

Teaching Special Learners' Workshop: *Teaching Students With Special Needs:*

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. So, for this purpose, I've included the following two case studies. The true identities of these students is confidential, but the conditions, and adaptive strategies suggested recorded were used with positive results.

Case Study #1:

Background

John is a 7th grade, Asian male, with Autism. In addition, he has a much lower than average IQ giving him mild mental retardation. Due to Autism, John has substantial impairment in communication, writing, some physical movement, and in general mental processing of information. Due to the lower IQ, he is unable to overcome some of these deficits easily. His one strength is his sociability, and pleasant disposition. Despite all of his weaknesses academically, and communicatively, he still makes a tremendous effort to greet his teachers, fellow students, and seeks attention (sometimes at inappropriate times) from all (i.e. hand gestures, big smiles, verbal greeting when you least expect them).

Autism is a neurological disorder in which the brain functions much differently than "normal" brains. It has been called the "ultimate learning disability" because of its impact on a person's ability to communicate, to relate with others, and to reason. To learn more of the many specifics regarding Autism, see Shawn Funk's excellent article in his Elementary column of the 2010 Summer Edition of PMEA News describing Autism Spectrum Disorder and it's many facets. I've also included some resources at the end of this article with much information.

Strategies

1. Seating and grouping. John's mainstreamed/regular ed. co-students often did not understand John's unique behavior patterns, so it was important to be proactive and arrange a seating chart well in advance of student entry into the room. Students were placed around John who were non-disabled, preferably higher achieving students, and he was placed closer to the front of the room; right in front of the large IPM Board/SmartBoard.
2. Consistency and predictable flow. John's class had predictable warm-up activity and a closing activity. Classroom activities varied for each student in the class depending on the unit, but John did much better when he had a predictable/well defined lesson in as simple of terms as possible.
3. Use many visual aids. One reason for #1 is that John is then directly in front of a IPM Board/SmartBoard with graphics to enrich the lesson.

4. Increase opportunities for one on one interaction:
 - A. John was good at reading rhythm patterns. He could function as well as the rest of the class when reading rhythm flashcards (big and visual) from the front of the room (teacher-directed), and would do fairly well when reading them off of a worksheet. He would show marked improvement when placed in smaller groupings with non-impaired students who showed an interest in being helpful. In a class of 24 students, 6 groups of 4 were created. Students practiced assigned rhythm patterns together in groups and then performed for the class. Much of the individual patterns were practiced and performed with drum sticks and a practice pad, while on occasion, students would read or create a 4-part rhythm ensemble using various percussion. The teacher would circulate between groups and give students individual attention while John also would interact with the other students in his group.
 - B. Music lab set ups are often great for creating more one on one opportunities. They also help facilitate differentiated instruction. John would name pitches from the treble and bass staves, but would take much longer to locate them on his instrument. Substantial improvements were made when he was paired up with a “likeable” non-impaired student who was willing to help. All of his classmates were divided up into pairs at “keyboard stations” and worked on reading/playing short melodies, or themes from larger works; starting simple and gradually getting more difficult. John would do his best to perform to his ability independent from the progress of the rest of the class. This kind of class set-up also allowed the teacher to give John one on one attention as a “facilitator” rotating from student to student rather than teaching the whole class as one large group.
5. Sing a song. Sometimes students on the autism spectrum will sing what they won’t speak. John responded well to a variety of vocal music games/activities (i.e. echo singing, singing a melody and having a student fill in the missing lyric). Being a little higher on the spectrum, John was able to use words given to him by the teacher and improvise a melody when given a blues pattern/style on the piano as accompaniment.

Case Study #2

Background

Peter is an 8th grader diagnosed with ADHD. According to Peter’s IEP, he wants to do well in school and can be hard on himself if he doesn’t do as well as he would like. If peers disagree with him, he becomes argumentative. He has a difficult time keeping organized and focused and often rushed through assignments in order to finish the task. Despite these weaknesses, Peter has an excellent vocabulary, reads well, and when he takes his time, is a strong writer.

When Peter came to chorus for the first time, it was apparent that he had difficulty getting along with others, and often became the focus of any disturbance in the male section of the choir. He would often report that another student “started it” by making a comment about him. It would turn out, typically, that Peter had interrupted or intruded on a conversation other students were having, or he would accuse another student of thinking something about him based on that other student’s facial gesture/expression. In general music class, Peter demonstrated the same behaviors, often making small nuisances to him into large distractions for the while class.

