeling the cabinets because they weren't labeled so that I don't have to spend time later trying to figure out. Well, I really need this one flute duet book, and I don't even know where the flute duet books are, and then it looks like to everybody else that I'm unorganized. I find that I'm actually typically more organized than people who don't struggle with executive dysfunction because I have to be as a necessity because I can't just remember where stuff is. It has to be labeled. It has to be color coded. It has to be in a row and in a place and identically spaced out. So, I'm now working on systems where next year I just know that's not gonna happen. And now that I know who the kids are that have school instruments. Next year, on day one, I'm going to have them lined up with the form on top of it. Take that form home. And you can use that instrument. So, like that's even like on parent open house. I'm gonna have those forms. So, I can pass to the parents, say, take this home and like, here's the fee, because I have kids using instruments that still have not turned in forms, because I kind of had to. because it was weeks

before I could get the forms made. Because I didn't even know which instruments were okay to use, and which Kid needed a small shank versus a large shank baritone. Because we don't have mouthpieces. They have to provide their own mouthpiece. you know. Just stuff like that. It's all. Now in all the supports, more or less are mine. not in the schools. And some from the district actually like the actual district has provided some support. Like the district instructional coach for Fine Arts provides like presentation support, where, if you need to run through your presentation, they will do it with you. Which is pretty cool, and they're the only ones who actually asked what accommodations I needed, and then actually followed through with it for training which I was like. I don't even bother asking, because I know it's not gonna happen. So, they, the instructional coach sought out me asked and then follow through. And that's me is like a big deal. Yeah, it's mostly just I'm flying solo the district. When I asked for support, said I needed to have my psych redo the evaluation that I was not actually capable of doing that job, because the supports that I requested were unreasonable, which were things like, please let me know a day ahead of time. If we're gonna have a meeting that's 24 h. Notice one working days. Notice is not a big deal, or the other one was. If you're gonna call a meeting, please tell me what it's about before I go. cause they? Just we get emails. We have a meeting at one o'clock. How hard is it to say we have a meeting at one o'clock to discuss recruitment strategies for next year. We have a meeting at one o'clock to discuss your last evaluation like that's not. That's not crazy. That's not what. But they said that was all unreasonable. And one of them was like, I want sound panels in my band room because I don't have them. And the principal was like, we're not going to provide that accommodation because you already have sound panels, and my response was like bitch. Where come down to my band room and point them out because they're not in there. So, then she called the district. The district said they're supposed to be there, so she was like, okay, well, we'll work on that. And it's still like that was 6 months ago, and I still don't have sound panels. Who criticized me for not responding to the intercom. And I'm like, you know why I don't respond to the intercom because I can't hear it, and you know why I can't hear it, because I don't have sound dampening panels in my room too loud. When kids play, I can't hear so, I don't even hear it go off sometimes. Because if I have 50 kids in a class, and they're all playing their instruments, which they should be doing, because that's the point of the class like, what do you want me to do? You've inherently set up a situation in which I cannot be successful, for things that are supposed to be provided by the school in the district, and then you don't want to do it. You want to drag your feet because it costs money.

INTERVIEWER: I know of a teacher here that called Osha, and had Osha come out

ALEX: I might, I might threaten that honestly like, it's just been on my list of shit, like there's been so many other problems that, like. It's down the line of like shit I need to deal with because it and you know mine, my perspective. I'm like, I've already done what I needed to do and they're just not doing it, I said. I now have to go manage other people, and I shouldn't have to manage other people. That's also been an issue in my department with the orchestra teacher so disorganized and like, I feel bad because I told them or the course teacher I was like I feel kind of bad because it makes me look better like all my problems aren't as severe as hers, and I actually have a reason, and she doesn't like for Lg for her evaluated performance. She decided she needed more practice time. So, the day of she held the kids and pulled kids from other classes without asking permission and then held them for 4 class periods without asking permission or informing our teachers. So, the school was getting flooded with calls. Why is my child absent? I dropped. Drop my child off at school. Did you lose my child? Because they're being more absent for 4 classes in a row and Admins having to figure out, where is this child? And they're in the orchestra room the whole time. And not only that, but she also had another class show up, and did not allow them entry to her room, made them sit in the hallway, did not give them anything to do, and did not give them supervision. So, they were like smooshing food into the floor, throwing shit like running around 0 supervision. And then, when they went into her room to figure out what was going on. The room was trashed…like. And it it's even though I can't go into her room like it. It's overwhelming for me, because, like her podium just has shit all over it, like all of and like, I will even say, like my podium has a lot of stuff on it, but it's not like just garbage, and like every small object, so like rosin paper clips, pen, any small thing you can imagine being an orchestra room is on that podium. She loses her music all the time because she can't find it. Instruments get broken all the time, and she's like, oh, it's because the kids aren't careful, like, no, it's because your room is a mess, and it's just gonna lead to instrument issues. I had a kid who skipped 2 months straight of my class, because it's band and orchestra, because she was going to orchestra every day, and the orchestra teacher never said anything, and I was like that child does not have permission from me. They're failing my class. and I even I talked to the Kid, and I was like, look, I will let you go to orchestra, if you're not missing any stuff because they should be an advanced band and advanced orchestra. But those classes meet at the same time. So, she's in like beginning band. And I'm like, I get it. Your way, too advanced for the people in here, and you're not gonna end up going to my

concert, anyway, so I don't care. I will let you go to orchestra, but you have to like to check in with me so I can take attendance, and you can't be missing any stuff for me. And she was like, oh, okay, now, like, we could have just had this conversation instead of you skipping my class for 2 months straight. So I'm like, and we, when we do our recruitment and retention stuff, we had to provide a list of every 7th and 8th grader whether they need to be a day or B day, and it was all going to be one list, and I got my list and course got our list, and we were done in orchestra by the day of the deadline, did not have it so. I had to go to her room and say, hey, I really need this list. And she was like, oh, I'm just so overwhelmed like I'll try. And so, she gets through half of it, and then gives up, and so I check on her again. She's like, Oh, whatever I can't right now. Okay, I'll come back at the end of the day. Come back at the end of the day. Oh, well, I'm just not gonna have it done. And I was like, that's not really like we need to send this together, and she's like, well, I'll add mine later and I'm like I can't do that, because when you go in and add yours later, you're not going to check my list. And you're going to put kids that are on a day in a day. There's a reason why we have to double check this list. And so, chorus director went over to her, and she finally said, Am I the only one who doesn't have it done? And of course I'd be like, yes, you're the only one who doesn't have it done, and we need it right now. So, she finally got it, could not figure out how to copy and paste wrong formatting on everything was mad that I was changing the formatting, and I said, all I need are your names. I'm going to fix the formatting, and I'm going to fix the kids who are doubled….that's all I need from you finally got that handled, and then the next week she spent the whole week passing out, sign-up sheets to 7th and 8th grade. They're done. Their list was submitted, and I got in trouble for sending multiple iterations of this in this list last time, around which I shouldn't have done because mine were corrections, not additions. Mine were. Your scheduling person is now taking kids out of my class again, and I had to invoke Hr. To like, get that to not be a problem. And I won that argument. But I shouldn't have had to do that. And I was like, but that's gonna make me look bad, because they already were mad at me for that. And so, me and chorus went to our VP, and we're like, Hey, here's the situation. We're having. Kids come to us trying to turn into these forms that we are not supposed to be collecting and then she continued to do it again. After that we had to tell her department head like, hey? We already talked to the VP. But she's still doing this and like I feel bad for snitching, because I'm not really wanting to be a snitch. I'm always like we are a united front. We should be a united front against admin. But if you're gonna continuously do shit that gets me in trouble and makes me look bad. I

can't. I can't have that, and especially not when I've already gone to you first and tried to resolve this through you. You don't want to be a team player. Fine! We're not a team. Especially like when this is gonna affect like my employment and livelihood like, I can't be doing that. And so, she was out the last couple of days, and I don't know if that was her choice or admin's choice. I feel kind of bad for that because I'm like that's not, but at the end of the day it cannot be my job to manage your behavior. I already have to manage more with my own behavior than the normal person has to do, anyway. When I describe, like my systems in place, people are like, Oh, my God! Like that is so. People are like they're like, that's so organized and so impressive like that is a bare necessity. I have to be that organized. I cannot not be that organized. I have to have labels. I have to have color coding. I have to have XY and Z. Because if I don't it's a nightmare, and I even gonna add more color-coding next year. I'm gonna color code by on my library. I'm going to color code. By [redacted]Lg, level, and by marches, like all marches, are red, all level ones are blue, all level twos are green, so that when I'm like I need a I need a march. I can look and see them without going through the list. My list also has a category, for, like theme and form so like, I can have all the Marches labeled as Marches Holidays labeled as Holidays, Sacred music labeled as sacred. So, I know, like I have Jehovah's witness kids. They can't do that music. Fine I can fill that out, or when Admin says we need you to play something for veteran's day in 3 weeks I can go through the patriotic tag and pull out something that's oh, that's labeled as patriotic. That's also labeled as a point 0 5 or point 5 difficulty level, which means we can do it in 3 weeks. Boom got it. Now, I don't have to dig through a bunch of stuff, and I'm gonna color code instruments with a colored circle on the tag by grade level. All 6th graders have a blue tag. All 7th graders have a green tag. All 8th graders have a yellow tag. So, when I see that instrument on the ground, I'm like who the who is leaving this instrument in the middle of the floor, or hey, you're walking away with a yellow tag instrument, and you're supposed to be a blue tag person. That's probably not yours, because all the cases look the same. We have like 15 Yamaha Saxes, that all the same case. 15 king trumpets that all have the same case, and kids sometimes like they steal. They're not really stealing. They're picking up the wrong instrument because they think it's theirs. And they're walking away with an instrument that. And now another kid is like freaking out because their instruments missing. So, I'm like, and I told that to the it guy and it I was like, oh, I'm gonna do that with Chromebook. That's such a good idea. And I'm like you're welcome it, man. Thank you. Love him. He just got me my new computer back admin, has let me have a loner laptop for 6 months, and he

by himself, not through admin, went and refurbished a whole computer for me, so that I would have one that wasn't a ThinkPad. So, I'm like, you're welcome company for free organizational advice. I'm great at it. Everything's likes in a nice little row.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that like just I, it's really interesting, because to me that all sounds normal. And then I go. Do you think that having these structures, and just like the act of needing to self-accommodate just to survive, has impacted your teaching style.

ALEX: Yes, I run my ensembles in a very structured way, and I like, for example, I was having issues with. Well, this warmup book has one thing, and this one has another thing. This has another thing and flipping back all the things that I need is really obnoxious, and I get sidetracked, and I can't have that many transitions. So, I made my own method book and it's all in one book, and everything I want is in one book and I just print them out and make them. And I have them all organized in a filing cabinet in the exact right way that I need it to be organized, and it streamlines my rehearsals. I try to trim the fat whenever I can. I try to make things easiest for me whenever possible. So even like graded assignments, like written assignments, I do things like this is only going to have 10 problems, because then I don't have to do math. You missed one problem. That's a 90. You missed 2, that's an 80. You missed 3. That's a 70 easy, peasy. I also think that because I have to deal with so much extraneous crap that I tend to only assign things that I think are essential and so I don't have busy work. I don't have bell ringers. I don't have like a lot of things that they encourage us to do, because I'm like that's extraneous, that is, to check a box for somebody who's coming in to observe to see. But that's not what's gonna function within my rehearsals best, and something for my administration. Interviewing somebody I resonated with something she said, where she said she always prioritizes students, needs first and that often gets her in trouble with administration and that has been overwhelmingly true for me as well. I prioritize what's best for my kids, musically, emotionally, like health wise, and that does not always align with admin mandates, and I in true autistic faction. If I understand the reason and the logic behind a rule, I will uphold it like its law, and I will make sure everyone else in the entire system upholds it as well. I will be like super intense about it, but if I do not understand or agree with your logic and reasoning behind why we're doing that. I am the biggest rebel I am a nightmare to deal with. I'm a nightmare to manage, because if you can't justify that to me, it just doesn't matter, and I'm not going to do it. If I understand the justification, I will be your biggest champion, but I will not uphold things that I do not understand unless you like, explicitly threaten me with losing my job. And then, even as I'm

