

ETM: The Podcast
Episode 19: with Dr. Alice Hammel
TRANSCRIPT

Noah: You are listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Dr Alice Hamel. Alice is a music educator in her 40th year of teaching, a scholar with a great deal of work in teaching music to students with differences and disabilities, and a highly sought-after clinician and presenter. Alice, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Dr. Alice Hammel: Thank you, I'm really happy to be here with you.

Noah: So this past week you were in New York meeting with ETM teachers to speak with them about teaching music to students with differences and disabilities, and I am really looking forward to getting into sort of the meat of what that presentation was all about. But before we go there, I wonder if we could start off just by talking about how you first became a musician and then a follow-up, how you ended up becoming a music teacher and then a scholar follow-up how you ended up becoming a music teacher and then a scholar.

Alice: Okay, I was born to two pediatricians who did not believe in child care. This was in the 60s and my parents had a crib for me in the hospital, a crib for me in their office. By the time I was four, I was making rounds with residents and during this period of time it was pretty common for children to just be on their own. So they would go to medical conferences. I would have my own badge, I would make my own schedule, I would attend presentations, I would hang out in the exhibit hall, I would sit in.

They taught for a while in medical school and so I would sit in on lectures and I would just listen. So clearly I was not very popular as a kid because I couldn't speak to kid talk. I only could speak doctor talk, because that's what my parents did all day, all night. So I am very, very steeped in the medical model of disability. They were the only doctors in our area of South Central Florida who took Medicaid, so they had all of the children and the families with disabilities who received social security benefits.

Noah: Yeah.

Alice: So I regularly, in their office, saw children that did not go to school with me, because at this time, what was then PL 94142 had not reached South Central Florida, just above Lake Okeechobee, so I didn't see them in school and I really wanted to learn about them. My jobs in their office started with changing the paper on the tables, emptying the trash cans, and I worked my way up to doing the Medicaid billing myself when I was in high school. So I knew a lot about a lot of different children and disabilities and what their options were and what kind of school or no school they got to have. At the same time, apparently before I was in kindergarten, I would just start singing to strangers in the grocery store. So yeah, I've been a weirdo a long time. So I loved music. Music was sometimes the reason I went to school. In our little town there were no

options for private lessons. You know. There were no like dance studios or there was nothing. The only thing we got was what happened in school, which has also made me a fierce advocate for what happens in school, and particularly in rural areas, because all I had was band. In fact, here's a good one. I did not know that there were string students and there were orchestras in schools. I had no idea. So I grew up in that kind of system. I loved music and I had this interest in disabilities and in seventh grade band I decided I was going to be a middle school band director. Like this is it. I'm going to be a middle school band director. And it took me until 10th grade to ask my high school band director if girls were allowed to be band directors, because I had never seen one. So my band director showed me a picture of Paula Kreider, who is a god in the band world, and said yes, girls can be band directors. So I was set.

So I went to college to major in music education. I thought it was band director, but apparently it was music education. So I went to college and I had all these other interests and people kept saying, oh, no, no, you should be a music therapy major. I said, oh, I mean, I knew about that as much as I did about beginning violin. So I took some classes in music therapy and then I did a summer long internship in a mental health institution and at the end of those experiences I thought I have a profound respect for music therapy. But that is not what I want to do. Music and music therapy we teach, we work with students and so that they can work on like functional skills, like tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, those kind of things, I said nope, I want to teach musical skills to students who have difficulty with that. So it's kind of like the crack in the sidewalk between music education and special education, which had not been clearly defined then special education, which had not been clearly defined.

Then I was fortunate enough to go to Florida State for my master's degree, which was one of the cradles of this part of music education, and they were able to help me successfully piece together those two ideas. From the very beginning of my teaching career I chose to only teach in schools where students were at risk and in need. I have always found traditional, maybe let's say suburban, school systems that have resources kind of boring. I like different. In fact my tattoo says different drummer, so I like different and different drummers. So, piecing those together, I began myself to learn and just using my students as best I could to learn how does this work and how does this look. So that's kind of the beginning and the first few years of my teaching career beginning in the first few years of my teaching career.

Noah: Yeah, this idea that you bring up, in which what's in school is what you know is available and you don't necessarily get to know what else is out there unless you encounter it in school, I think is that's one of the really powerful things about being a teacher is you are sort of helping to. Even with the Internet, even with all this variety of knowledge that is more or less available depending on where one is and where one's going to school, you're sort of helping to construct a world for a child. And so this idea that you didn't know that there were strings players because there wasn't an orchestra, it's so important that there are music programs so that people know that music programs are a thing. It sounds like you, when you began teaching, you were sort of a scientist, a trailblazer. You were kind of figuring out how things worked in the context of teaching students with disabilities or students with differences in learning and that sort of thing. So what were some of the early lessons that you learned in that context?

