

Teaching Special Learners' Workshop: Teaching Students With Special Needs

The following is a continuation from my article in the Fall issue of *PMEA News*. In talking with the membership, in regard to what needs we have as classroom music teachers, pertaining to special needs students, it has become apparent that real discussion/scenarios, about real students, in real classrooms, may be more useful than talking about special student conditions in a broad generalized ways. In the Fall Edition, two case studies were shared. I shared a case study of a student on the autistic spectrum and a case study of a student with very real ADHD. In the following case study, I will share background information from a student with Down Syndrome, along with strategies for helping this student be their best in the music classroom. True identities of students are intentionally confidential, but the conditions, and adaptive strategies suggested were used on real students with positive results.

A Word About Down Syndrome

About 1 in every 691 babies is born with Down Syndrome. Down Syndrome results when a fetus is developed with an extra chromosome. Down Syndrome is the leading cause of mental retardation and occurs in people of all race and economic levels. There are more than 400,000 people living with Down Syndrome in the U.S. today. In addition to cognitive delays, and the inability of many to exhibit higher level thinking and computation due to mental retardation, people with Down Syndrome also experience a higher level of medical conditions including heart defects, respiratory, vision and hearing impairment, Alzheimer's disease, childhood leukemia, intestinal, and thyroid conditions.

A few common physical traits of Down Syndrome include a stocky physique, small stature, a short neck, low muscle tone, an upward slant to the eyes, and a single deep crease across the center of the palm. People with Down Syndrome exhibit these characteristics in varying ways with some having more of one than the other. With a great educational program, a stimulating home environment, good health care, and positive support from family and friends, students with Down Syndrome can develop to their full potential and lead meaningful lives. It's important to note, especially as music educators, that though a student is experiencing mental retardation and a myriad of other difficulties (i.e. medical, mental), their musical ability may still be strong and only slightly effected by their handicaps.

For more information about Down Syndrome go to the National Down Syndrome Society website at www.ndss.org

Case Study #3: Background

Jackie is a 13 year old student diagnosed with Down Syndrome and Hirschsprung Disease (intestinal condition). She participates in a modified, part-time learning support classroom, and is mainstreamed with the rest of a public middle school population for music, art, physical education, tech. ed. and family consumer sciences, with the help of an instructional aide. She receives multiple services each week including occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech and language therapy. She is often pulled out of these special areas to receive these services on a weekly basis.

While occupational therapy helps her develop her fine motor skills (i.e. writing with a pencil, sorting paper), the physical therapy is helping her develop coordination in larger groups of muscles (i.e. walking on uneven terrain or up stairs). She has a hearing aid and is constantly undergoing re-evaluation in regard to her significant hearing loss. Jackie's primary form of communication is through speech. As she continues to receive speech and language therapy, her communication skills improve.

Jackie expresses much enthusiasm for music class, and has a very positive attitude. According to her instructional aide and the special education team, the primary goal for Jackie to be placed in a music classroom with other regular education students is for socialization purposes. This makes sense in light of the fact that she spends more than half of each school day with just a handful of other special education students and one on one therapy specialists.

The ultimate goal for Jackie, in the school's eyes, is to prepare her to be a productive member of the world outside the school and so, being with regular students is a big part of her day. Jackie does her best to participate in all music activities; even when she is physically unable to perform them (i.e. writing on the staff). While she is seriously challenged by writing assignments (i.e. keeping a music journal), she experiences better success at hands-on activities, such as playing several easy melodies on a piano keyboard with one or two fingers. She will work very hard at reading four to five pitches from the treble staff, find them on a piano keyboard and, if she knows the melody aurally, will play as well as her classmates around her. She is achieving the goal of socialization by working in pairs with, and performing, for other students and is doing all she can to achieve her music goals.

Strategies

When teaching Jackie, there are a few things that stick out. She wants to learn. She has a good attitude. She is delayed in her ability to think. She can do some things and not others. She has many handicaps, but is determined to overcome.

- It is important to not discount Jackie's abilities entirely because she has Down Syndrome. It's also important to set goals that are reasonable. Include Jackie in your classroom activities as much as she is able to contribute and don't hold it against her academically or personally if she isn't able to do some things (i.e. write or spell properly)
 - Seat Jackie away from windows, doors and other non-focused students to minimize distractions in the environment.
 - Regardless of the unit (reading, writing, or making music) Jackie needs to work in a smaller group as much as possible, and will make greater advances when given a student buddy. The best buddies are advanced regular education students who understand and are sympathetic to the condition of the special needs student. Because this is a time consuming task, a few buddies may need to rotate.
 - Modeling what needs to be done is important. For Jackie, it cannot be assumed that verbal or written communication is being understood.
 - Break down tasks into smaller sequenced steps.
 - Review often. Don't assume that material learned yesterday will be remembered today.
 - For clarity, ask Jackie to repeat or rephrase instructions. Ask for specific step-by-step questions to make sure the student has understood the instructions given.
 - Allow Jackie adequate response time.
 - Provide consistent positive reinforcement immediately after Jackie produces a correct response.
 - If Jackie makes a mistake, do not say "that's wrong." Ask her to try again, or provide the correct response and require her to repeat the correct response immediately. Immediate corrective feedback is more effective than delayed.
 - Give clear signals about the end of one activity and the beginning of the next. Use picture cues or audio cues with young children. For example, use picture symbols representing activities or sing a certain song before a specific activity.
- Present only a few stimuli or objects at a time. For example, if you are using worksheets, create worksheets that do not have too many pictures or sentences with complicated wording. Highlight or print key words in bold.
 - Use concrete objects/manipulatives along with verbal explanations. Jackie achieves more success at hands-on learning than written and even verbal. Playing the piano keyboard is more useful as a learning method than showing her a picture of a piano keyboard. Performing rhythms, whether by clapping, patting, moving, or drumming will be more effective as a learning method than pointing to eighth notes on a board, for example, and stating that they receive a ½ beat in common time.
 - Be flexible with attaining educational goals. Jackie has adapted to using a computer and mouse to do much academic work that would normally require writing. Always be on the lookout for technology, methods, and other creative ways to connect with special needs students.

I'd like to hear your story. Maybe you can think of a special needs child that you are experiencing success with, but don't want to have to do all of the work finding facts regarding the student's condition or all of the best practices. Just send me some basic facts and some of the strategies you've used that have worked, and I can assist with much of the other stuff. If you have a case study that you would like to share, please contact me at jcooper@colonialsd.org.

As the PMEA Special Learners Chair, I'm very much interested in increasing the awareness and dialogue regarding special needs students in our music classrooms. If you are a Facebook user, you can be part of our PMEA Special Learners Forum. After logging in to your existing Facebook account, simply go to our www.pmea.net site and, in the left column, click the Special Learners link. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.



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References:

The National Down Syndrome Society <http://www.ndss.org/>

Dr. Alice Hammel-Music and Students With Special Needs http://www.people.vcu.edu/~bhammel/special/types/mental_retardation.htm