enforcing it. I'm going to tell the children I'm not enforcing this because I want to. I'm enforcing it because I have to, and I don't agree with it, which admin do not want you to say they do not want you to not be behind their stuff. But I will explicitly say, I don't agree with this. And if you have a problem, here's the name and phone number of the person that you need to complain to because that's not me that's not on me and if I literally can't without getting fired, I will say I cannot tell you who's responsible for this without getting fired. So, like, I'm very open and honest with the kids. I'm open and honest about a lot of things with the kids. I think that's related to me being neurodivergent. Like, if I if I have a bad day, I tell them I'm having a bad day. And we're told not to do that right. We're told not to share those kinds of things with our students. That's unprofessional, and I don't always give them all the details. But I tell them, hey? I'm having, you know. Sometimes you don't have a good day, and you need some grace. I'm having a bad day, and I need some of your Grace right now, or I'll tell them. Hey, I'm having a really stressful day and autism wise. It's affecting my face. I want you to know that I'm not mad at you. If I seem like I'm mad. I'm not mad at you. I'm just. I'm mad about something else that doesn't concern you. but I'm like very open with them, and that leads to a lot of kids being more open with me. I have a suicidal child almost every single year that I've been teaching. and years where I haven't. I have had at least a kid in crisis. Who has come to me. I've had kids who are not even my kids, come to me because they know that I'm open and I'm safe and a lot of that has to do with the fact that I have pride flags up but a lot of it like I had a kid open up to me about mental health, because, he explicitly said, I feel like I can talk to you because you've had similar experiences. and I don't know exactly what he meant about that. We were in my room, surrounded by the pride flags that could have been it. It could have been about like the fact that I'm open about like, hey, like I have all these like mental conditions and neurological disorders. And he's like, okay, I can talk about mental health with you. He even like explicitly mentioned my divorce. He was like dealing with some heartbreak, and he was like, you've said your divorce before, so that must have been really difficult. How do you deal with that. How do you deal with like heartbreak at that level? And I'm like, that's a big question for a 14-year-old like he sent me an email that was heartbreaking. After he had his big meltdown. I had to like call Admin, because he was like active suicide risk at that moment. And he like even it was formatted like a letter, and he even put it in in there, and he like underlined it. How do you deal with being you. How do you accept you for who you are as a person I don't know how to reconcile my feelings with who I am. and I was like, Oh, my God! Like that is like. And I'm like, I can't

reply to this through email, because, like, we're, we're towing a line where you haven't explicitly said, this is about LGBT stuff, but it could be, and I could get in very big trouble for responding to that in a way that is documented. So, I basically probably, why don't you come? Find me, and we'll have a conversation. And we had a conversation in my office where it still was not like explicitly stated, but like I kind of had a feeling that that might be what we were talking about. But it really kind of broke my heart like I cried in my office that I was like, you don't have anybody else but me to ask, and this is my 1st year here you don't like. We don't have this like long standing relationship built up. I'm just the only person you could talk to about this and so, when I'm told, I've been told before not to do some of the things that I do, and I'm always gonna say no, because that's not what my kids need. And I know that's not what they need. And I'm and I'm never going to prioritize an adult's wants over a child's needs and that that sometimes means that I don't. I don't get teacher of the month. I don't get awards or accolades. I'm not very popular with adults, and I don't care. because that's not why I'm in this, and I used to care. I used to care more about like I'm busting my butt. I'm the last person in the parking lot. Why am I not getting recognized for that? Cause? It feels like it should be and I just kind of like over time, I came to acknowledge, especially with this diagnosis. There are just gonna be people who don't like me for that reason. and I'm probably not going to get those accolades or anything until I have a principal. That is also neurodivergent like, that's just not gonna happen so, it's it is what it is, and I know that I'm doing the right thing. And when I do get like in my feelings about it, I emailed you. You asked to see the letters that I have pinned up on my wall.

INTERVIEWER: I saw that.

ALEX: A couple of them. They're the ones that like. And I even read one of them the other day that, like really like. I was having a bad day, and I read a couple of them, some of the ones that I sent you pictures of, and it made me feel better because I know that I made, and especially the kids who feel like they don't matter because they get dunked on for their symptoms all day. Every day I make those kids feel like they matter. One of them was from a kid who very, very strongly suspect his Adhd and I to the point where I brought it up with him because he taught himself how to play oboe. I did not teach him how to play oboe. He taught himself, and he taught himself how to play a full B flat scale all state tempo arpeggio. Correct articulation in 40 min alone. Take some kids 3 years to do that on oboe, but I had to staple his music to his shirt, or he was going to lose it could not keep up for anything to save his damn life, and it got to the point where I just instead of

yelling at him, I just taught him how to use the printer, and I let. He was the only kid who had permission to use the printer, and then he became my librarian and made copies for everybody. I never had to make copies again, because they just knew not even to go to me. They go to Mackai to deal with the printer, issue the instrument, the music issue. And like he put in his letter, like, I'm like that. Something like he was thankful, and he appreciated it, even if. even though I had to like, after him, or like him. He's like sorry if you had to yell at me, I'm like, but I wouldn't yelling at you. I talked to him I was like, hey, has anybody ever suggested you might have Adhd? You gotta be really careful when you say that because parents will get upset. And he said, oh, yeah, I do. I think I do. I know I'm pretty sure I have it. My parents will not get me evaluated because they don't want me to have a stigma. and I was like. you are so wicked smart man, you are so smart, and you are so skilled, and you are such a hard worker, and you are not getting the supports that you need. God. I hate that. And I'm like, okay, so now I know I cannot bring this up to the parent, probably without having an issue. And I talked to the counselor at that school was also diagnosed neurodivergent, and he was a musician. So, we kinda talked a lot. And I was like, look, I have some kids that I really feel like need a diagnosis or evaluation. I don't know how to bring that up with parents, because, like, I'm not somebody who can give that evaluation. I'm just vibing too much with this kid. They vibe too much with me for them to be normal. And you know it's just he's my kind of normal. He's not neurotypical, normal. He's my kind of normal, and that, and he's not. I don't have an IEP or 504 for that kid, and I know that he's probably getting yelled at by other teachers. I know he's getting yelled at by other teachers, and I want to help fix that. And he's just like, Yeah, you just can't bring it up with some of them honestly, because they, and especially because it's genetic. When you suggest there's something wrong with their kid, or there's something going on, and their kids are just like them. You're saying something's wrong with them, too. and like it took a while for me. I had to convince my mom to get evaluated. And now she's like, Ritalin is awesome. This is amazing. I love this. And I'm like, Yeah, you're welcome. But she does not like that. I am diagnosed, autistic, and she continuously denies that and tries to say that I need to be reevaluated because I'm just like her. We're the same person, we laugh the same, we talk the same, we joke the same. We're like twinsies. And we were really, really close. And I'm like, yeah, because if there's something wrong with me, there's probably something wrong with you. and it's very frustrating for me to my mom runs a massage school, and she struggled with her 1st class of kids because she thought everybody would be super into it. And they're not. And I'm like, Yeah,

mom, we call that hyper fixation. You have one. They don't. Most people are not hyper fixated on their job. Their job is what they do to pay bills. and you're running the kind of school that is attracting people who are not successful at regular school because this is a 1 year program in which they can get paid 40 plus dollars an hour through with only one year of schooling in a small rural town that doesn't have a lot of job prospects that you're attracting a certain kind of person, and it's not people who love massage and are really passionate about the medical field, like my mom reads medical journals for fun like she does research for fun. She's certified in like 9,000 different things for fun, like she is a certified nutritionist and personal trainer, so that she can actually give dietary and stretching advice to her clients. She does not work as a nutritionist. She works as a massage therapist who can give you nutrition advice, and say, I've noticed XY, and Z. Things about your hair is very brittle, your skin is a certain, and how many you should maybe look at the fact that you might have a vitamin deficiency in XY or Z. You know, she does all that stuff. And I'm like, Yeah, mom, that's hyper fixation. That's not a normal amount of interest in what you do. And you've gotten away with it because we call that being passionate because your hyper fixation is not sonic, the hedgehog. It's exploitable via capitalism. We love that my hyper fixation is band. It's very exploitable because it's my job. And there are plenty. I think there's tons of people who are undiagnosed, autistic because their hyper fixations are socially acceptable, like how many dudes who really follow football statistics who are just really into, and they know the stats and the number of yards run by their favorite players. And blah blah! I'm like you're looking at math spreadsheets for a football game that's unhinged. That is not something that, nor but because football is America's number one sport that's socially acceptable. They can do that, and they're not going to have a problem. So, it affects how I teach it affects how it affects everything. Honestly, the answer is, does it affect? X. The answer is, yes, it affects everything because it affects how I think. With that, all being said, and everything. That was, that was a very long answer to your question, that no. I answered several questions. You didn't even ask. My bad.

INTERVIEWER: All leads to so many things, and there's been a couple of questions that, like you. You're like me. I'm like you. It I like I get it. I had my meeting with my faculty advisor, and I was like every all the names are already taken out of my transcripts, and so I was showing him just like the 2 pages worth of single space text. And I go. This is what I did to you. Hon, he goes, yeah, yeah.

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I'm here for it. With like everything, with all things considered. what is your relationship with your disability?

ALEX: I feel like it is a positive one. I do not mind that I am autistic. It does not bother me not for the most part there are some ways in which it bothers me. It bothers me when I have to throw out food. I have a lot of financial anxiety. I have an anxiety disorder, and I grew up in extreme poverty. My mom worked 3 jobs for us to keep the lights on. You know I have been homeless before I have lived out of my car, and that was a really traumatic experience in undergrad. My dad was required to pay my college bills per the divorce agreement. My mom was undergoing heart surgery, so she wasn't able to help me out, and I had a roommate threaten to rape and murder me and it was no longer safe for me to stay in that space. But the apartment complex said, if you're just having an argument, that's a roommate, disagreement. We will not let you out of the lease so I couldn't afford double rent, so I was homeless, and I had to sue my dad twice to make him pay those bills, he said. I cost too much to feed so that was really traumatic. So, I have a lot of financial anxiety. So, when I get late fees because of my Adhd, or I have to throw out food because I forgot about it, or because I tried a new food, and the texture was a little bit weird. And I just can't eat it, because the autism sensory thing like that does bother me. But 90% of what most people consider symptoms I don't really think is a problem. I talk a lot. That's not a problem for me. I have special interests. That's not a problem for me. There's joy in that. There's such joy in exploring those special interests where other people get frustrated. They can't get me to focus on whatever dumb boring thing they want me to focus on when I could be focusing on band instead. Like, that's not a problem for me. That's a problem for other people, and if our society was different, it would not even be listed as a symptom. Most of the diagnostic criteria are how we irritate neurotypical people. So, knowing that it's not my fault that there's my brain is wired a different way, and I can't control or fight that has. Let me let go of a lot of self-loathing. It's let me let go of that narrative that I'm a fuck up. I don't think that about myself anymore. Occasionally, when I do have something go wrong, that's really bad. I have that in my head. But it's easier to let go of. It's easier to talk myself out of it. This weekend I struggled with before they were able to squeeze me back in on this This conference. And I just thought maybe I screwed up the registration, and I'm just not gonna present, and that that's bad. And now all these people are expecting me to present. I'm not going to I had a whole tangent train of thought, and I clocked it for what it was. I was like. This is not a healthy way to think. but the train of thought was that my value to the world is in my work

output. I am valuable because I produce work, and I produce high quality and high volumes of work. And this is now taking away some of my output. I am less valuable because I am not doing this thing. and that's not true. Our value and people shouldn't be in our work output. Right? That's a that's a capitalism thing like that's not my value as a person, but that's how other people value me, because they don't value me for how I am. Most people don't something that I, my best friend, listed the other day my stims in order of like how often I do them! And to me I was like. That's a very loving thing that you know what I do and you're able to and so, she described it in a way that, like it was endearing to her that I do these things, that I tap my wrist together. I touch my ear, I touch my nose like these are things that she was describing it in a way that didn't make it seem like, Oh, that's so weird! She's doing XY or Z. She's like, oh, no, it's the cute thing you do like that they always like. See, this isn't. This shouldn't be a problem to other people, and I have people in my life that value me for who I am, and even like, with all that in there, like, I was actually introduced to a person who has OCD. The other day, and after she realized I had diagnosis, her 1st question was, What's yours? What's your stim? This one's mine, and like she like. And she was like, and I have to do it X number of times she was like, do you have a number? And I'm like, I like eights. And she was like, Oh, an even number that's so unusual. Mine have to be odd. And we had like this bonding moment of like. And I was like, that's very interesting like that's going to be my new icebreaker for neurodivergent people, what's your weird little thing that you do? What's your stem? Because it's a part of who I am, and it's not a bad thing anymore. I used to hide it, and, in fact, the reason that my stems go in order is because the more stressed out I am, the more socially unacceptable or socially visible ones. I do, because I have to. And I've kind of like I mask through like a system of like. If I'm just drumming on a desk, or if I'm walking around the hallways with the flute in my hand running through scales. I'm just a band director. I'm not weird. I'm just a band director doing band stuff. But that's not enough. It's not enough to go through scales when it's a concert day, and I'm really like high tense. I have to do the weirder ones, and then people are like, Oh, what's wrong? So, I mean, it's I really appreciate the diagnosis. I wish more people embraced it, and especially that, like, I now have been able to find communities of like-minded individuals. people who have the same experiences, and it took me almost a year to get diagnosed because it was hard to find a place that would do adults that didn't cost like thousands of dollars. Because most places that take adults won't take insurance and the memes were just a little too relatable, and I had a very strong feeling that I had that diagnosis, that I had that condition. But I felt like an

