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Instrumental Music for Special Learners

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Source: *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 87, No. 4, Special Focus: Inclusion (Jan., 2001), pp. 27-29+63

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#) on behalf of [MENC: The National Association for Music Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3399721>

Accessed: 18/11/2013 21:16

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INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC FOR SPECIAL LEARNERS

By making minor adaptations, instrumental music teachers can find ways to include special learners in their classes.

BY STEPHEN F. ZDZINSKI

Teaching special learners in the general music classroom is a commonly accepted concept, but the idea of teaching instrumental music to special learners is less common. The wide variety of cognitive, physical, and social abilities and disabilities possessed by "special learners" makes the task of inclusion a challenge, especially for the instrumental music teacher who must keep in mind the individual modifications and instructional goals needed to successfully teach such a student. However, instrumental music teachers can successfully teach learners with a variety of disabilities to play band and orchestral instruments by making minor modifications to traditional instrumental teaching techniques and by employing approaches used primarily in special education. With these adaptations, inclusion of students with special needs into the regular instrumental music program can take place.

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Adapting Musical Instruments

An essential step in the teaching of instrumental music to special learners is selecting appropriate instruments. Students need to be individually evaluated to determine both instrument preference and instrument suitability related to their particular disability. For students who are mentally challenged, valved brass (trumpets, baritone horns, valved trombones, and

tubas), single reed woodwinds, and percussion instruments are suggested by several sources as the most appropriate choices.¹ If possible, the music teacher should confer with the special education teacher to determine the extent of any developmental limitations that may affect the student's ability to play a specific instrument.

For students with significant physical challenges, a variety of band and orchestra instruments may be appropriate if selected carefully. Consultation with the school's occupational or physical therapist before an instrument is chosen will provide useful guidance, especially in determining the physical suitability of the instrument.² The student's instrument preference must also be considered.³ Modifications may be needed such as holding adaptations, mouthpiece adaptations, or, in the case of percussion instruments, beater adaptations. Donna Chadwick and Cynthia A. Clark offer numerous suggestions for these alterations.⁴ The sidebar lists resources for helping teachers accommodate students with disabilities in the music classroom.

Adapting the Social Environment

An instrumental music teacher who plans to include a learner with a dis-

ability needs to take several steps in order to ensure that the learner will be accepted into the ensemble. The initial step is to prepare the class for a new "special" student and to assign a "buddy" to help the student with new rules and instructional work. In preparing the class, care should be taken to explain to the students how the learner with special needs may be like and unlike them and what accommodations might be needed for this new student. In creating a suitable social environment, the instrumental music instructor will also need to prepare the special student for the music classroom. Classroom conduct rules and routines must be explained. These include such matters as respecting others, knowing how to request assistance when needed, rules for working in groups, proper procedures for participating in class, listening to and following directions, and understanding teacher and student roles. The student must be treated in a sensitive, yet non-patronizing manner that maintains his or her dignity.

Another way to adapt the social environment for the learner with special needs is through the use of positive image-building techniques, similar to those used in the Great Expectations Band Program.⁵ For example, the teacher can select goals for the student that are readily obtainable and ask the student to repeat each goal until it is mastered. Any progress towards those goals is reinforced while negative experiences are de-emphasized, so that the special learner continues to visualize positive outcomes. Comparisons with traditional students should be avoided, as their progress may be quicker and thus discourage the special learner.

Parental Involvement

One way to successfully adapt the social environment for special learners is through the informed use of parental involvement strategies. In special education settings, parental involvement is a vital part of the instructional mix. Research indicates that the following parental strategies are related to more positive student attitudes and greater achievement in music:

- singing with the child
- taking the child to school and nonschool concerts
- talking to the child about his or her progress in music
- listening to music with the child at home
- assisting with the child's practicing
- providing musical materials for the child
- providing transportation to the child's musical activities
- taping performances of the child
- attending meetings of music parent groups.⁶



In special education settings, parental involvement is a vital part of the instructional mix.



