

# Special Needs Students and the Instrumental Music Class

Sheri Engelmann

Twenty-first century instrumental music teachers are required to serve a variety of students in our classrooms. We are expected to develop musical skills and acuity in all of our students. Whether the students are physically and intellectually gifted, average or challenged in some way, we are to accept them all. Somehow, we are to teach them to play an instrument and bring them together in competitive and non-competitive group and individual performances. We take all students and place them in beginning instrumental classes based on no criteria other than the instrument they are going to study. Consequently, a beginning band or orchestra class may contain students who are gifted learners, average learners, and learners who are intellectually or physically challenged.

Students with learning disorders or other challenges can benefit from instrumental music instruction as much as other students who are considered average or gifted. Sometimes they can even excel in music when they cannot succeed in other areas. Studies show that children who study instrumental music in middle school and high school perform better on standardized tests, in both verbal

and mathematical areas. Research also shows that learning to play a musical instrument and read music increases brain activity and function in both children and adults, making it easier for them to learn other subjects. It also increases their memory skills. The results are the same in studies of students with Autism, ADHD and other learning disorders.

Having special needs students in our classes creates challenges for us. So, how do we manage? How do we meet the needs of the special education students and still encourage, stimulate and challenge our other students.

The first step is to understand the disabilities your students have and what that means to their ability to learn and function. This information is found in the student's IEP (Individual Education Plan) or other special education documents,

which you should receive at the beginning of the school year for each child you have who receives special education services. Although

these documents can provide insight into the student's abilities and needs in the regular academic classroom, they often do not go far enough to provide concrete ways of helping the students succeed in an instrumental class. You also need to talk to the special education teachers who work with the child regularly and coordinate your information and efforts. These teachers know the child and his or her personality, strengths and

weaknesses enabling them to give you a lot of help and insight.

## Choosing an instrument

Special care should be taken in selecting the instrument the student will play.

**Because of special needs students, we will examine our teaching styles and methods, causing us to stretch ourselves and continue to learn and grow. We will learn to celebrate the small achievements as well as the big ones. They will remind us to appreciate our differences as well as our similarities. They will show us how to look at life from a different angle and see things we did not see before.**

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### *Things to consider:*

- **Physical characteristics** - does the student have a physical handicap that will limit his or her success on the instrument?

- **Cognitive characteristics** - does the student have any disorders or diagnosis which cause limitation in their learning? For example: Attention Deficit Disorder, Autism, or other learning disability.

- **Emotional and behavior issues** - does the student have a history of disruptive or violent behavior? Are there certain things that trigger their misbehavior? How do they get along with other students in their classes?

The best way to get an idea about the above topics is to simply have a conversation with the student and his or her parents. Be kind, but truthful. Parents and students need to know clearly how the class is managed and what your expectations are for your students. And, they need to know that you will do what is necessary to help all of your students be successful.

### *Suggestions:*

- **Physical challenges** -Students who have physical disabilities can be successful learning to play an instrument as long as you are careful to accommodate their disability. For example, a student who has fingers missing on his right hand can learn to play the French Horn using the fingers on his left hand to manipulate the valves and using his right hand in the bell. Or, a student who is hearing impaired can learn to play the violin or viola by feeling the vibrations of the sound through the chin rest into his jawbone. Here are two good resources for accommodating students with physical disabilities.

1. McCord, Kimberly and Margaret Fitzgerald. "Children with Disabilities Playing Musical

Instruments." *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (March 2006), pp. 46 - 52.

2. Chadwick, Donna and Cynthia A. Clark. "Adapting Musical Instruments for the Physically Handicapped." *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (November 1980), p. 56.

- **Emotional and Intellectual Challenges** -Students who have emotional or intellectual challenges are not limited in their instrument choice by their physical bodies, any more than other students. Here are some things to consider beyond their physical challenges.

1. Instrument timbre and ability to produce a tone - Care must be taken to make sure they select an instrument whose sound they like and on which they can easily produce a tone. This will minimize their frustration level as beginners and maximize their potential for success.

2. Class size - These students will need more individual attention than the average learner, so they will be more successful in a smaller classes, if possible.

3. Size and number of parts for assembly - students who are easily frustrated may have difficulty learning to assemble instruments with many parts.

4. Woodwind instruments require the use of all fingers, and the hand position and finger combinations can be very complicated. This again can be an obstacle for students with short attention spans or other learning disabilities. Since these students generally learn slower than others, putting them on an instrument that does not require too much too fast will help their success.

Ultimately, you want to use the best judgment possible in selecting the instrument for each student whether they are learning impaired or not. Success or failure of anyone studying an instrument is going

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to rely heavily on their commitment to work hard and practice. They will all work harder and be more successful if they enjoy the instrument they have chosen and can have some level of success from the first day.

### General Classroom Strategies

Many of these strategies are simply sound teaching practices that will enhance the learning of the gifted and average student as well as allow the special learners to be successful. Since your class will likely contain gifted, average and learning impaired students, you need to set up structures that will enable all of the students to function at their best level.