Alice: Well, one of the earliest lessons I learned is how to convince teachers, classroom teachers and special education teachers that I wanted to teach their students and that I could teach their students, because everything was very new. Then the ideas of inclusion. And you know, rapidly we moved, you know, through the nineties into full inclusion and you know it kept. But in the mid eighties a lot of kids with more significant disabilities were kept separate, either in separate schools or separate classrooms, and they didn't get to do much music and they definitely weren't in secondary ensembles. So, and then the first place I think that they went was choir, you know. And so slowly this has moved through our profession and has gone from pre-K to 12.

But for me, I spent a lot of time saying, no, really I can do this here, let me, you know, let's talk about how we can do this. Because we can do music, I can do this, and so that I could have an inclusive ensemble or an inclusive classroom, because I knew that if these students didn't spend time with children with disabilities, how would they know how to interact with adults with disabilities and how would adults with disabilities know how to act with adults without disabilities? So I just kind of saw it almost as a social thing. Right, how do we all know how to be together if we've never been together? And there were so many misconceptions about everything.

So I worked a lot on that. I started kind of developing ways to adapt things for my students, and one day I kind of had this light bulb moment when I thought why am I just doing this for kids with paperwork? There are other kids in my ensembles who struggle with the same things. So I thought maybe adaptations should be for everybody. And if they're for everybody then well, this word hadn't been invented yet, right. But then we don't other kids right.

But I was thinking then, we don't embarrass or leave out or, you know, make them feel bad because they have to have these other things. So I just kind of started offering adaptations for everyone. Everyone could have larger music, or everyone could have, you know, a highlighter for their dynamics or something, and everybody, I could have half the group do something, half the group do something else, and we can switch and we can slow down our pacing. And you know, then I started thinking about, well, how about the way I present things? Cause I am very verbal, as you see, so we tend to teach the way we learn. And so I had to realize, Alice, just because you're verbal doesn't mean everybody else is verbal. So I thought, okay, I need to have more visuals.

So, and back then it was ditto machines, I mean, it was the Stone Age, so you know. And then on the board, right, let's use different colored chalk. You know, just things like that in the beginning. You know how, how do I do this to help my students so that everybody can learn together? Right, how do we use our kinesthetics? Because some students can, literally they cannot learn unless their bodies are in motion. And I think you know, everything's fine in elementary school. But once we get to ensemble, sometimes it's just you're sitting in a seat, you've got your instrument and you're standing, you don't move.

So just kind of started thinking about it and it took me, it took me a long time to figure so many things out. So then eventually I'm like, okay, that's, that's a pretty good heuristic, right Size, color, pacing, modality, yeah, and at the same time it might've been my teenage rebellion in my twenties, but I was like, do we need all this medical model? Because in the law, in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, they list a few of the disabilities ADHD, autism, hearing impairments, vision impairments and I thought but there are more than that and things continue to expand. So, for example, there are over a thousand disabilities related to chromosomal changes. Huh.

Are we going to memorize a thousand chromosomes? No, we're not. So I said okay. So when I first got asked to write my first book by Oxford once I got over the fact that anybody wanted to hear what I had to say, because I was a whole thing. I mean, so you never, you never grow out of where you grew up, right? So I was like, ok, I said, all right, I'm going to write a book and it is not going to be what I call a chapter book where every chapter is a different disability, because I don't think that's complete.

Also, a lot of the times the paperwork when music teachers do get to look at the paperwork, it doesn't list a specific disability, right? So I said, okay, so let me think how could I do this? So I thought about occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, music therapy and all the other areas that use domains instead of labels, and I thought, well, that's kind of interesting, because now we're looking at the individual kid instead of a list of etiology incidents in a book. And so I thought, ok, what would I do? So I thought, ok, behavior, cognition, communication, emotional, physical and medical and sensory. So those are the six that I focus on in my teaching and we can take medical model disabilities and place them within one or more domains to help us understand our students, and I have found that to be pretty successful as well as a way to kind of take away labels that sometimes marginalize students and we end up talking about only about their disabilities and what they can't do, instead of all the beautiful things that they can do.