Parents who have little aptitude in music are able to follow the above strategies. They can be given a list of these items and asked to assist in their child's instructional process in these ways.

Adapting Music

Reading written notation is troublesome for students with visual information processing difficulties. Instrumental music teachers may need to adjust their traditional method of teaching music reading skills. An aural approach to teaching notation, as outlined in Stanley L. Schleuter's book *A Sound Approach to Teaching Instrumentalists*, may be very effective in teaching special learners to read musical notation.⁷ In this approach, aural

experiences start with singing songs that are familiar to the students; then notation for these songs is provided. In addition, flash cards with pitch and rhythm patterns extracted from the songs are used to reinforce music reading.

Another approach that has the potential to help learners with special needs to read music is the use of color-coded notation. George L. Rogers, in his research with traditional band students, utilized color to distinguish various note values or pitches.⁸ While the results do not show statistically significant differences in achievement, students using the colored notation appear to prefer it. The use of color-coded notation may enhance the comprehension of musical notation by students with visual processing and mild mental disabilities, as they tend to learn better with information presented in multiple modalities.

When selecting music for learners with special needs, the instrumental music teacher must keep in mind the differing ability levels of the special learner and the other students in his or her program and then adapt the music accordingly. Larry Williams suggests that well-known and catchy tunes, such as "Jingle Bells," "Ode to Joy," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "Bingo," and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," work well with developmentally disabled students.⁹ When arranging music that includes learners with special needs at the beginning level, the teacher can use unison, two-part, or three-part music, as well as partner songs and rounds. The ability level of the student may require that more difficult music be simplified in one of several ways. Students may be responsible for only one or two pitches and play only when those pitches are sounded in the ensemble, much in the manner of writing used in handbell choirs. Parts may be rewritten, eliminating difficult rhythmic passages using quarter, half, and whole notes that follow the harmonic progression of the music.

Adapting Teaching Techniques

Two approaches that may be helpful in teaching instrumental music to the special learner are *task analysis* and

precision teaching. In task analysis, teachers break down complex technical and musical tasks into their prerequisite steps, creating more manageable and more easily obtainable goals. Instrumental techniques such as embouchure, holding position, breathing, and fingerings can be broken down into subskills that can be thoroughly taught and reinforced and then combined after mastery. When teaching students with special needs various facets of instrumental technique, task analysis can provide the teacher with the means to analyze situations that have gone wrong and therefore more quickly remediate problems as they occur. Breaking instruction into smaller steps helps the special learner experience more success.

Below is an example of task analysis for teaching students to make the proper embouchure for brass instruments:

- make horse noises
- make motor noises (slow to fast)
- put fingers on each side of your nose
- put fingers on your lips and make motor noises
- buzz without the mouthpiece
- put the mouthpiece on your nose and then bring it down to your lips
- buzz with the mouthpiece (natural pitch)
- make buzzing sirens (high and low)
- buzz with the mouthpiece and the instrument.

The Great Expectations Special Education Band Program uses task analysis extensively in instrumental music instruction.¹⁰ In addition, the program uses a teaching and measurement technique borrowed from special education called "precision teaching." Teachers using this approach set goals for each student and then continuously measure and chart the student's progress through daily testing. Error patterns are analyzed in order to modify instruction so that the learner who is developmentally disabled makes steady progress. Progress is charted and recorded on the attainment of all goals, so that the teacher can decide if any goal needs to be further subdivided through additional task analysis. If

■ Resources for Accommodating ■ Students with Disabilities in Music Classes

Birkenshaw-Fleming, Lois. *Music for All: Teaching Music to People with Special Needs*. Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1993.

Chadwick, Donna, and Cynthia Clark. "Adapting Music Instruments for the Physically Handicapped." *Music Educators Journal* 67, no. 3 (November 1980): 56-59.

Elliott, Barbara. *Guide to the Selection of Musical Instruments with Respect to Physical Ability and Disability*. St. Louis: Magnamusic-Baton, 1982.

