

Music Educators Journal

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Music Educators Journal 2004; 90; 33

DOI: 10.2307/3400021

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Inclusion Strategies That Work

By Alice M. Hammel

When PL 94-142, now named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was passed in 1975, music teachers and administrators began preparing to include special learners in their classrooms. Almost thirty years later, we are still learning how to include special learners in our classrooms!

Many school systems are moving toward an inclusion model for teaching special learners in which all students are included in general classrooms. The basic premise is that all students should first be placed in the general classroom. Students receive as many necessary supplementary aids and services as possible in the general classroom, and then, as needed, students are removed from the general classroom to receive any adaptations and accommodations that cannot be provided in that setting. This concept is different from mainstreaming in which students begin their placement process in separate classrooms or buildings and are moved into general classrooms as they become more able to participate with supplementary aids and services. Some students with more severe disabilities, however, may still be placed exclusively in a separate classroom or building for much or all of their instruction in either model.

*You can make
special learners
successful in your
music classroom by
working with
special education
faculty and staff
and implementing
inclusion strategies.*



Photo by Mark Regan.

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By working to include special learners in their classrooms, music teachers can enhance learning for all children.

The degree to which inclusion practices are implemented varies according to individual school system philosophy and personnel capability; however, in almost all systems, the inclusion philosophy has meant more special learners are placed in general classrooms. Inclusion has had a huge effect on music educators. We now see more special learners in our classrooms and often find ourselves teaching special learners with far greater needs and more severe disabilities than in years past.

The inclusion process can create a diverse and healthy environment for learning. It can also be frustrating for teachers who do not possess the tools necessary to fully include all learners in their classrooms. Research, study, and practice have identified some important strategies that have been used in many music classrooms with great success. Implementing these strategies can lead to greater success when working with all students, special and general learners alike, in inclusive settings.

Know Your Students

Music teachers who plan ahead for inclusion may find the process much easier. Talk to your school guidance counselor or administrator about students on your class roll. Check with classroom teachers and be aware of any special services these students may receive in their general classroom. Also, if possible, get IEP (Individualized Education Program) summaries (which may also be called student profiles or adaptations/modifications sheets) for all special learners in your classes. Review behavior management plans and curricular adaptation suggestions, noting whether the student participates alone or with a “shadow” or aide.

If a student is in a special education class, ask a special education staff member to review with you the student’s limiting conditions and IEP. Staff will gladly help you understand the “alphabet soup” of special education and will be up-to-date on any changes. Identify strong students in your class who will possibly be good friends for a special student who may need help. The school guidance counselor may be able to help identify stu-

dents. If possible, contact some special learners before school begins through postcards, e-mails, phone calls, or other forms of communication to welcome them to your class.

We now see more special learners in our classrooms and often find ourselves teaching special learners with far greater needs and more severe disabilities than in years past.

Know Your Special Education Faculty

Take the time to get to know the special education faculty at your school. Visit their classrooms, and let them know that you are ready and willing to teach their students. This will help if any problems occur later. Know which special education teacher is primarily responsible for each special learner in your class. One teacher will be responsible for seeing that the IEP goals are met. This person is sometimes referred to as the case manager. Know the specialties of each special education teacher. Some are adept at working on behavior modifications, while others are better at curriculum adaptations. The school guidance counselor, administrator, or the teachers themselves will be good sources of information about these specialties.

Invite the special education teachers to visit your classroom and offer advice about the physical setup of the room. Ask about possible modifications to your classroom procedures as

well. These teachers can be a wealth of information—develop a good working relationship with them. Let them know that you value having their students in your classroom.

Know Your Special Education Staff

Get to know special education paraprofessionals. If a student has an aide in the general classroom, that aide may accompany the student in the music classroom. Ask questions about specific situations or students. The aides are with the students all day and may have some ideas about how certain students learn best. Invite paraprofessionals to observe your class if they are not going to attend each class. Allow them to offer suggestions based on their experiences.

Know Your Administration

Get to know your administrators before the school year starts. Develop a positive working relationship with them and let them know how willing you are to teach *all* students in the school. Ask about the possibility of attending an IEP meeting for a student in your class. Let administrators know that you consider this an important part of your preparation to teach special learners. Know the procedures used by your administration concerning classroom behavior. Determine whether any of the students in your class are under a different set of “rules” regarding behavior. Your knowledge of current laws and practice will help here.

The “Least Restrictive Environment”

One of the most discussed sections of special education law states that students are to participate with their classmates in the “least restrictive environment.” This means that they should be placed in classes where they can be successful with the least amount of modifications and adaptations. If a student is not able to succeed in your classroom with the use of all available supplementary aids and services, the current classroom environment may not be the least restrictive environment for that student.¹ Students placed in the general class-

Adapting Instructional Methods and Materials for Special Learners

room setting for academic classes may or may not be included in other classes. A student may be more successful in another section or class of music, or may need to receive music instruction in a setting other than the general music classroom.