Students diagnosed with ADHD are classified according to three areas: Inattention, Hyperactivity, and Impulsivity. All ADHD students are different and should not be stereotyped. Some will demonstrate inattention (i.e. easily distracted, does not seem to listen, difficulty organizing), but not demonstrate the hyperactivity (i.e. fidgeting, leaving seat often, acting as if “driven by a motor”). Likewise, some will be more impulsive (i.e. blurting our answers, interrupting others) without as much inattention. Most ADHD-diagnosed students are a combination of these three areas at varying levels and must meet the criteria specified in the American Psychological Association (APA) DSM-IV. In this case, and though it would not be clearly stated in the IEP, Peter was usually showing impulsive symptoms to a large extent, hyperactivity to a small extent, and very little inattention.

Strategies

Peter’s 8th Grade general music class had three units of study: guitar lab, music theatre, and music history. All three units encompassed individual study, small group projects, and music performance. It was found that Peter did well under the following conditions:

1. “Believe” in ADHD. As a teacher of ADHD students, it is important to remember that ADHD is a condition where a child is experiencing input of information (sensory) and responding to that information in what seem like uncontrollable ways at times. To teach ADHD students effectively, you need to believe that ADHD is a real disorder and not another label to slap on to hyperactive kids.
2. Structure and Placement. Peter’s teacher, knowing his difficulties from previous grade levels, was proactive and created a seating chart that would place Peter closer to the front of the room where there are less distractions and around students that would be less responsive to Peter’s comments. The class rules and expectations were printed and posted on the front wall of the room where they would be seen daily during warm-up activities, and these were well-defined on the first day of instruction. Student behavior had consequences that were fair (all students must abide by the same rules and received the same consequences) and consistent.
3. Choose activities that invite student participation. Many of Peter’s classroom activities involved either doing/performing/creating individually or with others.
4. Pairing/Cooperative Learning. There were students that would, unintentionally, escalate Peter’s distractibility and argumentiveness. Finding the right grouping was essential. I’m

not sure if there is a formula for finding the right grouping for an ADHD student, but once Peter was in a workable group, the other students were able to help him stay organized and on task.

5. Coach the student in social skills. Peter was aware of his ADHD, but not as aware of the impact it had on him socially. Fortunately, he liked music class, and his music teacher, and so, there was opportunity for the teacher to have regular conversation with Peter, in and out of class time, about how he interacts with others.
6. Put emphasis on quality rather than quantity. Since one of Peter's weaknesses was rushing through assignments, it was important to remind Peter that the grade for his assignments was not dependent on how much he thought he accomplished (ex. "I played through 7 melodies today"), rather the quality of his work.
7. Create smaller tasks from a larger assignment. Peter was to create a Powerpoint presentation about Ludwig Van Beethoven. The assignment was broken down into several smaller tasks: researching basic facts about the composer via library tools and web, listening to works by Beethoven, practicing themes on piano or guitar from Beethoven's larger works (ex. 9th Symphony), and presenting to the class.

From *Is your teacher ADD-Friendly ☺ or ADD-Toxic ☹??* Dr. Kathleen Nadeau, author of Help4ADD@ High School:

An "ADD-friendly teacher" is:

A teacher who is excited about a subject, and works in creative ways to get you excited too

A teacher who is flexible, and tries to work with you instead of rigidly sticking to "the rules"

A teacher who encourages rather than lectures when you're having difficulties

A teacher who understands that ADD can cause forgetfulness, even when you're trying really hard to remember.

A teacher who is organized and clear about what is required in the course

A teacher who is fun and interesting, and seems to enjoy the class

An "ADD-toxic teacher" is:

A teacher who doesn't "believe in" ADD, and refuses to accommodate you

A teacher who shows little interest in his/her students

A teacher who is rigid and inflexible

A teacher who is boring or non-creative

A teacher who is disorganized

A teacher who can't be bothered to help you individually

A teacher who motivates through shame and criticism rather than praise and encouragement.

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:

Is your teacher ADD-Friendly☺ or ADD-Toxic ☹?? by Dr. Kathleen Nadeau, author of Help4ADD@ High School. <http://www.deficitdeatencion.org/isyour.htm> 2004.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Why Can't They Just Sit Still and Listen?! by Dr. Alice Hammel. <http://www.people.vcu.edu/~bhammel/special/types/adhd/index.htm>. 2008.

Including Autism Spectrum Students in Music Class: Is More Really Merrier? by Shawn Funk. PMEA News, p. 30-33. Summer Edition, 2010.