imposter. I felt like I couldn't say it if a doctor didn't tell me that I diagnosed myself a full like year and a half before any medical professional told me that, but I felt like I couldn't own it. I couldn't say it. I couldn't tell people that until I was diagnosed, and now I have the diagnosis. I appreciate it, and they're even now that I'm in therapy, and I'm doing things that are much healthier coping mechanisms. I was even lamenting it almost the other day to somebody where I was like man. I have this really big deadline coming up for my dissertation, and I wish I could just trigger a manic episode like I used to. because I could just get this done in like 3 days if I just triggered a manic episode. But that's not healthy. I'm not supposed to do that anymore, because the manic episode is always followed by a period of extreme burnout. There's a cost to that manic episode. And so, like, I've been doing healthier work things. And it's even just harder to trigger them on medication. but it's not a bad thing, and, in fact, evolutionary wise is not a bad thing, because, like it's Adhd. People stay up very late or have this disturbed sleep cycles. That's so. You could be awake to watch for predators in the night. like, there's a biological incentive for us to be neurodiverse as a society. It's just that, you know. socially, and capitalism wise. We punish deviance from the norm.

INTERVIEWER: It's really funny. Anytime people talk about stims. I have like finger feet, my extremity stims. I also have like popping my ears, but.

ALEX: Not everybody can do that. I can do that, too.

INTERVIEWER: That's so, interest that that's just like a thing I've always been able to.

ALEX: Wiggling your ears like some people can do it. Some can't. I didn't know people couldn't do that.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I just learned that right now.

ALEX: And so, like me. I learned it because I like said it to somebody like we don't know what you're talking about. And then I looked it up and found out that, like some people can't do it.

INTERVIEWER: I like mine go like the whole thing about the increase when people start talking about them. I have really bad, like vocal stims, a lot of like oral and mouth stems. And I was like we got to mute for a second because it's just gonna get really loud for a second. Yeah.

ALEX: No, I had. I had more oral stems and vocal stems when I was a kid. But people tend to point those out a lot. There are a lot more. People may not see you doing the physical stem, but they hear it. So those are like on the on the lower tier of like. I only do these if I absolutely have to self-regulate. In fact, I didn't know that they weren't a choice until my ex when we were still dating when I was in undergrad was like, stop doing that. And I was like whatever and they were. The

response was, I'm gonna tickle you every time you do it as a response. And I found myself sneaking around to do it like going to the bathroom, and I didn't actually have to go to the bathroom, and that when I did it my heart rate elevated, and I was like Oh. and I didn't know what it was I was like, is this a nervous tick like I can't control this. This is a behavior I can't control. I thought I was doing this just cause like because I wanted to. I didn't realize I can't control this behavior. And so now, there's like there's systems even in place with the stems, and how to do them, learning that people can flex their ears was like learning that some people don't have an internal monologue, but more than that. throwing me for a loop was that learning that a lot of neurotypical people can turn it off. If they have a monologue, they can stop it when they want to. That's why, when they're just like, just go to sleep. I'm like the bitch in my head won't shut up like, and we're not even talking about anything important right now, like I have a middle school band march stuck in my head that I played 3 years ago. There's no point in that. There's nothing, no reason for that to be like running through like oh, and there's that counter melody, and the strain of the tree like, no, that's not useful. I don't need that in my head. So normally they could just shut it off like it makes me so angry. I'm like, what do you mean? You can just shut it off.

INTERVIEWER: Frequently. I'll ask my partner what song stuck in your head, and he's like nothing, and I'm like, I don't.

ALEX: What do you mean that mine is disproportionately cotton eyed Joan. I really wish that would stop. So, I like that song. Please go away. I don't need Cotton Eye. Joe stuck in my head for 6 straight hours like, or it'll be like, I only know this one line of the chorus of this one song, and it's gonna play on. Repeat like a like a vocal stem, just but internally like that one little sound bite that's only 10 seconds long is gonna be on loop for the next 4 h. And I really need that to go away because it's distracting.

INTERVIEWER: So, I if it's okay with you, the questions I'll ask next time. The next one is our last one is just 3 advice questions. Say them now, so maybe you can sit and think about it for a bit. But the 1st one is, what advice would you give someone with a disability who's thinking about pursuing a career in music education. So, like being high school students, someone who's doing a career change not just like students, but adults that are like this. That was me at, you know, 22. And then what advice would you give pre-service music teachers? And then what advice. Would you give other music educators in the field with a disability. First can I ask demographic questions?

ALEX: Yes

INTERVIEWER: Okay, let me. Okay. I'm gonna go through these questions and see if I can remember at all. You're in Georgia. Correct, are you using she, her.

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I'm writing it all down, so I don't forget, years teaching. I don't know that one.

ALEX: This is year 6 in the public schools. I taught privately before that. So, I was like, split between multiple schools running like after school programs, teaching with marching bands. I had a private studio usually about like 5 or 6 students at a time. Because I went straight into grad school. So, I've been professionally teaching for 6. But like, when you look at my pay, scale, it set, or for 8, it says 6.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and then you teach band. But also, you've taught choir.

ALEX: Yes, I taught 3 years of chorus. My 1st job was split band and chorus. My second job was quoting unquote chorus for a year. But we were virtual. So. and I found that doing singing videos like my kids just wouldn't do it. So, it was really like general music. At the middle school level. And then a year of like actual chorus before I jumped ship and was like, I'm gonna go back to Band, or I'm gonna like, Have an episode. I cannot do chorus anymore. And I love the kids. And I didn't. I didn't hate it. But I had an identity crisis. I'm a band director.

INTERVIEWER: are you in an urban space.

ALEX: That's closer. And we're suburban, really. But yeah. we're like in the Metro Atlanta area. So, to me, urban means like Atlanta, Atlanta, and we're not Atlanta, Atlanta. We're, you know, the kind of place where people still have yards. But you can also still find a place that sells Thai food at 3 in the morning. You know the right sweet spot. My mom wanted me to move rural, and I was like, what am I supposed to do? If I want Thai food at 3 am, mom. I can't do it. I gotta have that convenience.

INTERVIEWER: And then what disability title would you like to have identify you.

ALEX: Autism and Adhd I also, if you feel like it's relevant to throw in there. I have generalized anxiety. Disorder, and PTSD which I feel like they all kind of… It's hard to separate them. The PTSD is caused in large part by the fact that I was, and the generalized anxiety. Disorder was caused by the fact that I wasn't diagnosed with autism and the Adhd for close to 3 decades. Like anxiety was my main coping mechanism until I started going to therapy.

INTERVIEWER: And then I think, I think this is a 2-question part disability onset.

ALEX: So, the autism and Adhd are both like from birth conditions. PTSD, I don't know. I was diagnosed last year or 2 years ago. But I think the episodes, like the triggering episodes flashbacks for me, are not like a visual auditory flashback. It is like a mindset flashback where I feel like I'm still in that situation. Those were happening for a couple of years. My relationship with my ex was really stressful because they were suicidal for a lot of it. My time in grad school was essentially academic, hazing how I felt with being the increased demands with no supports, no diagnosis, so honestly probably say around then, which would be 24. The anxiety disorder has been a thing, I can tell you. My 1st anxiety, meltdown, was in the 1st grade. It's called 6, because at home I didn't have to be anxious because I was allowed to be myself, but at school I was forced into a square peg into a round hole, and the only way that works is by hurting the peg, by shaving off parts of the peg, so I had to force myself into to fit a mold that I didn't really fit. So, the anxiety probably happened then, and I had big meltdowns over like I missed a homework deadline in the 1st grade when it's not that serious, but I just felt like I was gonna be in trouble. People are gonna be mad at me. I was gonna get yelled at and just had this big meltdown. So, anxiety is probably all the way to 6.

INTERVIEWER: are you okay If I put like the Audhd being birth, and then PTSD being in adulthood and generalized anxiety, being young childhood.

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I just I don't want to give like too many if I say Georgia. And then this I'm like, yes, I don't even want to chance it.

ALEX: Yup. No, I got. I got you. I'm having to do something stuff for some of mine.

INTERVIEWER: One of the teachers that I'm interviewing, I asked my professor. I was like. is it okay? If I use a voice changer, if I include any audio clip in a presentation. He's like, Are you sure? And I was like, yes, if they're if they are local, distinct voice, like people know who they are. Yeah, it's the thing where it's like, I just I feel more comfortable doing that. And then with your case especially, I think, noting when you were diagnosed.

ALEX: The Adhd and generalized anxiety disorder. I was diagnosed at 26 Autism and PTSD. I was diagnosed at 29.

INTERVIEWER: Adhd. 26, autism and PTSD, 20, PTSD, 29. Did the generalized anxiety disorder come with the PTSD day.

ALEX: No, that was with Adhd one, and I was like very shocked, and I don't know why they're like we're diagnosing the general anxiety disorder. And I was like, why? And they were like, you said, you've been nervous since 2,004. It's like, oh, yeah, has it, everybody? They're like. No, most people are not anxious unless there's a trigger. I'm like, oh, yeah, when I don't have something to be anxious about, I get anxious about that because it means I'm missing something. I missed something.

INTERVIEWER: Like the neutral zone, is anxiety.

ALEX: So, there's just always like a baseline of it's why. And I'm now to the point where I'm starting to wean off of my anxiety meds, and I need them at work. I don't need them at home.

and that is like I got. I didn't take them today, and I feel fine, but I need them at work, because work is such a, especially with the things that have happened this year.

Interview 6 (3.23.25)

INTERVIEWER: I didn't ask you last time. Do you have a name you would like to go by. Do you like a pseudonym picked out

ALEX: Let's go with ALEX. I like that.

INTERVIEWER: sweet! Do you want to just like jump right in

ALEX: Sure. Go ahead!

INTERVIEWER: Okay? The. I have 3 questions on advice, but the one prior, and you can answer it any order you would like to. But the just. The 4 questions I have is, what is your relationship with your disability? And then, what advice you would give to people wanting to go into music ed, so like either high school students or I mean, I was 22 when I decided and then pre-service music teachers like music majors, and then other teachers. So, you can answer those in any order you would like to

ALEX: I guess my relationship with my disability.

I mean, sometimes it feels like a boon, sometimes it feels like a curse.

Oh, like it. It allows me to do things that some people can't do but it also causes a lot of struggles. So, it's like my relationship with. It is fine. Society's relationship with my disability is not. If that makes sense. I'm happy to have the diagnosis, because whether I have the diagnosis or not. It doesn't change that. I'm still like that. So, I know some people don't like having the label or don't like having the diagnosis, but to me it's been. It's better to know than to not know. My advice to anybody going into music ed. That has a disability, I guess, is to know what your protections

are, know what the laws are, but also just be prepared to do your accommodations yourself. Like. Know what you're entitled to, and also just know that people are gonna fight doing that. Anyway, it's not really. It's weird to say it feels like ever. It's not built for us because nothing is built for us, but I don't know that I've met very many music educators that I didn't think were some kind of not normal. I even had a counselor at my last job once. One of our school counselors, who is a musician and also like diagnosed neurodivergent. Or he told me that he doesn't think that there are any band directors that last longer than a couple of years that aren't neurodivergent. He's like you have to be neurodivergent to do this, and when he was pointing to rows and rows of cases of instruments that were like out in the middle of the floor, because we were doing inventory stuff. and he was like, normal people can't do this. So, any like all the systems that I have that make it possible for me to do my job are ones that I've put in place more or less. not ones that have been provided. So, like it's while it's important to like, know your rights and know, like what you can fight for. It's just in my experience that doesn't actually like help all too much. It just opens the door for like potential backlash. like when Hr. And told me, you know, we'll just have your psych redo your evaluation to say you're not capable of doing your job. I don't remember what the other one was where it was advice for people going into it

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I can also put them in the chat that actually might be helpful. But that way, that way they're all there. No, no, I definitely should have just thought of that cause. I know my brain can't hold on to anything for more than like 10 seconds. We're at Goldfish BRAIN moment.