Be prepared to teach *all* students, but be aware that not *all* students will succeed in every class. Even when you have tried all available modifications, consulted with special education faculty and staff, met with administrators, and followed suggestions from the faculty and staff, the student may still not be ready to succeed in a particular setting. If nothing has helped, you have the right to suggest that in the best interest of the student another classroom placement be considered. While a single teacher will not unilaterally make this decision, the IEP team, teachers, administration, and parents may decide together to make a placement change for music class. This is a last resort measure; however, before it occurs, it is within your realm to ask that the IEP be amended, an aide be present, or any other modification made that you deem necessary for the success of that student and other students in the class.

The Arrangement of Your Classroom

A teacher who runs a well-organized and tidy classroom will help special learners be successful. It is important for teachers to orient special learners in the classroom and make them aware of safety issues. If you make any physical changes to the room, inform the special learners—in advance, if possible. This applies to all special learners because a change in routine can be very difficult for them.

Teachers can make special physical arrangements for special learners with low or no vision. Reserve front seats for these students and make sure they are not near windows or uncontrolled lighting that can create glare.

Students with physical disabilities should be integrated into the physical setup of your classroom. These students will appreciate being in the middle of the classroom action even though integration of their wheel-

There are many ways to adapt methods and materials for special learners. Not all adaptations will work for all students; however, if you continue to try new techniques, you are more likely to be successful.

- Use an overhead projector or computer-enhanced image to enlarge materials (music, books, and sheet music) and provide written materials to go along with spoken instruction. A “picture” schedule that outlines the day’s activities with pictures instead of words is good for nonreaders and students with autism.

- Allow students a hands-on examination of all new materials, equipment, and instruments during the introduction of a concept. This kinesthetic approach combined with visual and aural instructional elements will help students learn according to their modality.

- Allow students to tape-record rehearsals or lectures and to record a test or assignment. Also, allow them to respond to tests or assignments on tape, orally, or in writing.

- Provide music or reading materials in advance to allow time for arrangements to be made for special learners.

- Use Velcro strips to help students hold mallets or small instruments. Sticks can also be wrapped with tape or foam rubber to facilitate handling.

- Bells or cymbals can be sewn onto a band or ribbon and tied to the wrist. Straps and cords can be used to attach rhythm instruments to wheelchairs or walkers for students who may drop them during class.

- Code music or instruments with colors or symbols to help students remember notes or rhythms. A highlighter or colored pens or chalk can be used to help a student focus on a specific part of the music or book.

- A felt board or other raised-texture board with heavy rope one to two inches thick representing musical notation can be used to demonstrate the concept of a staff to students who learn kinesthetically or are visually impaired.

- Provide written rehearsal schedules for students to follow. These can be on the chalk or bulletin board or placed in folders.

- Individualize some assignments for students who may not be able to complete the quantity of homework other students can. Check the IEP to make sure you are following the modifications listed.

- Use computers with students who need extra drill and practice.

- Separate rhythmic and melodic assignments until special learners can combine the two.

- Limit the use of words not yet in the student’s vocabulary, and be consistent with the terminology you do use.

- Allow students to help plan their own instructional accommodations and be a partner in the process.

- When preparing music for special learners, you can indicate tempo and meter, mark the students’ parts, and allow students to highlight the music. Write measure numbers and breath marks, create visual aids for difficult words, and provide visual cues for score markings and phrase lengths.

- When using written assessments with special learners, provide accurate and complete study guides. Help focus study efforts on important events, ideas, and vocabulary. Use this tool to help students organize and sequence information.

- Use short tests at frequent intervals to encourage students to work at an even pace rather than postponing the study of a large amount of material until just before a long exam. This also provides a student some room to perform poorly on a single test without significantly compromising the grade for the entire period.

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■ Allow students to use a word bank (a list of words offered as answer choices for fill-in-the-blank questions on tests or as prompts for writing longer answers). They may remember concepts but have difficulty with spelling.

■ Vary the style of test questions used. This will prevent a student from being unduly penalized for having difficulty with a particular type of question.

■ Place a rubber strip on the back of a ruler or use a magnetic ruler to help students measure or draw lines without slipping. Use adhesive-backed Velcro to attach items to a desk or wheelchair laptray.

■ Allow students to use felt-tip pens or soft lead pencils that require less pressure or to use a computer to complete assignments.

■ Wait at least five seconds to prompt students for verbal answers to questions. They may need a longer period of time to process the question and determine an appropriate response. It may help to call on the student only when his or her hand is raised. This may lower frustration and prevent embarrassment.

■ Be aware that if an accommodation or modification is listed in the IEP, all teachers must follow it.

