

Reaching All Learners through Music

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

With the passage in 1975 of Public Law 94-142, followed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, students with special needs were to be placed in the least restrictive environment, which, in many cases, became the regular elementary school classroom. (Before 1975, students were generally isolated in special self-contained classes.) The IDEA has been revised many times since 1990 with the most recent amendments passed by Congress in 2004, with final regulations published in 2006 (Part B for school-aged children), and in 2011 (Part C for babies and toddlers).

IDEA requires that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are to be developed annually for each student. The IEP is a written plan, developed by a team that includes the student's parent(s), teacher(s), and, if appropriate, the student. The plan is to include the student's current levels of educational performance and annual goals.

Under the IDEA, states are responsible for meeting the special needs of eligible children with disabilities (parentcenterhub.org). The IDEA lists thirteen disability categories under which children and youth ages three through twenty-one may be eligible for special education and related services. Those categories are: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (including blindness). For a student who has a disability that is included in IDEA, but does not need the same level of services of an IEP, or a student who has a disability that is not included in IDEA, a 504 Plan may be developed that includes more general adaptations of the general classroom environment.

Teaching Music to Students with Special Needs

The following material includes basic information and recommendations for teaching music to students who may have exceptional learning needs.

Autism

An Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that impacts verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, with signs typically emerging during early childhood. ASD has a range of characteristics that covers a wide spectrum displayed by children diagnosed with autism. As a result, each child with autism is different. In some school districts, students with autism spectrum disorder participate in general education programs; in others, they receive more comprehensive special education services. To learn more about ASD, consult the information presented on the Autism Society website (www.autism-society.org).

Suggestions for planning instruction:

- Establish a structured classroom with predictable schedules, routines, and seating position.
- Be aware that students may be sensitive to loud sounds (aural) and personal touch (tactile).
- Give visual cues to help in remembering, e.g., the lyrics of a song. Some students, however, may be sensitive to visuals and cover their eyes.
- Assign peer partners (peer-assisted learning) for students who can relate to others and benefit from such a pairing, e.g., in learning the steps of a singing game.
- Encourage and build on the positive response that these students have to musical experiences – many can match pitches readily and recall songs easily.

Hearing Impairment, Deafness, and Deaf-Blindness

Students with varying levels of hearing impairment can participate in music in an inclusive classroom. Musical vibrations are amplified through hearing aids, although students will not hear music in the same way as a student with normal hearing. Each child's aid needs to be properly adjusted to help with hearing the singing, playing of instruments, and recordings. Feeling vibrations in instruments is especially important for the student with a hearing impairment.

Suggestions for planning instruction:

- Place students close to the front of the room to ensure that the teacher's face is easily seen and the instruments and other materials are close by.
- Arrange seating so a student with a hearing impairment can sit next to a student with a strong, clear singing voice.
- Hold charts and other materials close to the teacher's face while describing them since some students may be lipreading.
- Make available instruments such as drums, Autoharp® or Chromaharp®, alto metallophones, and resonator bars so students can feel the vibrations.
- Note that students may hear or feel low pitches better than high pitches so initially may sing in a lower range. Help them explore and discover the difference between speaking and singing voices and work to expand their singing range.
- Incorporate signing with singing activities as often as possible. Numerous examples are given throughout Sections Two and Four in this text.
- Choose songs that reflect the natural rhythm and pitch of speech to help with language development.
- Have students use headphones (over the hearing aids) to hear the music better.

Two more severe categories of hearing impairment in the IDEA are deafness and deaf-blindness. Deafness impairs the processes of linguistic information through hearing, with or without hearing aids. Deaf-blindness indicates simultaneous hearing and visual impairments.

Behavior or Emotional Disorders

Students with behavior or emotional disorders can be “tough to reach, rough to teach” (Rockwell, 2006). While the current special education law uses the term *emotional disturbance* to identify these students, the term preferred and widely endorsed in the profession is *emotional or behavior disorders*. These students, most of whom have normal intelligence, exhibit extremely inappropriate behavior – behavior that inhibits their academic progress and isolates them socially. They are often either very aggressive and disruptive or appear withdrawn and depressed. The cause for these behaviors may be biological or psychological.

