

All Learners Can Succeed in Music Class

By Laura Meehan

Most teachers have likely had some level of experience with incorporating special learners into their classroom. The challenges inherent in this inclusion continue to be a popular topic in the world of music education, and rightfully so. Research repeatedly shows that studying music can have great benefits in areas such as cognition, socialization, and support for students with disabilities. However, studies also steadily report that music educators do not always feel prepared and confident when it comes to teaching students with special needs. Between Friday night football games, scheduling PTA performances, figuring out what to play in next month's concert, and more—all on top of preparing for and delivering instruction during class—who has the time and energy to dedicate to teaching students with special needs?

With more inclusion policies in place, budget cuts, and wider teacher-to-student ratios, it is more important than ever for music educators to find ways for all learners to experience success in the music classroom. In my work with music students who have special needs, I have found the following ideas and strategies essential in facilitating learning in a way that includes all. Not only are they crucial for the inclusion of students with special needs, but they also inherently involve and affect all students in the process.

THE BUDDY SYSTEM

According to Bloom's Taxonomy, one of the highest levels of learning is creating; you have truly learned something when you can create an idea and teach it to someone else. Take advantage of this by implementing a buddy system where more experienced students teach younger peers, or strategically pair up stronger students with those who still need assistance.

Unlike typical academic classroom setups, the music classroom can easily be structured into smaller groups working on different activities. Allow students who are excelling to work together with those who need additional attention. This will encourage student

learning, instill confidence in the student who is teaching, and create a safe social atmosphere for the entire group.

More mature high school students will often realize when a student with a disability is having difficulty in your ensemble. Invite students to be peer helpers and allow them to teach others. In addition to helping you with classroom management, this offers students a sense of responsibility and shows students with disabilities they are valued.

KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CONSISTENT

Learners with special needs often respond best to firm and consistent structure. Students with behavioral challenges especially need consistency. The challenge is establishing that in an environment that by its nature is more chaotic than other classrooms. With that in mind, it is important to establish boundaries with your students and stick to them.

Display a short and simple list of rules in your classroom where students will see them daily. Include a picture illustrating each rule (e.g., a student throwing away gum). Visual reinforcement helps some students with disabilities process the information more quickly. Some may even need the rules list on their stand, or they may need to sit closer to the visual reminder. Establish nonverbal cues to remind students in a way that minimizes the interruption as well as the personal embarrassment or anxiety that could result. This can help keep emotions from escalating.

If you teach special learners who often become agitated or act out, it could help to meet them at the door and inform them of the day's overall lesson plan. This gives you a way to connect with the student and see how they are doing and gives them a heads up for the class schedule.

ADAPT THE ADAPTABLE

While this seems obvious, it's not always simple. First, adapt your expectations. What do you *really* want students with special

needs to achieve in your classroom? Learning how to read music? Being able to socialize with peers? Successfully performing in a concert in front of friends and family? There are endless possibilities, but whatever the goal, make sure it is reasonable and obtainable for each student. Goals for each student might vary greatly, but with appropriate goals established, each student can gain something valuable from your classroom.

You could, for example, adapt their music to only the first note of each measure. Or, if a student has mastered concert B-flat on their instrument, highlight all of those notes and have them play only the highlighted notes. Try color-coding the notes rather than using them on the staff. Colors are something the student likely already knows and can easily understand. While it is not traditional notation, it may

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help them follow along more easily with the rest of the ensemble. If they are able to adjust to these adaptations rather quickly, you can start to reduce them or add additional skills. The same type of ideas can be applied to rhythms. Draw out the durations of notes or write them above the student's music. (More examples of specific adaptations are offered on page 63.)

Also consider adapting your classroom setup. While you might traditionally seat trombones in back next to the low brass, this might not be the optimal placement for a student with ADHD who tends to

frequently be off task and becomes a distraction to his peers. Move this student to a place where distractions are minimized, and make sure there is nothing surrounding this student's stand that could easily interfere with rehearsal. When it's absolutely necessary that all trombones be in a traditional band setting, prepare the student in advance by giving clear behavioral expectations. Utilize other staff members to stand in the back and ensure the students are following instructions.