ALEX: Yeah, yeah, so yeah, it just for all 3, like knowing your rights and making your own systems is valid. it's the same to like your protections as a preservice music teacher. Apply also to like what protections and accommodations you have like within your teacher preparation program, not just within future employment. And I think, too, maybe my advice for all 3 would be to find like community like with having community. People who are also, you know, quote unquote, like you who are your kind of normal is very helpful. I think. Just let you know my biggest source of support at work is the other. The other neurodivergent person in my department

INTERVIEWER: I really love that. You keep coming back to the like your kind of normal. I that's like my favorite thing.

ALEX: I just. I thought the way that I was normal for a very long time, and it wasn't until you know my diagnosis where I was told that no, actually, people do not have elaborate systems

for how they put on their socks in the morning

INTERVIEWER: Did I realize that that kind of wasn't normal. And I feel like when we call things, as you know, like normal and abnormal. It kind of creates like a negative connotation.

ALEX: The way that I am isn't bad. It's just different. Society often treats different as bad. But like there's biological incentive for us to be different, right? Even just when it comes to like sleep cycles. It's beneficial for creatures to have members of their pack or their community that are awake at night to watch for predators. So, having someone with a delayed sleep phase cycle, which often happens with Adhd, is a boon having people who solve problems differently is a boon so that you can find alternative solutions to problems, you know, etc., etc. It's just that within our social, political climate we view different as bad

INTERVIEWER: I know that you've talked a lot about your university experience. Adding to this this, that we, the laundry list we carry? Do you have anything that any like reassurance or tips that you thought of when you were going through the program that you think might benefit somebody who is. I don't think that's an uncommon experience. Unfortunately. Any advice for those people

ALEX: So, some advice that I failed to take, that I really wish I had taken as an undergrad our orchestra director. Oh, I was never an orchestra, but he taught advanced conducting. Are you taught basic conducting? And I turned that into to get your honors diploma? You had to have X number of credits in the lower level and the upper level that were honors, credits. But there weren't enough music majors to open whole sections of music classes as an honors class. So, you do what you called a contract where you took a regular class, and you added to it to elevate it to an honors class, and I did a contract with him for conducting where I basically took some private lessons with him. And he became a little bit of a mentor figure, but something that he said to like every class all the time was that if he could make counseling or therapy mandatory for music majors, he would, because we have a high stress profession, and even someone who does not have any diagnosis or like any underlying conditions, still would extremely benefit from it, and he openly talked about him going to therapy, and how even just things like performance, anxiety we could benefit from therapy and I always kind of like treated that advice so just like Al. I don't need it. and maybe I would have gotten diagnosed or gotten some supports earlier had I gone, and after I got diagnosed, I saw him at a conference. and I talked to him, and I was like, hey, I wanted to let you know that. You know, I got diagnosed with a couple of things, and I've been going to therapy. And one of my

1st thoughts, when I got diagnosed was like, Oh, hey! [redacted] was right. and he like it was a very encouraging thing. He, like grabbed both my hands and was like. I'm so proud of you. I'm so thank like I'm so happy for you that that you're doing that. And he's a very intense guy like he does not blink ever makes unhealing eye contact. Is a very just, intense person, but I kind of blew off that advice because I was like, oh, I don't need it. I'm functioning, you know. I'm winning auditions, and I've got good grades, and therefore I'm fine because I defined fine by my work output and not by anything else. But it came at a cost. And I really wish I'd given therapy a chance earlier, even if there wasn't a diagnosis cause our music education has, like one of the highest rates of dropout with any other major in my undergrad we had the highest rate of suicide attempts. Like we. We actually had to have like mandatory school, wide, like the whole school of music, had to have drug and alcohol counseling when I was there, like we were. We were not like coping very well. And I really wish I'd listened to that advice, and it was always given from like a very encouraging and inclusive place, like he was like, I go to therapy. I benefit from therapy like I really, you know. Hope you guys are open to that, and if you ever want a faculty recommendation, I'll give it to you. And if you want to talk to somebody that's not a therapist. My door is always open, you know. It's very encouraging, but I kind of blew it off because I was quote unquote, performing well and I think I talked last time about how that's how I used to define my value. And even then, like this week, I'm I've been struggling with that. We just got through with our large group performance evaluation, and I got a weird smattering of scores. It's not even supposed to be something they do where you're not supposed to have a spread larger than 2 numbers, you know ones and twos, or twos, and threes, or threes and fours, but not one through threes, and I got ones through threes. and I got some weird comments, you know, even on the same metric, like one judge gave me A's and ones in like the category of tone. And then another judge gave me C’s, but I felt really bad about getting those threes. Those c's like that. Didn't that didn't feel good one judge asked me if I was a 1st year teacher which felt like a weird question. and he didn't elaborate on why, when I was like, no, this is like you. So, I'm like in my thirties now. I don't know if it's just because I look younger, and he was the judge that gave me the highest score, so I don't even I don't know what to make of that like. I really struggled with that like. Oh, I got I had bad performance, therefore I'm not valuable. I'm not good at my job, which is. we don't. The judges don't know where my kids started versus where they are now, and that that to me, is the most important part, and they don't know well, also, the only judge that gave us a good score was the only judge that

wasn't white. and my kids are mostly not white, and I have a feeling that may have fit into that decision, especially because the judges who gave me threes gave me almost no comments on the score sheet, like the judge who gave me a 2, gave a lot of feedback. And I'm like, I'm okay with that because he's justified to me. Why he picked a 2. And that makes sense. But one judge literally put in one category. The only comment he put was overall fine and then gave me a 2 in that category. And I'm like, if it's if it's fine, why is it a 2? You know that that's a little weird.

INTERVIEWER: Do you guys not get audio like? Do they not like speak

ALEX: We do, but I haven't gotten it yet, and oddly, in my district we have to pay for the audio.

and like I've never had that in any place before I'm like, why do I have to pay for the audio you're already making it like all you have to do is send me a Google drive folder link like it doesn't cost you anything. It's a little weird

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that is where that is like an unnecessary barrier

ALEX: Yes, and like, it's only $30. But, like our district, is also very racially and monetarily divided. So, like, we have rich white schools, and we have poor, not white schools, not at one of the poor, not white schools. So, and we, you know, lots of literature and studies show that female directors tend to get lower scores. So, you know, when I got this course, I was like, is this is this because of sexism, because of racism because of classism? Or is it a combination of all 3? And if the judges all agreed like if across the board, I got threes, I'd be more willing to accept it. But the fact that I had one judge give me a 1, 1, give me a 2, and then 2. Give me threes makes me kind of question the validity of those numbers. so, I guess another piece of advice would be kind of figuring out how you want to define success. And like, that's something I'm still struggling with, if I know how I want to define success. But I still feel bad when I don't meet outside metrics of success. But to me what I view is successful for my students is more important than that number. Like one of the one of the things, they docked us for, that I probably could have changed or fit, you know. Quote unquote fixed, was that my ensemble was unbalanced and the kids struggled with dealing with the balance issues because of my instrumentation. But to fix the balance I would have had to cut kids that did the work. So, I was low brass, heavy, because all of my low brass showed up and did the work and knocked it out of the park. And I would have had to turn kids away who did the work and not give them this experience. but that probably would have upped my balance scores because they were having to work 3 times as hard for the melody to be heard just due to

numbers. And that's not something I could have really impacted, because this is my 1st year at the school. So, you know, next year I'll probably have a little bit easier time with balance, because I've I. When I divided the classes I took that into account. I still would rather have an unbalanced ensemble where kids are in the appropriate difficulty level course, than have kids who are advanced level, bored to tears in the beginner class, or beginners who are drowning in the advanced class, just so that I have somebody filling that spot. So, to me, what I what I ask my kids, is a successful concert is, are we? Did we grow as musicians? Are we proud of what we did? And did we enjoy doing it? And to me those were all. Yes, so I should feel happy and good about this performance. But I'm still kind of like, and it's also just as it was a long day. We I didn't. We didn't perform until almost 8 Pm. so I was with the kids all day. High stress, high energy, you know, I crashed really hard. I didn't do anything yesterday, and so I'm still dealing with, like the emotional crash of like I was, I was on and performing for 16 straight hours. Essentially, that's a long time to be functional. But I think I'm getting better at that as time goes on defining success. The way I want to define success the way that our profession defines success may not be possible or healthy. or even align with our experiences as people with disabilities. You know I in my early it's like starting from high school and through college I valued musical performance more than I valued myself. And I think, as an early teacher that bled into my teaching in ways that I didn't like it. When I saw how that manifested. I didn't like that. I didn't like how it looked like my students felt, because I know I didn't like how I felt. And so that changed how? Wanted to define the success because in order to perform at those levels. I had to as someone who's like already starting 20 feet before the start line. I had to work harder to catch up

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of like early years of teaching? I think, especially with neurodivergent neurodivergences. Routine is such an important factor. And I know, like freshman year of college is really hard for a lot of people, because it's a routine change. And then I think we talk about 1st year teachers having a hard time, because it's just like you're into something new. But then that

ALEX: Right.

INTERVIEWER: That's like the basis for able bodied people. And then we get the addition of.

you know, having this this other thing happening. I'm watching a lot of likes, just like personal people in my life who are neurodivergent, that are having a really hard time as 1st year

teachers because of a routine change and the like curve balls of not knowing what the routine changes are going to be, because it's their 1st year. Do you have any words for those that large group of people

ALEX: So, part of it was just that I didn't expect so many things to be uncommunicated. So, like that 1st year like you said, like I made plans for the whole year in advance. Because that's what you do, right? You plan out rehearsals and long, you know. Long term. We're gonna start jazz band at this point of the year, and you know, blah blah and I would get thrown up by like, oh, well, you can't have rehearsal these 3 weeks because of testing. That's not even the end of your testing. It's like some other kind of testing that we volunteered extra. You know things I didn't know about, or because we have scoliosis screening this week. And I didn't know that was gonna be a thing learning to at the very beginning of the year. Whatever I thought I could do in that amount of time, taking like 10 to 15% off to give myself a buffer zone for those things to happen really helped. And even it's funny you said that because there was there was one day I think it was last year where I was just aggravated. I was aggravated all day, and it was the day we did scoliosis screening, and I was being mean to the kids, and I didn't. I was like, why am I? Why am I like this today? Why do I feel so awful today? And my, the orchestra teacher looked at me and was like. ALEX, your routine got messed up and you're autistic. And I looked. And I was like, Oh, yeah, yeah. Cause we did scoliosis screening today? Yeah, I'm upset because my routine's not the same. And he was like, aren't you glad I remembered you're autistic. And I'm like, yeah, because I honestly forgot for a minute. Man. and he was like, you're welcome. And it was kind of a funny little moment with like I didn't even think about it like, oh, my routine is going to be different. So, knowing the most you can in advance is helpful. I found that what I consider advance, and with administration and neurotypical people consider, advance is not the same amount of advance. So, you can ask like, hey, will you let me know, you know, when stuff's gonna happen. And they're like, okay, I'll let you know the week before. And I'm like Buddy. I already. I planned my life 3 months in advance like a week before. Ain't gonna cut it so, having that buffer in place of like I planned for, there to be time to like, be eaten up by something else, and then, if it doesn't get eaten up, you have extra time to polish or clean, or, you know, take a day off and go home early. But if I plan to maximize my time, I'm always gonna fall short because of these differences in routines. Establishing your own routines and your own systems in place as soon as you can, is really helpful. I'm noticing that this semester I'm doing a lot better than I was last semester, just because I was at a new school

where my systems were not already in place like this, the systems for inventory and you know the catalog and the music library. And now that I have more organizational systems in place. I can follow the systems more clearly instead of being like oops. Well, now, I have to derail half a day in my normal schedule and routine, because I have to figure out which of these 14 trombones works to check out to a new kid. Now that I have a checkout system in place and all the instruments evaluated that takes 20 min and not a whole day and just kind of acknowledging that that 1st year is just gonna suck. You can minimize the suckiness, but it is not gonna not suck and I think I was given this advice about playing baritone, not about routines, but I feel like it kind of applies. My 1st year marching baritone. It's heavy and I'm small. I'm only 5 feet, and at the time I was very underweight, and I had a staff member look at me, and they spoke. You're waiting for this to not suck. and it's just not gonna not suck, it will always suck. And I looked at him, and I kind of had an epiphany of like. Oh, this is always going to suck like this is just always going to be awful. This is never going to feel good. And I was able to kind of like let go of like this tension of like waiting for it to get better and like. In a sense it did get better, and that, like I built up more muscle, but it never stopped being a fight, and the horn never stopped being a struggle. Even when I got stronger, even when I was more successful, I still had to fight that weight of that horn, and I kind of feel like it's the same with dealing with the disability stuff like I can put systems in place that make it to where I'm not struggling as much. But there's always going to be a certain element that does just suck my routine's gonna get messed up. Someone's gonna do something that like weirdly, expect a kid's gonna randomly hug me. And I didn't want to be touched that day like it's just there's elements of this that are just going to suck, and I think that's true. No matter what job you have, ours is a very high pressure, high stress job, and that doesn't help. But there's some parts of it that are just gonna suck and knowing that your 1st year is gonna suck the most. I think, makes a little bit easier to make it to year 2. It's not always going to be like that. But also, there's not holding onto that false hope that all of a sudden it will just become easy