- Establish a clear and concise set of class rules and expectations, with predictable rewards and consequences. These need to be taught and reinforced daily to all students.

- Have a highly structured daily routine, enabling all students to develop a comfort level that will help them with behavior and learning. This is especially important for students on the Autism spectrum, ADD or ADHD, and emotionally challenged students. If they know what to expect, they can manage themselves much better.

- Create an atmosphere of acceptance and support in your class. Teach your students to treat each other with respect. Teach them to encourage each other and don't allow them to tease or humiliate anyone because they are struggling with skills or concepts.

- Learn to break down each skill you teach into its smallest steps. This enables you to give short, concise instructions which can easily be understood and followed by everyone. Students with any type of learning disability need things to be kept as simple as possible.

- Keep the pace of the class lively and vary the activities within the lesson as much as possible. Use learning sequences that target a variety of learning styles to teach each concept. For example, clapping rhythms, singing rhythms or pitches, fingering notes in rhythm before playing, call and response activities, etc. Finding multiple ways to teach the same information, and repeating the information many times is beneficial to all learners.

- Model, model and model some more. This is probably the most important part of teaching any instrumental music class. All students will benefit from watching and imitating you at the beginning. As the students gain skills and are successful allow them do the modeling.

### Learner Specific Strategies

In dealing with special needs students you must always keep in mind that they have a disability and that they are working to manage it. These students cannot control their behaviors or attention as well as other students because of their disability. They are not intentionally provoking you or misbehaving. Remember to stay calm and keep your cool with them. Patience is a very important skill in working with these students.

- Maintain consistency in everything as much as possible. When changes to the daily routine are going to occur, try to prepare the students ahead of time (the day before if possible).

- Minimize distractions in the classroom.
- Recognize and reward appropriate behaviors immediately and positively.

- Give constructive feedback and redirection for misbehaviors.

- Monitor your students at all times. If a student is prone to outbursts in temper, learn to recognize the

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signs that he or she is losing patience or getting agitated and try to dispel the situation before it escalates.

- Carefully consider seating arrangements so that the student is seated near other students who do not provoke him or her. This may require ongoing review and changing seating when necessary.

- Proximity control is a very effective discipline management strategy. Set up the class in such a way that you can easily get close to the student to help.

- Make sure you have a contingency plan in place for the student if he or she feels a meltdown coming on. For example, one of my students who is emotionally and behaviorally challenged knows that when he gets frustrated or angry and can't handle a situation he can get up and leave the class and go to his special education teacher's room for a cool off period.

- When traveling with these students make sure that they are sitting on the bus in proximity to an adult they trust, but with other students who will not agitate them. Also, watch who they socialize with carefully at every activity.

- With Autistic students you will need to use planned ignoring when necessary to maintain class order. This means that they may have issues or behaviors that you and the other students in the class simply need to ignore in-order to keep the class

moving and manageable. You will be amazed that the other students can and will ignore a variety of behaviors if you do not make an issue of them.

- If the student struggles with reading music or with the playing technique required for the music you are preparing for Concerts or Completions, you can and should write simplified parts that will allow them to participate without compromising the performance of the group.

Special needs students in our instrumental music classes challenge us as teachers and as human beings. They require patience and understanding like all of our students, but amplified. If we take the time and make the effort to get to know them and work with them to enrich their lives through music, they will teach us and give us much in return. Because of them, we will examine our teaching styles and methods, causing us to stretch ourselves and continue to learn and grow. We will learn to celebrate the small achievements as well as the big ones. They will remind us to appreciate our differences as well as our similarities. They will show us how to look at life from a different angle and see things we did not see before. If we choose to embrace special needs students rather than simply tolerate them, we and all of our students will benefit.

*Mrs. Engelmann has been a band director in the Houston area for the past 24 years, and is currently at Morton Ranch Junior High School in Katy ISD. She received her Bachelor's Degree in music education from the University of North Texas in 1986 and her Master's Degree in music education from Sam Houston State University in 1994. Mrs. Engelmann has had success as both an assistant band director and as the head band director in Junior High programs with a variety of economic and ethnic make ups, including Title I schools. She taught for 7 years as the Head Junior High Band Director and Assistant High School Band Director in Willis Independent School District, a rural community north of Houston. And, she taught for 8 years in Alief ISD, an urban community on the west side of Houston, serving as the head Intermediate School Band Director for 5 years and as an assistant Junior High Band Director for 3 years. Mrs. Engelmann's students have achieved success both in large ensembles at Concert and Sight Reading Contests and individually in Solo and Ensemble Contests, Region Band competitions, and at the High School Level All-State. Mrs. Engelmann has served on Curriculum Writing Teams as well as Textbook adoption committee. She has also served as a Mentor Teacher for new teachers entering Music Education, and in 2002 she was selected as the campus "Teacher of the Year" for Owens Intermediate School.*