Noah: This translation of information that isn't all that useful for teachers into information that is useful for teachers and sort of this idea that it is.

It is good to know things about your students and then to prepare musical experiences for your students that are more accessible to them.

I think is so important, and I think that that's a realization that a lot of music teachers don't have at first, but then they get there eventually and then everybody needs a little bit of accessibility considerations in order to have a good musical experience.

Like something I never thought about until I became a music teacher is the impact that having sensitive hearing has on me in a music classroom. That was something I really struggled with when I first began teaching, and so it made it all the more important to me that I make sure that my classroom is a comfortable place for everybody to be in, because some people are going to have sensitive ears and other people are not going to have sensitive ears but they are going to be sensitive to smells and other people are going to be sensitive to overhead lights and it's such

an important thing to make sure that this, like beginning point of like, can I be in a music classroom and can I be comfortable and able to do what, what is expected of me and what I would like to be able to do, making sure that that's possible for everybody.

Alice: Absolutely. The sensory domain is so important and I tell teachers, you know, we learned our five senses in first grade, but our teachers didn't teach us the other two, which are vestibular and proprioceptive.

And those have to do with where our body is in space, right, in particular, instruments where you have to cross the midline, like flute. I just taught a string class this morning and we talked about, yeah, it's fine, but then we were crossing the midline with a bow. So you know what? What kind of proprioceptive and vestibular? You know what happens there, and that we all have our own hyper and hypo responses to various senses. And one advantage of being a grownup is that we have figured that out. Our kids have not. So when, when a teacher says something silly that doesn't actually exist, like they had a meltdown, it came from nowhere. Nope and nope. Meltdown was because we as teachers were not paying attention to the sensory system or the emotional domain of that student, and all behavior is communication, and so meltdowns don't just come from nowhere, they come from kids not understanding what is happening to their bodies. So I will take one sense and talk about it with my students and about what a hypersensitivity to vision can look like and what a hyposensitivity can look like. A lot of teachers when they talk about behaviors, or the new word is dysregulation. So I asked one teacher. I said, oh okay, so if there's a student in your class and their head's kind of down and they're not really participating or they're like almost falling asleep. Do you call them dysregulated? No, I said okay. Then you're just doing an erase in a very place for the word behavior and you should stop that, because we're not, we don't pay attention to that. So I talk to my kids, we talk about the visual sense, and then I just have them go think about it for a week or so and then they come back and we have a conversation and we go through all of the senses so that they can understand their own reactions and then they can also see the reactions of others. Because until we start understanding each other, how can we play together, how can we be together, not just musically but as a society, if we don't really understand that everybody's different and that's okay. So, for example, I have all these lights on that you asked me to turn on. As soon as this is over, I'm going to turn them off because I am hypersensitive to light. I could live my entire life on natural lighting and be just fine. So you know every everybody's different. And when you're talking about paperwork, it's interesting because some of that paperwork and the testing that's done involves giving standardized tests. So my answer about standardized tests is anytime you give someone who does not have a standardized brain a standardized test, you are not going to get a valid or reliable result. So a lot of teachers, a lot of college students, you know, I say your SAT scores no, your state scores no, your GREs no, because your brain is different. And I said, and many people who are neurodivergent were not in the room when those tests were normed. So there's just a lot of things.

And I know thinking about IEPs, right, and when they talk about accommodations, so, for example, if they say time and a half or double time and a lot of times, music teachers think well, what does that have to do with me? Well, let's say, you're going to do the 12 major scales, right,

we got to do our 12 major scales within five minutes or whatever, or whatever it is Right. So for this student I might say I'd like for you to do four major scales today, four major scales next time and then the last for the third day. So things like that, just making you know transfers. But if we don't know how to do that, we don't know how to do that, and that's not our fault. It's just something that, as a profession, we're still working on. How do I transfer those? Because they're not written in music talk, so how can I transfer those to music talk? And that's a whole nother skill that we're having to learn as music teachers.

Noah: Absolutely, and it's, and it's something that I think music teachers will oftentimes find themselves needing to begin doing on their own, because not only is it not something that that music teachers are always prepared to do, but it's, it's. I don't think administrations at every school are school are going first to the music teacher, are looking for the music teacher to make sure that they are taking it upon themselves to translate or doing the translating for them. So I was so excited when I heard that ETM was going to get to meet with you. For a little bit of backstory, I read one of your texts when I was in grad school as one of the required texts for my one of my music classes teaching students with disabilities. So it is. It's such a great thing that they got some FaceTime with you, and so I wonder if we could talk a little bit about what all went into that presentation and how, together, you and ETM have gotten started on this process of getting the teachers on track to be better able to translate the documentation and take care of their students.