INTERVIEWER: For I think I think this applies to just like every facet of life. But specific to like 1st years or just teaching and going through music Ed programs. But do you have anything to say to like burnout and imposter syndrome

ALEX: Yeah, I have suffered imposter syndrome quite a bit like, especially with the constant narrative of people telling me, well, you're not stupid, so you just must be lazy or you're not stupid. So, you just must not have cared, and knowing that I was working really hard, and

knowing that I cared a lot. I spent a lot of time thinking that I really was just stupid, and I just somehow tricked people into thinking I wasn't stupid. Getting a diagnosis helped with that having people that I trust to not lie to me has helped with that. Like I have friends that I know will tell me the truth, and like not gas me up just to gas me up so like I can check in with those people, and you know, ask like an honest, legitimate question of like, hey, does this suck? And they'll tell me like, no, this is this is adequate, you know, or this is, this is good. You're doing a good job. My 1st year teaching I had a really bad imposter syndrome, because the situation I walked into was really bad. I was Fan director 3 out of 7 and 4 years. and it got bad enough to the point where my mom came down to visit, and it's gotta be. Things got to be pretty bad for my mom to come in to rescue me. But and this is the exact language my mom used, and it's, you know, vulgar and inappropriate. But she sat across like the I didn't even have a real table. I had a folding table, because I couldn't afford real furniture, yet this is my 1st teaching job. But she looked at me and said, why are you letting other people make you feel like you don't have a big Dick. and I kind of looked at her. I was like, oh, I'm doing that. I'm letting. I'm letting other people make me feel small. Make me feel like I'm not adequate making me feel you know, and it's really weird. I had somebody try to do this to me this past week. Where to make themselves feel better. They tried to make me feel small, and it was okay. Somebody who is reached out to me to try to get like sectional jobs. Was like, hey, I'm applying for band jobs in your county. Can I ask you some questions? And I said, Sure. and he was like, what you know. Grade music. Do your students play? And I was like, you know, between point 5 and one it's like, technically like, you know, nodewise. They can handle it, too. But we're dealing with intonation and embouchure issues. My predecessor was a percussionist, and it's just a weakness that they have because of that, you know my percussion is amazing. But my, my wind players have some issues, their articulation and tongue position. So, you know, and he was like, oh, well, when I was an interim director, you know, my bands played 2.5, and I looked. And I was like, yeah, everything's kind of like, okay that's your band. It's not my band. So, whatever. And I was like, Yeah, well, you know, I can't have after school rehearsals too often, because my administration doesn't like that. We have like lots of blackout days like for the whole month of April. I'm only allowed to have rehearsals on Fridays, which is weird. and I was like, well, you know, I can't go after school rehearsals, and I only see my kids every other day, and his response was, have you tried telling them to practice? And I was just like, are you seriously trying to mansplain the concept of practicing to me right now, my dude, and he was like, have you tried

asking them to practice? That's what I did. And you know I didn't even have to have after school rehearsals, you know, really worked for me. And so, I went digging because I'm nosy and found out that he had to drop his music education major, because he couldn't maintain his GPA. And he's been desperate to get in other people's band rooms to try to buff up his resume. And I was like, you're trying to make me feel small, so that you feel big. And unfortunately, our profession is very competitive, and people will try to do that. And you know, you see, this time of year, like people posting their scores, their Lg scores. and you know and I don't know if there's a purpose to that, besides inflating your own ego. I think just my advice for dealing with imposter syndrome is just know what you are. Know that you have a big dick. and don't let other people make you feel like you don't. And if you have met the success criteria that you have defined. You don't have to meet anybody else's. and like that's I've been struggling with that this week. I didn't meet the external criteria for success. But I did meet my criteria for success. and even in I would have been like more self-doubtful. But my chorus director came and chaperoned, and she's a band person. She's a former band director. She is a band kid, and I was like, did you think it sounded like a 3, and she was like, no, she's like a high 2 or a low one is what I would have given it, but not a 3. And I was like, okay. So, I'm not like a hundred percent crazy like that's part of like me, I was able to rely on outside advice that I trust, like, I don't think she lied to me. yeah. And burnout is…Burnout's a little harder, because our profession encourages burnout and it both teaching and band both encourage burnout, right? Because teaching does it from the side of oh, but you should really do more unpaid labor, because think of the kids. and don't you care about the kids, and don't you care about their experience? And if you really cared, you'd be willing to put in all these unpaid volunteer hours' time away from your family time, away from relaxation, time away from decompressing. And as people with the disabilities, and especially, I feel like neurodivergences, you need time to decompress because of how much you've been masking, and we're encouraged to give that time up to be in the band room. You know we're encouraged to be that last car to leave the parking lot. and that's not really helpful. Something that's been helpful for me has been finding hobbies that do not have to do with band that make me feel productive. So, like I, foreign language is mine. I'm because it doesn't matter really, if my Spanish is bad like. It's just for me, and if I can use a little bit of it that's cool and like I did my announcements at my concert in English and Spanish, and my Spanish was not great. But my school is 80% Hispanic. And one of my kids told me that they were like, yeah, your Spanish wasn't great, but my parents made a comment on the way home that it's

like it was cool that you tried that. They don't see a lot of people try. And I was like, that's all I'm doing. I'm just trying, and it's not tied to my success as a band director, and it's not tied to my profession. And it's just like something I do for fun. And so, anything I do feels productive. And it's not tied to music. The other thing that's really helped for me. Burnout wise is being in a healthy relationship where I like to spend time at home. And that may be a unique to me thing, because my PTSD diagnosis largely comes like from 2 sources, then, that the autism, the Adhd was undiagnosed, and the fact that my marriage, my last 1st relationship, was really unhealthy and really stressful, that I preferred being at work to being at home and me and the in my group chat with my 2 former coworkers. We when we all worked together in the same building, we used to make fun of the orchestra, Guy, because he's a wife, Guy, like he just his wife, writes some notes in his lunchbox every day, and he's just so smitten. And it's honestly, really cute. She comes to all the concerts, and like they're really cute together. But we used to like make fun of them in a joke, and we'd be like, oh, my name is PI love my wife. I go home at the end of the day, and then when I started dating my now fiancé like maybe like a month in, I looked at him, and I was like, oh, no, Bro, I get it. I get it now, like, I want to go home. And he was just like, oh, see? See, I told you. And I was like, Yeah, I want to go home. I like being at home now, and that's made it easier for me to let go of all of the shit at work because I like to be at home, and that doesn't necessarily have to be like from a relationship but finding a place where you feel like you belong in a place where you can be happy. That is not work. Not defining yourself by your work. I think many band directors struggle with that disability or not, we define ourselves by our position. Even to the point where, when I taught chorus, I felt like I was having an identity crisis because I was a band director. I just was teaching chorus, and that didn't feel right.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any like environmental things that you utilize, that either make it a safe space or make like. Do you have anything changed in your band room, or anything

ALEX: So, I do most of that in my office. So that and part of it has been irritating in my new job because my office has automatic lights. I can't turn off, so what I used to do is, I used to just leave the lights in my office off, and I have a lamp where you can change both the tone and the brightness, so it can be cool, light, warm, light, very bright, very dark. I put in comfy chairs. I have some of the chairs have like pillows and stuffed animals on it, so that I could have low lighting. closed off space comfortable seating and it that helped not only me, but it became like a thing for the kids, too. We're like, when my kids were having high stress days they'd be like, can I use your

office for 10 min? And it and it became a thing even to the point of like we got a kid mid, and I heard one of my like section leaders like student leaders like talking to them and being like, hey, she says that like you can do that like she means it like you actually can go, you know. Use that space. And you know, sometimes a lot of likes, hey, do you want to talk about it, or you just need the space now, like, I just need the space for 10 min to decompress. But that low lighting you know, kind of low, sensory environment compared to like the band room with the lights on and everybody playing because I can't exactly make that. Not a thing. My room does not have sound panels, and I am desperately trying to get sound panels in there. It was a whole thing where the county that my principal, my last principal, was like, you have sound panels, and I was like No, I don't. And she called the district, and they were like she should have sound panels, and I'm like they are not in there. We can walk down to my vendor right now, and I'll point out to you the blank space where they should be, but they are not there. So, I'm trying to get sound panels to help reduce the noise. Stimulation. A lot of my sensory stuff, too. I handle with clothing. I like compression. So, I wear like knee high socks that like they're not compression socks, but they are like it's not the looseness of my pant legs around my legs. It's the then close to skin fabric of the socks. Even when I wear. I wear like baggier hoodies and stuff like that over, but like tighter stuff underneath, and I almost always have my hair pulled back tight where, like there is like the it's like a weighted blanket type thing, just like the pressure. And so like, I often feel like I look like I'm dressed very casually at work, because I'll have on the business clothes, but it's like I've got like this pink, fuzzy Hoodie on over top of it. That looks it. It's old and busted in like, was it? Hand me down before I even got it. But it's like a comfort clothing. Item. so, I handle a lot of that was like portable stuff. So, my room it's the sensory things are isolated to my office, and that's, I think. really helpful, because when I do need a break from the stimulus I can disappear into my office. even if I have the door open. So, if I have students in the room like I leave the door open so I can monitor the kids. It's still like removed from the main stimulus

INTERVIEWER: that was all the questions that I had, and all the follow up. Is there anything else that you would like to say

ALEX: no, not really, I did. I was able to get doesn't necessarily matter, probably for your study, but I was able to get a pair pro, so I could have the student with the mobility and medical issues at our concert cost me $300, but like I was able, because I had to have them for 2 days, and it's a hundred 50 a day. But I was able to get him to the concert, and like was able to perform with

everybody. And I was really happy about that.

INTERVIEWER: It's really exciting that like makes me so happy to hear because that every kid deserves an opportunity

ALEX: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's like the bare minimum one of our school districts didn't support that

ALEX: One of the other teachers in my school was talking about wanting to go back for a PhD. In music. He like works on the admin side but is a musician. And he was talking about how he really wants to study like, why, kids with disabilities like don't go into these music programs. And in my head, I was like. Well, we only really make it an option. They're inherently excluded. It's not because they don't want to. But yeah, I think I don't think I have anything

PENELOPE

Interview 1 (2.18.25)

PENELOPE: I'm in my third year of actually teaching. I graduated from Michigan state in 2019. I teach in rural northern Michigan. I teach k-12 music, so elementary general in the music and band in the afternoon. It's a time. I was a flute player through college. It broke me. I came really close to leaving the teaching field after undergrad. I was diagnosed with ADHD and autism about a year and a half ago and now it's just kind of in this state of relaying all the way this kinda had impacted my path to how I got to where I am and how I deal with things in the classroom on a daily basis and life outside of that. And now it's kinda like what does this look like going forward. Also, my distract got rid of all music education probably about ten years ago. And then I was there in an AmeriCorps position, and they were like you have a music ed degree? We want to restart our music programs. So that is another factor in my job.