Rogers, George L. "Effect of Colored Rhythmic Notation on Music-Reading Skills of Elementary Students." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 15-25.

Schleuter, Stanley L. *A Sound Approach to Teaching Instrumentalists*. New York: Schirmer, 1997.

the student is not meeting his or her goal, the objective is modified so that the student is able to make progress. In this way, students can make slow but continual progress that can be documented with appropriate reinforcement provided.

Adapting Evaluation Techniques

When working in instrumental music classes with learners who have special needs, teachers may need to modify evaluation techniques. Technical goals, musical content goals, and social goals should be included in their grading criteria. Students who have unique difficulties with auditory or visual perception may require both aural and written directions. Students with shorter attention spans may need more frequent, less lengthy testing situations. Anxiety may also be a problem, especially if test objectives are too difficult. More frequent testing with less complex objectives may help.

Evaluation and grading should be used to help build positive images. Instruction will need to be adapted and segmented to show continuous progress. While progress may be slower, attainment of each objective should be documented and charted to show progress, so that students and parents will not become discouraged.

Instrumental music study goals should be included in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Grading adaptations, if appropriate, should also be included in a student's IEP, and grading should be based on the attainment of IEP objectives for instrumental music. In some cases, traditional letter grades may be less appropriate than alternative grading systems, such as pass/fail grading, mastery-level grading, or the use of portfolio assessment. In all cases, instrumental music teachers need to be involved in the development of the IEPs of special learners in their music classes.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities can be successfully included in instrumental music programs, as long as teachers are ready and willing to find ways to accommodate the needs of these students. Instrumental teachers may have to seek the assistance of parents, other students in the program, preservice music teachers, or music therapists. Instruments must be selected carefully and adapted as needed, taking into consideration physical, musical, and social factors. Classes should be pre-

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pared for the inclusion of a "special" student. Additional self-esteem enhancement and parental involvement strategies may prove useful. Once the student is mainstreamed into the instrumental class, complex tasks may need to be broken down into simpler subtasks, and music may need to be simplified for the student. Grading may also need to be modified and should include both musical and social objectives. These strategies will take time and additional resources for the instrumental teacher. With a little effort, however, teachers can include learners with special needs in their instrumental classrooms and can help them include instrumental music in their lives.

Notes

1. Lois Birkenshaw-Fleming, *Music for All: Teaching Music to People with Special Needs* (Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson Music, 1993); Larry D. Williams, "A Band That Exceeds all Expectations," *Music Educators Journal* 71, no. 6 (February 1985): 26.
2. Barbara Elliot, *Guide to the Selection of Musical Instruments with Respect to Physical Ability and Disability* (St. Louis: Magnamusic-Baton, 1982).
3. A measure such as Gordon's *Instrumental Timbre Preference Test* (Chicago: GIA, 1984) may be used.

4. Donna Chadwick and Cynthia A. Clark, "Adapting Music Instruments for the Physically Handicapped," *Music Educators Journal* 67, no. 3 (November 1980): 56.

5. Williams, "A Band That Exceeds All Expectations."

6. James Shelton, "The Influence of Home Musical Environment upon Musical Response of First-Grade Children" *Dissertation Abstracts International* 26 (1966): 6765-6766; Manny Brand, "Relationships between Home Musical Environment and Selected Musical Attributes of Second-Grade Children, *Journal of Research in Music Education* 34, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 101-110; Stephen F. Zdzinski, "Relationships among Parental Involvement, Selected Student Attributes, and Learning Outcomes in Instrumental Music," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 34-48.

7. Stanley L. Schleuter, *A Sound Approach to Teaching Instrumentalists* (New York: Schirmer, 1997).

8. George L. Rogers, "Effect of Colored Rhythmic Notation on Music-Reading Skills of Elementary Students," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 15-25; Birkenshaw-Fleming, *Music for All*.

9. Williams, "A Band That Exceeds All Expectations."

10. Ibid. (The Great Expectations Program has been incorporated into the special education curriculum of the Great Falls, Montana, Public Schools.) ■

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