Alice: Well, I have been with ETM for I don't know, maybe 15 years or more, and I always say yes to ETM, all the ETMs right. We got Boulder, Ia, new York, all of them. Because the energy, the energy of the teachers, is fantastic and they are all there 100%, is fantastic and they are all there 100% for the kids. And some of them are young, they're just starting, some of them are older. I taught a group in LA and there was a teacher who had been a set player constantly on tour around the world for 40 years with bands and he said he came back from his last tour and he looked around he was like okay, these are children, I'm done, I'm going to go teach. So at the age of about my age, it's his first year of teaching. Wow.

And I felt so honored that I got to talk to him about school and teaching and how do you teach people who learn differently before he goes into his first year. I love ETM and how many teachers then go and are hired by the school districts, and so almost every time I come there's a whole new group, which is fantastic news, because all the other teachers are now have jobs with school districts and school systems are seeing the value of music education through these teachers who come with etm, and so I always say yes to etm. Um, to get ready for this particular day that I did on the 27th in New York, well, I only had three hours, so to me three hours is about three minutes, because I could go maybe a month without sleeping and just keep going and going, so they have to actually make me stop. So for this I said okay. So I said I'm going to focus on adaptations. I said I'm going to focus on adaptations. So we talked about that size, color, pacing and the modality with visual, aural and kinesthetic. So we spent some time, had some examples. I brought some actual things that I use for adaptations for the classroom. We talked about how they're for everybody, because you never know, and I know there were times I

could have used some adaptations, but I didn't have any paperwork. And then we talked about what I call winding.

In special education language they call it modifications. Modifications are for students who are not going to be able to meet your stated expectations or objectives. Who are not going to be able to meet your stated expectations or objectives. So my beef with modifications is one, it only goes one way backward. And two, they're the same for every class a student is in.

Nobody has an even learning profile, right. We all have subjects where we do better and such we're not. And we, you know, in some subjects we may need more time. You know, or you know, I know that one thing is often is the use of a multiplication chart, you know which, for music teachers, means I'm going to have difficulty memorizing the names of the lines and spaces, I'm going to have difficulty memorizing key signatures, you know things like that. So it's just everybody's different and needs different things. So I thought, okay, modifications are not working for me anymore, so I need to think of something different. So I thought for a while and then I thought about a cat with a ball of yarn and how they kind of you know, and then they wind it and then we have to wind it back and then they just do it again and then we wind it back and it's a whole cat thing.

I thought let's think about that. Maybe what we're doing is we're going to wind it back. So winding involves you begin at your expected level, right, your objective for 80% of your students, and then you say, okay, if a student can't do that, what is a prerequisite skill that they may be able to do? Okay, if they can't do that, and you just keep winding it back till you get to my very first. In any winding sequence, for me the very first objective is is there a noticeable change in the student when music is absent or present? Because if we are very lucky, we will have maybe three of those students during our career I mean maybe more for extra lucky. So students who are maybe rolled into the classroom and they don't currently use spoken language, maybe they don't make eye contact, and sometimes as teachers we wonder honestly does this student know that they're in music now and how? So we start musicking in whatever way we are and I look for a change in that. Student right Leg movements, arm movements, vocalizations, respirations, eye blinks is something different and if not, I go okay, let's try a different kind of music and I'll do something else, and I will just keep going until there is something, some kind of response, and then I slowly work forward.

Now the fun thing about winding well, so many fun things about winding sequences. But one of the best things is they're never done and they're never correct, because every student's different and some students are able to skip several steps that you might have in a winding sequence, and for some students you need to make more winding because it's just too big between this expectation and this one. And that's where sometimes teachers start to feel frustrated and then they start thinking they're bad teachers or something, because they don't see the progress. If you don't see the progress, make more steps in between. So it's a great car game I play a lot. Think about how can I wind, what can I do, and for everybody it's different and for every student and for every situation. And then the other thing I love about winding is it also goes forward.

Noah: Right.

Alice: Because there are students in every class who, like we, really doing 16th notes again. So maybe they are musically talented, maybe they are intellectually gifted and that has also somehow crossed over, even though those two are not, are not the same or maybe they take lessons, or maybe their parents are musicians or you know, for some reason they just they're ahead. We lose a lot of musically talented students because we don't wind forward for them and music is boring, and then they quit and they go do something that challenges them, because people like that really want challenge. So how do we wind it forward for a kid who thinks what we're doing is boring and you know they'll show this to you by being disengaged or, as I was as a kid, naughty, and then we call them behavior or, you know, dysreg, dysregulation. No, we got to wind it forward and we're like okay, you can do this, can you do this? Oh, wow, can you do this? No, okay, let's do that.