INTERVIEWER: kind of growing from what was left behind.

PENELOPE: starting from scratch. It was gone for just long enough that any student who had been in the program previously had already graduated. By that point they cut elementary music well before they cut band too, so none of the kids had any elementary music experience like yeah. It was like starting completely from square one.

INTERVIEWER: you were diagnosed like a year and a half ago, which is fairly recent in a lifetime. What is your relationship with the word disability and disabled"

PENELOPE: It's something that I have had to, especially since getting diagnosed, that I had a lot of unconscious biases towards disability. Like I knew things were difficult for me and that I acted in ways that were different, but I never thought of myself as having a disability. I assumed there were different reasons for all of my struggles, and not that it was a disability. Since receiving a diagnosis, it has forced me to examine my perspective on disability and my relationship to it and I'm starting to force myself ingo the mindset that I am disabled. And that means I need help with things and it's not some kind of failure on me to have to ask for help. It's also opened my perspective to really how broad a score disability covers. I've also had a different viewpoint on it too because my mother and father-in-law are both children of deaf adults. They both were career interpreters and active within deaf advocacy. It's just come into a different connection and relationship for me coming into a family with a history of disability and disability advocacy and realized that I am disabled.

INTERVIEWER: do you identify with PFL or IFL?

PENELOPE: I personally prefer IFL, I don't know, there's something that feels very clinical about PFL to me as opposed to IFL. For me, the fact I am autistic is a core part of who I am. That's just my take on it.

INTERVIEWER: do you identify as having a disability, and what does it mean to you to have this identity?

PENELOPE: I do identify as having a disability. To me, it's almost as a way of kind of acknowledging that I am approaching things from an uneven perspective to the rest of society. So, to me it is something, a part of who I am, something about me, that I guess is something neutral to me. I don't have a strong emotional connection to it.

Interview 2 (2.25.25)

INTERVIEWER: I believe the next question I have is, yeah, is why did you go into education? I think that's where we left off right? Okay, before we get into that. Did you have anything you wanted to like? Update anything that's happened this last week?

PENELOPE: It was band festival week this past week.

INTERVIEWER: That that will do it. Does that like coincide with? Because like, for here like all state and stuff kind of coincides with our Music Education Association Conference.

PENELOPE: No, we do. Usually, band festival is like a month after the Music Ed Conference. Also, Michigan does things weird. In that there is MMEA. So, Michigan Music

Education Association. But they're basically just like education, advocacy, side of stuff. And then the actual like contests and so on. Ensemble is through 2 separate organizations, MSBOA and MSBMA, band and orchestra and vocal music. So MSBOA handles the All-State band which is done at the Music Ed Conference. But then, individual like band Festival, is separate.

INTERVIEWER: That is like so many individual things to have to sign up for.

PENELOPE: Yeah, I was describing it to my husband how it's like basically band director hell for me from February, from like middle of January to April. Because almost every week this month. and going into next month, I have had some kind of band event. Solo and ensemble was at the beginning of February for us, and I had kids sign up and then not follow through on attending. But our MSBOA policy is, if you register kids, you get a work assignment and you have to go if your kids drop. So, like that was super fun waking up at 5 am. And then driving back because, solo, not I live in the middle of nowhere. So, solo and ensemble is a 2-hour drive for most of my kids, at least for my high schoolers. and it was blizzarding on the way back. So, we've had. We had solo and ensemble. Then last weekend was festival and festivals a 2-day process, because I have the day that I actually take my kids. And then the day that I go for my work assignment. And then our middle School honor band is in 2 weeks, and I have kids going to that. And then, right after we get back from spring break is middle school solo and ensemble.

INTERVIEWER: That's a lot. You teach K-12.

PENELOPE: I do

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Cause I was like, I know you do elementary. And then band. that's a lot in the day.

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I think I think you guys are the unspoken heroes of music education.

PENELOPE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I guess this kind of leads into it pretty well. Why did you go into education as like a whole? And then how did I guess? How did you end up here?

PENELOPE: I wanted to be a band director. I was joking with one of my kids today, one of my students today. Cause they were like, oh, do you? You seem like the kind of person that would enjoy Elden Ring unironically. So, I was discussing favorite video games. And I was like, you know, I've got the kind of autism that… And this student is also autistic. So, I was like, I've got the kind of autism that once I like something I only do that thing. How do you think I got into

this job? But like, that's basically what it was is, I was at an honor band and had a like. This is really cool moment and decided I wanted to make that my career. So, when I went in, I was like, I'm gonna be a high school band director. And then, after going through all this stuff, I was like, no, like I, you know, it's not just about playing the big pieces for me. It's the whole aspect of band and what it can be and what it is. And I wanted to do either middle school or 6-12. Undergrad was also not the greatest of times for me. Michigan State has a very toxic band culture. And I could go on about how I think it permeates to the culture of bands and band directors around the State of Michigan, but I would… One of my conducting professors told me my junior year because I was not the most intensive score studiers that you need. If you're not willing to intensely score, study this much, you need to consider if this is the right field for you. And so, when I graduated, I was kind of in this mindset of like, yes, I'm looking for a teaching job. But if I don't find one. I'm not opposed to going into other fields or like related fields. So, I graduated in December of 2019 and had a long-term sub job lined up. That was supposed to take me through the end of that school year. That obviously got cut short because Covid happened. And so, then it was like trying to find a music teaching job in that summer was insanely difficult. And so, I had found an AmeriCorps position in higher education, counseling. So, working in smaller or more urban schools that have a low college going rate and a high rate of ratio of students to guidance counselor and I picked the placement that I did, because my like, not aunt, but not aunt, like close family friend, has a place up around where I'm at, and I had been up there before. So, I jokingly said to my mom, hey, what if I went and worked in Town? And she was like you should go do that. So, I did. And when I took that AmeriCorps position, I initially was like, okay, it's going to be a year. And if you know, things are better next summer, and band jobs are open. I'll take a band job, and then I was like, but wait, I like it here, and I don't want to leave here, and also, maybe I don't want to go back into the educational field, and then my district that I now teach in had not had any kind of music program for at that point, like 8, or like probably 6 or 7 years. And in between my 1st and second year of AmeriCorps. The I was having lunch with both building principals at the time, the Guidance Counselor and the superintendent, and the Guidance counselor and I were really close, and she's like, hey, **PENELOPE**'s got a music Ed degree and is licensed. And I basically got hired on the spot then.

INTERVIEWER: That is awesome.

PENELOPE: And like, now go to my band director, friends, that cause I am starting to get a lot of you know you're still having to fight a lot of these battles in year 3 you should start looking at other jobs, and I make the joke that it's the Kappa Kappa psi in me. I'm serving the bands.

INTERVIEWER: You said you had a toxic band culture at Michigan State.

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: The next question I have is, did you find support in your teacher education program? And then what did these supports look like it. It could be friends, it could be that you found therapy, it could be you avoided professors just kind of what did it? What did it look like for you?

PENELOPE: The one of the music education professors fought for me because the flute professor also wanted to kick me out of the university and be like basically told me in the end of my junior year, you are a waste of my time, so I had a music, Ed Professor, that was like, look you can. You know she can learn how to conduct and teach, and classroom manage there. She has a way with kids and a passion with kids that you cannot teach, and it would be a shame to take her out of the field. Be just because she can't conduct up to the standard that you know, we expect Michigan State directors and alumni to be. So, I had that… A lot of the supports I was in therapy throughout college. And then I supported with unhealthy coping mechanisms. And I had a couple grad students and TAs that I had gotten close with that also kind of understood that like I'm in here for the education side of things. I don't care, you know, not so much the music side of things. And it's another thing that, like looking back on it. Almost every single one of my ed classmates was at the very least there was an attempt to talk them into adding a performance major as well by their applied professors. So, I think I found the other people within the College of Music that were like, I'm fine being in the lowest band and never putting on a recital. I'm here to learn how to teach.

INTERVIEWER: it is, it is like always alarming. How similar music schools can be.

PENELOPE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: It's like music, it doesn't matter where you are. Band is band for better or for worse.

PENELOPE: Yup!

INTERVIEWER: at your like in your current community. Like that being like your school, your peers around you. I know you've talked about being very open about having autism with your students. Does your community generally know about your disability?

PENELOPE: I'm only open about my autism, with my students that I know are also autistic, it usually comes up in a they're in a meltdown or in some kind of autism related not having a great time, and they're trying to explain themselves to me. And I'm like you don't need to. I get it. And then I'll also be kind of like more. And then usually I follow that up with, so is there some kind of is there something I can do to make things more manageable for you from a sensory perspective? I have kind of shied on disclosing it to the school community as a whole. All of my students know I have Adhd. because I feel like that one is. There's a little less stigma around that. A handful of teachers know. But I haven't like fully fully disclosed it to the community, because the community I teach in is one of those small towns where, like a lot of my students, parents graduated from there, and their parents did, too, and they are friends with the children of the people their parents were friends with. And so, when I'm already an outsider, and when this community decides they don't like someone or something specifically, in relationship to the school. They will not shut up about it until they get their way. And right now, there are some athletic parents that are not happy, that having music meant that the weight room had to be relocated. There are some now former band parents who think that I'm an ineffective teacher because of these struggles to try to build a band culture in a program that has never, that hasn't had it for a very long time, and they're more musically inclined child is upset about their band experience as a result, and there's also just like a general distrust of the school within the community right now. So, I kind of don't want to give them any reason to try to push me. I don't want to give anybody a nail in the coffin to push for me being gone.

INTERVIEWER: and then kind of gearing it towards like a different mindset of how to answer, the question I have is, is, how does your disability impact your relationship with your students, with autism. Kind of having that like. Okay, now, what do you need in a sensory thing? How have you noticed that change things or any experiences you've had.

PENELOPE: On one hand, I've noticed that sometimes my students, who are autistic kind of expect me to excuse certain behaviors. Like one of my high school band students has been one of the ones that has been there like since the beginning of the restarting of the program, and it was like kind of a culture cornerstone within my program my 1st year, and definitely a

little bit last year. But like started missing a lot of school because it was kind of. I don't want to go, and I don't feel like going, and the kids Grandma will call him in pretty much whenever he doesn't want to go to school especially because this year his schedule is essentially 2 art classes peer to peer in my middle school band being in high school band, and then one actual class. So, I think there's kind of this expectation that I will just always understand and accept instead of, and I try to frame it as the in the mindset of your gonna have to deal with this for the rest of your life, and employers are not always going to be as understanding colleges are not always going to be as understanding. So, like, I understand. But I also need you to understand that there are plenty of days that I do not feel like going in. And I come in and show up for you guys because we've made this commitment. And then I think, also on the flip side. the non-autistic kid, the allistic kids treat me the same way that they treat their autistic peers, even if they don't outwardly know it's like. Oh, it's like the Oh, let's pick on the autistic kid until they melt down and freak out. Oh, let's push the buttons of the autistic teacher until she freaks out. Because it's funny when she does. And then especially with like the rise of autistic being used as a slur, then it's like the but why can't I say this? Why is it important that I not say this.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that? This is like unique to being in a small community or that that kind of impacts this relationship.

PENELOPE: I don't know if I was just like higher masking during my student teaching, but I don't remember, and it was, I mean, so a student taught in a community that's I wouldn't say it is a smaller rural community, but not to the level that the one I'm currently in is. But like, there were also a couple kids in my student teaching that very much would try to push the buttons until I like. I came back to sub for one of my cooperating teachers one day I was done student teaching. And they had these behavior questions that you were supposed to ask when a kid acted out. And there was one kid that, like by the end of my student teaching, I was asking them the questions once or twice a week. So, the day I came back to sub they had a bet on how long it would take for me to have to ask that one kid the questions.

INTERVIEWER: the next question kind of falls into maybe a different spot. The next question, like the guideline, I have been, if you are open with your community, have you noticed a change due to visual representation? Do you have anything that you feel that might apply to.

PENELOPE: I don't know, because, like I… So, I have disclosed it to my admin, and it's one of them is very much like picks up on when I seem overstimulated or irked about something

and is like, is everything okay? So, I also hesitate to like talk more about it because I'm worried of it being used as an excuse. especially like that setting, because, like, I am terrible at tracking and logging behavior stuff. because I just get so like overwhelmed and frustrated in the moment, and then I forget to write it down or I in my mind, I'm like, okay, I haven't exactly followed all the steps that my principal expects me to follow, so he won't help me if I send this kid to him, because I haven't already called. I haven't already. I haven't already called their parents and said, Hey, this kid's a behavior problem in my class. so, I don't know. I hesitate to bring it up a lot because afraid of it being perceived as an excuse.