Web Sites That Support Special Learners

- <http://www.adainfo.org> (The ADA Information Center)
- <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/adhd.cfm> (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)
- <http://www.aamr.org> (The American Association on Mental Retardation)
- <http://www.acb.org> (The American Council of the Blind)
- <http://www.deafchildren.org> (The American Society for Deaf Children)
- <http://www.autism-society.org> (The Autism Society of America)
- <http://www.cec.sped.org> (The Council for Exceptional Children)
- <http://www.ldonline.org> (Information Regarding Learning Disabilities and ADHD)
- <http://www.musictherapy.org> (The American Music Therapy Association)
- <http://www.ncl.org> (The National Center for Learning Disabilities)
- <http://www.ncl.org> (The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities)
- <http://www.vsa.org> (VSA Arts)

chairs, walkers, or other equipment may initially require some extra effort.

In general, when you make a change to the routine, mark it in several ways in the classroom (on the board and near folders or equipment used for class). Keep the classroom neat and clear of clutter, and seat special learners near equipment if students are going to be moving to that equipment during class.

Your Classroom Management Style

Classroom management can be one of the most frustrating aspects of teaching special learners. Some students are held to a different set of expectations, especially if their behavior is a part of their identified disability. Music teachers who are aware of these students will not run the risk of applying a disciplinary

procedure that might be overturned by the administration.

Some general classroom management ideas are universal for all students. One important strategy is to use seating arrangements that facilitate good behavior management. Teachers who provide a rehearsal outline for students who can read may increase the amount of time a student is on task. Many teachers use a prearranged signal or word to notify the student when his or her behavior is inappropriate. This gives the student an opportunity to modify behavior, often before other students in the class are aware of it.

Work with special education teachers. Try to use the same behavior management plan they use in the general or special education classroom to provide greater consistency for the special learner. Also, be available for parent/teacher conferences, particularly for students who are having difficulty in your class. If possible, ask to be included in conferences held with parents so that you can let parents know about the difficulty a student is having in your music class.

Some successful techniques are to

■ Make sure all students know they are of value to the group.

■ Be flexible and modify classroom expectations when necessary to help all students succeed in your classroom.

■ Avoid power struggles with students. Provide specific instructions and feedback about behavior privately rather than risk a verbal struggle in front of the class.

■ Be positive whenever possible. Be sure you know what reinforces a behavior. (This can vary according to the student.)

For more suggestions, see the Adapting Instructional Methods and Materials for Special Learners sidebar.

Asking for Help

Before asking for outside help, make sure you have done everything possible to solve the problem yourself. If you have already tried several solutions, you will be better able to precisely define the problem. When you do ask for help, begin by asking the instructional aide, classroom teacher, or special education teacher. They will be able to describe their strategies and give you some ideas. If these strategies

do not work, request a conference with the parents or guardians, teachers, and student (if practical). Try to create a new plan. Make sure the plan has a defined beginning and ending date, and make a date to meet again if the plan is not working.

If efforts continue to fail, ask for help from the administration. At this point, you will have gathered a lot of information and will be able to show that you have sought help from teachers and parents or guardians. If all personnel are involved and all accommodations are being made, and the student is still failing to succeed in the class, then your classroom may not be the least restrictive environment for that student.

There are many sources of help available. The instructional aides, classroom teachers, special education teachers, site administrators, central administrators, and local agencies are all there to help you. Seek outside help whenever necessary to secure the best possible classroom environment for all students. The Web Sites That Support Special Learners sidebar lists helpful resources. A more complete list of agencies is available on my Web site, <http://www.hammel.us>, under "special learners."

Many special learners have low self-esteem and are easily frustrated. Celebrating each small success helps build student/teacher relationships and reminds students of their value to you and the school community. You can be a positive influence that a student will remember forever. Seek outside help whenever necessary to secure the best possible classroom environment for all special learners and embrace these very special young people. Your willingness to actively include special learners in your music classrooms will be greatly appreciated by your students and by the parents who trust you with the music education of their most precious possessions: their children.

(This article, originally published in the Winter 2002 issue of Massachusetts Music News, is reprinted with permission.)

Note

1. *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, Public Law 94-142, U.S. Code 20 (1997), §1412. ■

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MENC Resources

The following MENC resources may be helpful to music educators in creating inclusive classrooms. Visit the MENC Web site (www.menc.org) or call 800-828-0229 to order.

Books

Readings on Diversity, Inclusion, and Music for All. 2003. Item #1665.

Models of Music Therapy Intervention in School Settings: From Institutions to Inclusion, edited by Brian Wilson. 1996. Item #1700.

An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners, by Elise S. Sobol. 2001. Item #1302.

TIPS: Teaching Music to Special Learners, compiled by Gail Schaberg. 1988. Item #1092.

Articles

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