Regardless of the adaptation, do your best to be subtle to minimize attention on

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the students with disabilities. It is likely they get enough unwanted attention as it is. Help make the music classroom a safe and positive environment. If other students ask why their peer gets different music or assignments than the rest of the class, simply tell them that is the plan you have for that student and it should be none of their concern.

DISCOVER NEW TECHNOLOGY

There are a multitude of helpful assistive devices for students with disabilities. Find out if your student uses any in their other classes. It could be easily adaptable for the music classroom, and they will already know how to use the device. There are many excellent iPad apps for special learners. The Children with Exceptionalities Special Research Interest Group website offers a wealth of resources to help music educators, including an updated list of effective apps. To access this list of apps, go to www.tmea.org/musicapps (look for music-related apps in the Apps by Category listing).

Establish a listening station in your classroom where students can listen to recorded music using headphones. This can be used as a reward when a student has been able to stay on task for the first half of your class. Allow them a five-minute break while you work on something else with the other students.

Let your students play games or activities together in groups on an iPad or SMART Board, incorporating the music objectives you are working on that week. This could easily be used in conjunction with the buddy system mentioned earlier and allows for special learners to work with their higher functioning peers while learning together.

IF YOU DON'T KNOW, ASK SOMEONE WHO SHOULD

You are not expected to know how to work with every student who has a disability, but you are expected to learn how to create the best musical learning experience possible. Work together with other staff members as a team to achieve this goal. Paraprofessionals, special education teachers, aides, and therapists within your school will become some of your best resources. They have been trained to work with special learners and have likely worked with these students in other settings. Behavioral tendencies, styles of

Adaptations & Additional Resources

As you consider how to accommodate students' needs, begin with these concepts: simplify the music, be aware of students' surroundings, know their triggers, use visuals, and employ creative notation. The following are examples of specific accommodations:

- Rebecca, a clarinet player, is unable to keep up with the melodic line in a march, so her director rewrites her part to match the saxophone's upbeats.
- Bobby, a fourth grader, has difficult time being still during music. The teacher moves the extra Orff instruments out of reach until they're to be used during the lesson. She also assigns Bobby to sit where distractions are minimal.
- Brian, a tuba player, becomes agitated when there is a sudden loud noise. While preparing to play "Sleigh Ride" at this winter's concert, his director prepares him to hear the slapstick. By having him listen to a recording, showing him how the instrument works, and giving him a cue during the first few rehearsals, Brian becomes comfortable with the sound and can control his emotions.
- Ella, a middle school choir student, has trouble staying organized and on task and is a few grades behind in reading. Her choir director provides a visual schedule for the entire class to follow each day and modifies it so that Ella can read and know what is expected of her.
- Andres, a first grader, has difficulty processing new information. Colors are something he is comfortable with, so his music teacher uses color notation. She uses different teaching materials with coordinating colors to teach him the difference between the notes and melodic lines.

Online Resources: The following URLs link to websites with valuable information to help you teach students with special needs:

- *Children with Exceptionalities Special Research Interest Group:* tmea.org/Meehan1. Developed by music educators as a resource for inclusive music education, it includes research in music in special education, apps, websites, books, and more.
- *University of Texas Center for Music Learning/Disabilities Information:* tmea.org/Meehan2. General information is offered about various disabilities and organizations that offer support. It also includes educational implications for students with disabilities that can be very helpful for music educators.
- *National Association for Music Education/Special Learners Channel:* tmea.org/Meehan3. Online webinars given by music educators offer different ideas and strategies for the music classroom.

learning, and successful instruction are all things they have helped these students develop. Learning about these teaching techniques and strategies will certainly benefit you, and your colleagues will appreciate your coming to them for support in working with these students.

Finally, do not forget about the parents of your special learners, and do not hesitate to ask them for guidance. They will understand best the challenges their child faces and the most productive approaches to help them in various situations. While you still have to apply that knowledge to the music classroom and your instruction, parents are the best place to start to ensure you do the most you can to support each

child's success.

Teaching students with disabilities can result in some challenging tasks, but each of us must do the best we can to fully include these students in the music classroom. Special learners benefit from music education just as much as other students benefit from creating music with their peers who are special learners. ■

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