INTERVIEWER: there's like a really cool. I say, really cool, because I find any research about people with disabilities just like yay, somebody's talking about us. There's this. I might have mentioned this a study from, I believe, Israel, but it's studying Western education. So, like not specific to the United States, but, like overall Western education, and in it there was, they like talked with a large number of teachers, with disabilities in all a bunch of fields. Another qualitative study, and they discussed, like the 4 primary dilemmas, about like essentially just being a teacher with a disability. And one of the biggest ones was whether or not to come out of the disability closet. Do you find that you maybe experience a bit of that?

PENELOPE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I can definitely send it to you. If you're like wanting a read that might feel a little bit validating because I definitely read it and was like, I feel seen. I can a hundred percent share that with you. I have. I have like a million links on my computer but that one discussed like whether or not to apply for accommodations, whether or not to tell your community. And one of the big things that other people had spoken about was fear of it being used against them. Which kind of sounds like a lot of what you're saying.

PENELOPE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And that's unfortunately a common theme. But it was nice to hear other people say something that I'm like, okay, I'm not alone even like between cultures, which is very unfortunate, but interesting to read about. The next couple of questions I have is more like job search and whatnot, so we can get into that next time. But did you want to share anything?

PENELOPE: So, since I have like a newer program, I take my kids to festival for comments only and last year I didn't take my middle schoolers. I just took my high schoolers, and I don't know how it is in Oregon, but like the way it works in Michigan is you play your

performances, and then you would go into the site reading room. But if you're going comments only you get a clinic instead of site reading. So, the clinician that we had last year with my high schoolers was wonderful. Just like he was very… I had granted I had had my work assignment the night before last year, and I had worked in the sight-reading room. So, I talked with him about my program and like kind of bring, you know, bringing him up to speed on what was going on. So, he approached my kids with that mindset, and was just very helpful, very wonderful. The clinician we had this year for this our clinic was not. I don't want to say as understanding, because I talked a lot more with her the next night at my work assignment, and the way that conversation start the way that night started versus ended was vastly different. When she had more perspective on what I'm up against in my program. And so middle school went first but I had my high schoolers go through the whole process because some of my high schoolers also didn't go to Festival last year because they were in 8th grade last year, and now they're freshmen. And my one kid with autism was freaking out because we had like 45 min of downtime between when middle school's clinic finished in high school needed to go warm up. So, he was sitting in the corner freaking out, and I just went up to him, and I'm like and talked him through it so well, and then also was like, do you need something to stim with, and he was kind of sheepishly like, yeah. And I handed him the one that's on my school keys all the time

INTERVIEWER: if it's possible, could you take a picture of the fidget spinner on your keys and send that because I think that would actually be a great artifact.

PENELOPE: Send my whole like Keychain, because I also have a set of loop earplugs that live on my school keys. I have that also. I have the same one. Fidget on my car keys, and I'll put the 2 side by side because it's like a little spiky fidget, and the one on my school keys. Half of the spikes have worn off, and the one on my car keys is like fully intact.

INTERVIEWER: That's so funny. So, you could tell like which one has been used and loved. Yeah, that things like that would be a fantastic artifact because it's like it's like the things that live that are physical, that are like a representation. You know.

PENELOPE: Yes.

Interview 3 (3.21.25)

INTERVIEWER: Last we left off I sent you the article about like the disability closet. I don't know if that…

PENELOPE: Not read it. If I'm being completely honest, I forgot to read it.

INTERVIEWER: No, you don't have to read anything, but it's leisure reading if you want to, just because it's something that we had discussed about of the like wanting, being fearful of coming out, because the feeling of and let me know if I'm interpreting this correctly of it kind of being viewed as an excuse, or like another way, that people could maybe see our human traits and look at them in a negative way, because, like, we're all human. And there's the thing of like, well, is this a human thing? Or is this like a disability thing I get that a lot with like when I forget things people will automatically assume. It's because I can't see or like. There's other neurodivergences in there rather than the fact that, like, I'm just a person, and I forget things.

PENELOPE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, sweet, that's what I have last on my notes and then the next question I have is, is, how; and this can be interpreted in any way you would like it to. But how is your disability impacted your relationship with students? And maybe specifically like to the students that you've kind of built that connection with of like, hey, this is like an understanding. And then maybe the ones that don't know. But your teaching style has maybe weaved its way with it.

PENELOPE: Yeah, so I think with the ones that I'm more connected with I they're more…

I don't know exactly the right words for it, but like they give me more accommodations, almost like one of them. One of my kids that I took to honor Band wanted another copy of one of the Honor bands pieces and kept asking me to print it out for her, and I kept forgetting. So, she went and got her pack of sticky notes and put like 20 sticky notes around the band room, saying, Print the Incredibles for Jessica so like they understand that, or my favorite one to always tell is one of my saxophone players asked for a queue one time. For it was like their entrance was in a weird spot, and they wanted a queue in, and I kept forgetting to give them the queue, and they looked at me. And we're like, take out your pencil and write that in your score right now.

INTERVIEWER: That's awesome. And then have you, have you noticed anything with this like maybe the students that you haven't built that connection with

PENELOPE: I do think that my neurotypical students, to an extent have clocked me as neurodivergent of some kind, maybe autistic. And I do think that some of them who already maybe, aren't the biggest fans of music, and are still because I teach K-12 at a point where they are in there without any like, say, in being there kind, either like use, that as a reason to be more disrespectful towards me, or like try to mess with me, or try to get a big dramatic rise out of me.

And it also does show up in the way that I will. Kinda I, when I hear them like gossiping or telling mean stories about one of their neurodivergent classmates. I try to defend the neurodivert like as much as is reasonable. So, like. For example, in my 6th grade group, there is a student that is on the spectrum and ended up being removed from that class because he was making a bunch of, I don't think it was intentional, but there's no way to know for sure sexual comments towards a group of the girls in the class and they were just like beyond, uncomfortable with it. So, like I was not like, no, it's okay. He doesn't understand those things. But in other smaller things I've been like. Well, you know, this person is just trying to communicate a need of some kind, or for this person when things are really loud. It's physically painful for them, or I've got a 4th grader who also has ASD, who gets very particular about his spot in line and another kid and him would get into arguments about it like almost every time I lined them up, and they were not just like small arguments they blew up and I was like, you know, you have things in your day that you like and know are consistent. Don't you think he feels that same way. And do you? Is it because you actually want the spot, or you don't want him to, have it? I guess I try to bring a sort of empathy and understanding to the students that I haven't made that connection with.

INTERVIEWER: The next question I have is for your students that you're open with, because like the ones that you've built that connection with, have you noticed them, maybe accept themselves more, or see themselves represented in a different way? Or have you noticed that that any impact that you've had with them

PENELOPE: I don't know if the only one I can like really to think of honestly is.

I have one student who has kind of expected me to excuse all, not ideal behaviors and basically try to solve their problems for them. And this student is one of my seniors. So, I'm trying to frame it was like, hey, you are about to go into an environment where you do not have as much support and tracking like you do here right now and that's not saying that you can't have accommodations. But Number One. Nobody is going to like to track down that your accommodations are being followed. Nobody is going to track down and make and really get those accommodations for you, and nobody is going to be constantly on you about missing work, missing assignments you're going to have to like, be responsible for those things and you're going to. You need. You are going to have to learn how to solve some more of your own problems. That's not saying it's not difficult. That's not saying you don't necessarily need support to do those things, but that your words… It's not… You're not going to be able to excuse having

responsibilities and just like, never be responsible for every anything, just because you are autistic. Especially because this student in particular functions at a high cognitive level like tap so there isn't anything that would like to prove that they are unable to support themselves. If that makes sense

INTERVIEWER: And then I think, from what I remember correctly, you've shared that you have I don't know what the extent you've shared, but you've disclosed to admin that you have a disability. Have you noticed, perhaps, like a change in perception of disability, or like just like kind of throughout your time teaching and going through school. Have you observed any changes in community with, with how people viewed like teachers, with disabilities, adults, students. kind of the whole spectrum

PENELOPE: I see, like a little bit of both sides of change. So, the school I work at is, or at least is, working to be more neurodiversity affirming so like, for example, there's a program within our like county. I don't know how districts are divided out and like grouped together in Oregon, but in Michigan we have what's called [redacted] or [redacted], and it's like a coalition of schools over one, or like maybe 2 or 3 counties that. So, it's like centralized resources for all of the districts in that area. And my school host houses [redacted] wide program for students who can't be mainstreamed into a traditional classroom. So, my district was the 1st one within the [redacted] to start, including those students in specials like music and art, and PE and my school also has a psychiatrist that comes in once a month and does trauma assessments on kids? Does med assessments on kids and works with their family doctors to help them get on the right meds and help them. And it started with just kids with severe trauma, because my district does have a very high trauma population. But it's kind of moved also to med reviews as well so I see that from within the community. But then, like I also. I don't engage a lot within the community, because it's 1 of those small rural towns where, like. If you're not from there, it's going to take you forever to be part of from there. And also, quite frankly, I fundamentally don't share a lot of values and beliefs with the people within that community but me. So, I Facebook, lurk because of who I am as a person. And I can definitely see that at least the parents that are being outspoken about it think that schools use Adhd diagnoses to give an excuse to drug kids so that they'll sit still and listen because they don't give them enough physical activity during the day or this, that, and the other, and like the correlation of parents who say that, and parents whose children have the most iPad kid behavior I've ever seen is a circle. But it's like you're going to blame the school for not giving your child enough physical activity, but they're going to go home and it on a screen for 5 h. make this

make sense

INTERVIEWER: I see this in some cases where and especially like talking to other people of, there's the parents that choose to never believe their child has anything going on like I have a whole bunch of things, and it wasn't until I was an adult and could go see a doctor myself and choose to do that path that I ever got any diagnoses. And it wasn't until I showed my mom my doctor's reports that she, like believed they were real. The vision is undeniable, but everything else. She was pretty in denial and now she's changed. She's changed like completely. But do you think that there's an ounce of that within? Those families of you know, maybe their kids are exhibiting some traits that are aligned with an identity, and they're choosing to just ignore, because it's my kid can't have anything wrong

PENELOPE: Yes, I think there's a little bit of that. The county that my school district is in because I live in a different one that is also one in Michigan that has a very high rate of prescription drug abuse. So, I think some of it stems from fear of their child developing an addiction or not actually taking their medication and selling it

INTERVIEWER: So, there's like an ounce of fear attached to the community.

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: that's a really interesting perspective. I'm so glad to like to hear all of not glad to hear all of this, but I'm, I'm always so grateful when there's differences and experiences that can be shared

PENELOPE: Yeah. And some of it is just straight up. They buy into the Rak stuff about Adhd and think that it's just all the processed food.

Because…

INTERVIEWER: Vaccines?

PENELOPE: Yes, because it's also like rural, generational poor, like a lot of my students are a lot of my students. Parents went to that school, and their grandparents, and their like entire extended family.

INTERVIEWER: Like a very deep-rooted community.

PENELOPE: Yes. And they're not a lot of outside educational influences.

INTERVIEWER: But

PENELOPE: Not a lot of people, not a lot of people leave that community. Not a lot of people come into that community. If people go get higher education. a lot like, I would say, 75% of

people who go get a degree of some kind become a teacher or a nurse

INTERVIEWER: The next couple of questions I have is very different in trajectory. The 1st one is, what was the job process like, and how was the interviewing process? I don't know if you received diagnoses after or before, but the diagnosis doesn't change that. It's an identity that you've had for

PENELOPE: Right? So fun. Fact, I didn't actually interview for my current job.

I was already working in the district within a different position, and they were like, oh, you have a music Ed degree. We want to have a music program. Congratulations. You have a job, So I do remember from when I was interviewing, I was just stressed out the whole time about making the appropriate levels of eye contact that I remember thinking a lot about that and like thinking overthinking a lot of my interview answers very much and a lot of like the etiquette around it. I think the most difficult part was like the unknowns of it all.

INTERVIEWER: and I feel like there's like a sentiment of that that a lot of people shared.

But the difference is a lot of people aren't thinking about eye contact and the like… how the body looks.