And the answer for winding forward for me is often improvisation or part work, so doing something while you're also doing something else. So can you play hot cross buns while at the same time your feet are tapping? Mary had a little lamb.

Noah: Interesting.

Alice: I see your eyes. That's the look. If that's the look you get from your student, then you know you've hit the sweet spot. So, and again, these are things everybody can be doing together at the same time. For some students with the, let's say, the Mary had a little lamb flute player. I'm a flute player, right, so I can hold, I can do that D. It's a nice note. You hardly ever drop the flute when you've got all those fingers down. And then so I say to my students so let's, let's audiate Mary LeRoll along. Mary had a little lamb, whatever name it is.

What note do we play the most? And after some thinking, yeah, they say d or whatever note you know on the transposing instrument you know, or me, we do it in solfege like, yeah, so I need a whole me group that's going to make sure that our most important note is being played. So I have a me group, I have a D group and I will do it for several instruments. And it's not because Alice can only play D, because it's a really important note and we've got to have it Right. So I've wound it back. It's not going to hurt other students to just play D Right, and then on another piece.

Maybe you've got another group with another note. So just ways to you know, wind things back, wind things forward. Adapt so that every kid runs to class. They're not supposed to run, but they run class because they want to be there Right, and it becomes their reason why they go to school and where they feel important and where other students can say you know, Alice is terrible in math, boy, she could play the flute. Because we all need to have that place right when our peers see us as being valuable to the group.

Noah: That way of framing too, where it's not. This is the I. I remember at around the time I time I left the classroom, there was sort of a medium, mild, spicy. That was sort of how we would let

the kids sort of self select what they were doing, but you know what mild means and you know what spicy means, whereas you know this way of framing. It is like this is an important note. I need this group to make sure that we hit this important note that is. It's very sneaky. It's a great way of making sure that everybody who ends up needing to be in that group for now feels like they're still part of maybe even more a part of the ensemble experience.

Alice: And one question I get from teachers sometimes is well, what if everybody just wants to do that? I'm like okay let them try it.

I mean, you know what, if everybody wants to be in it, okay. Or what if everybody wants to try to play Marilee Rural long while we're doing that? I mean, what if they want to do the part work, okay, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. And so what I found this is year 40 for me, and so what I have found is that the more rules I break right and the less I listen to what I was taught and look at the students in front of me, the better a teacher I am.

So I started breaking rules, like do we have to get there an hour before the concert, like everybody? So I let some students come just a little bit before the concert and the ceiling did not fall in. Does everyone have to play all the pieces? You know what? No, they don't. So I just started breaking rules just to see what would happen. I mean not to be oppositional, but just curious, like the things that we've been told, right, and all these traditions that have come from our teachers and their teachers and back to well, in the band world world war one, right. So then you know all these families. First, when those rules were made up, these kids were not in any classrooms. And two why? Why do we need to perpetuate the trauma that was done to us? Let's break some rules and look at the kids we're teaching, instead of what our teacher told us 20 years ago.

Noah: Well, I think. I think that's fantastic parting wisdom to wrap up on. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you want to get on tape?

Alice: Well, again, I could go for a month with no sleep and not be done, but for this podcast, if we must end now, that is just fine. However, I am happy to come back and talk to you anytime you'd like. Noah, you and ETM, I just, I love everything about you and the organization and again, I will always say yes, so yes.

Noah: Well, thank you so much, Alice. This, this has been so refreshing. I think that, uh, the listener will have a lot to think about and also a lot to begin implementing, like right now, which is always sort of what we're aiming for. So, thank you again. This has been fantastic.

Alice: Thank you, and if anyone would ever like to email me, you're welcome to put my email here. And that's my hobby. I don't understand crossword puzzles. I've heard there's a Sudoku, but that is math and I don't do that, so I have no. My hobby is brainstorming with music teachers and helping them, so I am happy to email and help anyone, because I know I didn't get into anybody's specific things on this podcast, but I'm happy to do that with them on email.

Noah: Amazing. Thank you so much. I'll include Alice's email address in the episode description and with that, thank you again and until next time.

Alice: Okay, all right, bye, Noah.