Suggestions for planning instruction:

- Consult with the school or district special education specialist and school psychologists to best understand how to adapt instruction for these students.
- Plan instruction carefully recognizing which music activities might challenge children with emotional disorders and be prepared to implement procedures that will result in appropriate behaviors.
- Be consistent in expectations and procedures. Post classroom rules and procedures.
- Keep the noise level in the classroom at a manageable one for the students who are sensitive to noise.
- Seat students near peers who can serve as role models and buddies.
- Offer lots of positive reinforcement for good behavior, compliance, and academic success.

Intellectual Disability

Students with an intellectual or cognitive disability (mild or moderate) learn slowly and may be behind in most areas of learning compared with students in their age group. However, many students with mild intellectual disabilities are able to join in some of the instructional activities of the regular classroom and, like all students, differ in their musical capacities. Tasks such as abstract thinking and reasoning may be particularly challenging for them.

Suggestions for planning instruction:

- Engage them in one task at a time, along with much repetition.
- Use imitation to help them be successful – clap and sing in response to the teacher or other classmates.
- Introduce songs with actions, visual cues for word order of songs, and other concrete stimuli.
- Present songs in a lower register to help them match tones if students sing in a low voice and help them explore and expand their voices by whispering, speaking, and singing throughout their range.

Like all students in the classroom, students with an intellectual disability need to feel successful. When they are able to tell the answer, they may be able to show the answer. With a sensitive teacher's patience and encouragement, they will gain needed self-confidence and independence.

Orthopedic impairment

Rhythm sticks, for example, can be made of one- or two-inch-diameter doweling. Lap tables should be provided for students in wheelchairs and special mounts can be added to wheelchairs to hold instruments.

During movement activities, substitute motions will aid some learners: fingers can "walk" in the air, heads can bob, or wheelchairs can move in time to the music. Because students with physical disabilities will prefer to do the same activities as their peers, a teacher might involve half the class in motions that these learners can perform while the other half participates in locomotor movements.

Other Health Impairment

Some students may suffer from chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome. These disabilities naturally affect a student's academic success in the general classroom setting. Teachers need to be prepared to help these children be successful in the classroom environment.

Specific Learning Disability

Students with a learning disability are of normal intelligence, but have a specific challenge or limitation in learning. These disabilities cover a wide range of conditions including perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. In order to work effectively with individual students, teachers should consult with the school or district special education specialist to learn how to address specific student learning needs.

Processing aural and visual information is usually difficult for students with learning disabilities. (Copying from the board is especially a challenge for these students.) Teachers should emphasize initially the music-learning mode for which a student shows preference, e.g., singing or movement. The use of one mode at a time works best. For example, students can sing a song until it is learned well and later add steady-beat clapping. Since students need extra concentration for spatial tasks and following directions, singing games and dances will need practice. Visual cues will help with remembering the words of a song and the steps of a singing game or dance. If frustration occurs, "time-outs" are always in order.

Speech or Language Impairment

A speech or language disability is a communication disorder that affects many students. Students who have a speech disability may stutter, have voice clarity issues, or not be able to articulate sounds clearly. Students with language disabilities may have difficulty expressing themselves (expressive language). These students can build confidence by using their voice in a group setting. Singing or chanting are excellent musical activities for these children. A small number may have voice impairment secondary to vocal abuse and may be on vocal rest. The school speech and language pathologist can provide suggestions and accommodations for all of these students.

Traumatic Brain Injury

Students who have suffered a head injury caused by a fall, sports injury, motor vehicle accident and so forth, fall into a distinct disability category referred to as traumatic brain injury. This category is separate from other physical impairments as recognized in the 1990 IDEA. The education services offered for these students may be in their homes, hospital settings, and in schools (including general education classrooms). Students with traumatic brain injury have many needs: physical, academic, and social-behavioral.

Visual Impairment (including blindness)

Students with a visual impairment need seating close to the front of the class, enlarged charts, and two- and three-dimensional study aids. Teachers should constantly describe verbally what is happening in the classroom so students may hear what they cannot see.

Students benefit from experiences that build their comprehension of space. Singing games and dances performed in an ordered, unchanging setting will help children build physical and social self-confidence, as well as concepts about physical space. Teachers can use flannelboards and felt cutouts for notes and shapes or use the student's hand to show the five lines and four spaces of the staff. Autoharp®, Chromaharp®, and resonator bars can be labeled with tactile cues. Listening or picture maps can be printed with raised ink so students can participate in a listening experience.

Technology can be of tremendous help to these learners. For example, traditional music notation can be converted to Braille with a Braille printer/scanner or with software such as GoodFEEL (dancingdots.com).

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