PENELOPE: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: There's like an extra layer of, there's not just nerves about what you're saying, but how you're saying. And then when you were doing your 1st job. Search? because I know conversation. Job on the spot is a fire. That is like a girl boss moment. But when you were going through the interview process for your and an application process for your prior position, did you? I don't know if you receive if you had a diagnosis. But did you approach disability at all?

PENELOPE: I get that. When I was interviewing and Job searching, I was not diagnosed, and the possibility of being autistic, or having Adhd had not crossed my mind.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you've disclosed like to some of your admin, I don't know to what degree. But do you receive accommodations, or do you self-accommodate? I love the students asking you to put those in place of like I'm going to give you 20 sticky notes. What does this kind of look like for you?

PENELOPE: Definitely the way I dress. I probably am slightly more on the casual side, but like I wear a lot of teacher T-shirts and sweatshirts, because if I am wearing clothing that is giving me sensory, that is all I will think about all day. I have a pair of loop earplugs. I usually have to take them out for band stuff because I will miss wrong notes if I don't. And I will miss

intonation issues and stuff like that, and I won't be able to get like a really. I found that what cause I 1st started wearing them after I got my diagnosis, and then I found that I was missing a lot of wrong notes, and I really wasn't liking the sound. I was getting out of my group, and I'm like this is because I'm not hearing it correctly, so I can't give them accurate feedback and then, like I used to let, because the way. My schedule is middle school band is right after my lunch, which is also middle school lunch, and I used to let middle my middle school band students eat lunch or like, come down to my room after lunch before class started, because the way they build middle school lunch longer than they actually need to eat, and then they just kind of let them go run wild in the cafe in the gym, for however long and I started allowing my students, because some of them just were like, the gym is too loud and overwhelming for me. I don't want to be in there, and I was like I get that? But then it became everybody's coming down there and acting loud and crazy in the band room. So, I stopped letting my students eat lunch in the band or come down to the band room during lunch.

INTERVIEWER: Trying to get that kind of took away from your own quiet sanctuary.

PENELOPE: Yeah. I have my earplugs and my sensory keychain, which I know I need to send you a picture of for my journal entry. And actually, funny story about that. One of my students asked the other day if it was a Barbie hairbrush. So, I do that in my elementary classroom. I can have only half the lights on at a time if I want. So, I do that. I am redoing the band room over the summer because it was the weight room when my district got rid of band, and then I just got it back as the band room. So, I'm going to change something in the lighting in the band room as well.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm! It sounds like a lot of like the self-accommodations you're doing are like more towards the environment. To kind of limit sensory overstimulation.

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's really cool, that you are able, like, you're in a position where your school is allowing you to kind of make the environment what you need it to be. That is, that is so good to hear. And then do you have any supports that are like available to you, either by your school or do you have, like a mentor that you work with? I know somebody else is like my choir teacher. We're best buds, and that's their support, person.

PENELOPE: I have 2 other female band directors in my [redacted] district that I we have a group chat that we do a lot of yapping in and a couple of the more longtime band directors in my [redacted] district have kind of like giving me some mentorship. I do have a mentor through my

school district, but my principal didn't tell her that I was supposed my mentor was supposed to be the art teacher, because she's the only other person whose K. 12 but she got all pissed off that me coming in meant that she would have to share a classroom with me at the elementary. So, she refused to be my mentor and the person who got reassigned to be my mentor didn't find out until the end of that my 1st year. So, I technically have a mentor. I wouldn't say that I've gotten a lot of mentorship guidance from her directly. She's still a person that, like a teacher that I talk to and have a good relationship with, because she also has Adhd. And but I haven't gotten like the traditional mentorship from her. Just a handful of other longtime directors in the district. But, like my [redacted] district, also likes to pride itself on being one of the nicest districts in the State, and that we all actually talk to each other respectfully

INTERVIEWER: Sometimes it feels like the bar is low.

PENELOPE: It. It really is but like one of the directors in the district who knows that I'm autistic. During festival last year on my work assignment day. There were 2 of us in the site reading room, so I was running a score sheet back, and the one was just look! It was in the office and just looked at me and went. Do you need a break?

INTERVIEWER: Like just like a recognition

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: and then do you do you feel like your teaching style is impacted by your disability

PENELOPE: Yes, because especially because music is something that I have hyper fixated on. And I just find so fascinating all of the like different music theory reasonings behind why things sound good. So, when one of my students points, I will go down a tangent so quickly

INTERVIEWER: Like it’s kind of has positively impacted your teaching.

PENELOPE: Yes and no, because it's not always a relevant tangent and my band kids have admitted to trying to get me to go on a tangent to waste time.

Hmm, or sometimes the sometimes the kids will just be like we didn't ask

Interview 4 (3.28.25)

INTERVIEWER: I have a couple of questions first; do you have a pseudonym picked out that you would like to use

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Awesome. What is it?

PENELOPE: It is PENELOPE

INTERVIEWER: How do you want that spelled?

PENELOPE: PENELOPE

INTERVIEWER: That is really cool. That's a really cool name.

Thank you. And then I have a couple of other just like demographic questions. Just so that way. I'm like writing your character in the right way that you want it perceived

INTERVIEWER: And then the 1st one is you're in Maryland, correct

PENELOPE: Michigan.

INTERVIEWER: Michigan, the other M. State at my stage.

If I can spell any of this correctly, and then do you use she her pronouns

PENELOPE: I use. She, they

INTERVIEWER: She, and then how many years of change do you want written down for yourself?

PENELOPE: 3.

INTERVIEWER: And then subject, which is just K through K. 12. Music and band. And then you are very rural, correct

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay? And then, this next one is like disability titles. So, I have kind of like, there's like physical disabilities. You can put autism or Adhd. However, you would like to term it, you could put Adhd, because I know a lot of people like that term as well. But what would you like to title it as

PENELOPE: Let's go with AudiHD

INTERVIEWER: And then the next one I have is onset, and that one is because there's so many different kinds of participants. That you could say from birth, or you could say like later on in life, what would you prefer the onset to be

PENELOPE: Let's go with from birth, because it's not like it hasn't always been there

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And then when were you diagnosed with it?

You also don't have to answer that if you don't want to

PENELOPE: Okay, do you want like, what year or how old I was when I was diagnosed

INTERVIEWER: How old were you?

PENELOPE: I was diagnosed at 26, yeah, 26.

INTERVIEWER: Sweet. that's all the questions I have. Okay, those are all the demographic questions that way. I make sure, like when I'm writing the method section It's how you want yourself to be written down.

PENELOPE: Got it

INTERVIEWER: That and the pseudonym are fantastic. I love this one. This is awesome.

Sweet! And then I have only left 4 more questions for you. And the 1st one is what is your relationship with your disability? We've talked a lot about overall. So, this is kind of a revisited question. After, you know. A couple of weeks of sitting and talking about it.

PENELOPE: it's just to me. It's like it's something that is a part of me, and I acknowledge it's there. But I don't really have, like a significant relationship to it, I guess, other than like the referring to my brain, as if it is its own separate entity from myself.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And then, the last 3 questions I have are more advice, questions, things that like it. It's a space for you to say what you would like to say. That's kind of not bounded to a specific question. Okay, so the 1st one I have is specific for what advice would you have them for? Like a high school student, somebody who's choosing to change their career? Somebody who's wanting to go into music education. That has a disability

PENELOPE: I would say that if it's something you want to do, it's important for the field that you're going into to be a role model of sorts for students who might also be facing the same or similar disabilities. I would also say that I think somebody who is considering going into this field who is disabled, should be extremely mindful of how the different disciplines within the field are going to be impacted by disability, that disability as well. So, like, you know, there's more movement that needs to be done in the elementary setting. But there's a lot more long-time commitments that need to happen in the band setting or the secondary ensemble setting. So just, you know being mindful that there may be a part of this field that is better suited.

INTERVIEWER: That like draws home really close for me, cause right now we're in the job application process. and I always get the question of why aren't you considering elementary? And I go? I can't see them put stuff in their mouth. Don't wanna have that conversation with parents. Therefore, I don't think I should do that. One middle schooler. You put stuff in your mouth. You're a little bit more conscious of what you're doing. And other middle schoolers know how to like. Hey, this dude's choking

PENELOPE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: No, that one draws that that absolutely that one I feel like is so frequently interpreted in such a negative way that it's like, no, this is reality.

PENELOPE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: See here. And then the second one I have is specific to like music, education majors. So, advice you'd have for preservice teachers who are who are in like the classes doing the thing and are actively looking at the field but are like in the perspective of being in the precursor to it.

PENELOPE: I think again, with the, you know, acknowledge what is realistic for you as you're exploring different placements, and just like be open to anything. And then the other thing I would say is, if you aren't already doing this, start practicing, advocating for yourself and your needs being met now because nobody is going… You're not going to have it fought for you in the field, and even like, I know, there's a difference between how accommodations are enforced and taken care of between K-12, public and higher Ed. But there's like even less support you get in the field. So, if you are not good at advocating for yourself. Get good at it now. It would also be. Don't burn yourself out before you enter the field right.

INTERVIEWER: And then the last one I have is advice for other music educators with a disability, and that that could be answered in an in a couple of different ways of like people who similarly have always had it. Always had some sort of disability, but maybe are diagnosed later, or are starting to have an onset of a disability, and are, you know, navigating that change of life

PENELOPE: know that you are doing something important by showing your students that having a disability doesn't mean that they cannot fully partake in the things that they enjoy doing, or you know, have a career that is meaningful to them. Make sure you're involved with your union. If your State or school district has one. Make sure, even if you're not like openly disclosing your disabilities to all of the staff or community at your school at the very least, I would say, let your union rep know and don't be afraid to use your actual sick days for your disability and not your personal days. I say this with a month of accumulated sick time right now

INTERVIEWER: these are like the advice; I have a very specific friend in mind of like I'm gonna I'm gonna share that one with them. Awesome. Is there? Is there anything else you would like to say, like just any big points that are like meaningful to you, that you want to share

PENELOPE: No.

INTERVIEWER: Okay that was all. Like we. We got through everything. Pretty quickly,

actually, And I believe that is all the questions I have. You answer everything very nice. And to the point, which is, I do appreciate when I'm writing my notes. That it's like, sometimes I have to go back and go. This is the response to this question up here, and like So, I appreciate how you respond to everything. if at any point you have anything you want to share if you remember, I will. Also, I will remember to email you a picture for your keys. And your fidgets, because I think that would be a very nice a good image to insert that are like not specific to your story, because that might be even like a detail too close. But just that these exist and like this is what it looks like of just like this is the reality and the little tools that we can give ourselves and so I know many of friends that have lots of fidgets on the toys. And I think it's an important part like I look at that, and I like to know what that means. But people don't realize that. Or maybe, like even able-bodied people are like, I would definitely benefit from that. And I should have that in my class. And so, I will email you if I if I hope I will remember I'm writing a note. So that would be great if anything else comes to mind. Don't hesitate to open up an email. Send like an audio message just anything that that you would like to add. When I finally stop coding and get everything written up, I will send you kind of what? My method section just like who the participants are. Before I get into the data. That way, you can kind of see how that has blocked up. So, I'll shoot that in an email when we get to that phase.

Appendix E: Thematic, Axial, and Open Codes.

Thematic	Axial	Open
Participant Vignettes	Identity and Representation	disability identity
		feeling disabled
		grateful for
		language importance
		need to overachieve
		Sped segregation
The Complex Terrain of Disclosure	Employment process and ADA Accommodations	ADA denial
		ADA request approval
		Interview disclosure
		Job descriptions
	Disclosure Experience	benefits of disclosure
		compulsory disclosure
		fear of disclosure
		forced out of disability closet
		response to disability negative
		response to disability positive
		scrutiny
	Social Perception and Stigma	Breaking stigma

		harassment
		TEP nonacceptance
The Impact of the Community	Support Systems	Friend support system TEP
		Professional development peers support
		Professor support system TEP
		support from admin
		support from peers
		support from students
The Power of Representation	Disclosure Experience	benefits of disclosure
	Identity and Representation	DEI not including disability
	Impact	disability representation professional
		importance of accessibility
		openness about disability
		professional development peers support
	Social Perception and Stigma	intersectionality
	Student Development and Identity	kids are accepting
		student acceptance of self
		students learning empathy
		SWD you can
	Teaching	disability identity
		learning empathy
		self accommodations

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