

Assessment of Students with Special Needs in Your Music Classroom

The Problem

In a recent poll by www.edutopia.org (Ring, 2011) readers were asked to vote and blog, on the following question: Should special needs students take high school assessment exams? In a sample of 472 people, 22% said Yes, 38% replied with a Maybe, and 40% replied with a No. The blogs, and reasons listed for voting, were all over the board. Some in the Yes category thought that special-needs students have to perform equally as well as non special-needs students in order to gain a high school diploma; while others in the Yes category think that while they should be tested, the test should be different than that given to the other standardized examinees. Many of the people voting in the No category would probably agree with the former group, but would also add that the separate test should be as easy as possible and not be the key factor in a special needs student's grade.

The above question, though admittedly is in relation to special needs students taking high school assessments that would lead them to a college or job situation after high school, when generalized, is an essential question for every music educator. Should we, as music teachers be testing special needs students? If so, should they be tested using the exact same assessment materials?

In discussing this issue with colleagues on many occasions, it appears that music teachers are also all over the board in regard to how they treat their special needs students and how they determine individual and final grades for them. In fact, it's many times worse for a specialist teacher in a K-12 school, because our classes are mainstreamed or inclusionary. Unlike our core subject teacher comrades, we deal with special ed., regular ed. and gifted ed. students all in one class period. Also, the variety of students who are labeled as special needs, defined as those students requiring an IEP or Plan 504, runs the gamut (i.e. Autism, Down Syndrome, ADHD, physical disabilities, speech/hearing/communication, etc...).

Assessment As A Tool

Oosterhof (2001) defines educational measurement as "the process of determining a quantitative or qualitative attribute of an individual or group of individuals." Hammel and Hourigan (2011) state that "assessment is the tool used to measure the learnable

characteristics of (special-needs) students within the classroom." Like all of the students we teach on a daily basis, and to answer the above two questions, we can use formative and summative assessments to regularly gather information about our student's learning, the effectiveness of our teaching methods and technique, and to see what changes we would want to make in the future to help all of our students develop what skills they have as musicians.

Formative assessment is typically evaluation that takes place while a learner is in the process of learning the stated objective(s). For example, a general music teacher has a group of students echo singing and records (using a rubric chart, or quick checklist) how each student is matching pitch and the accuracy of their rhythm.

Another example, would be the band director who is leading his/her students through an exercise with *Smart-Music*, or out of a lesson book, and records the accuracy of each student's embouchure or fingering of an F#. In fact, rehearsal directors are constantly in the process of formative assessment as they rehearse their ensemble. Many rehearsal directors, who desire to remember where their group has been, or what needs to be worked on next, will write down or chart their group's progress (maybe even individual player's objectives for the next rehearsal).

For any classroom, and in regard to special need students, a teacher can only set appropriate goals for each student, after finding out what each student can already do, or by attempting to measure student ability through some sort of formative assessment.

Summative Assessment is the exam/test at the end of a unit. This being what people more traditionally think of as assessment has always been a valuable tool for not only gathering data about what your students have learned, but can also tell you if you've been an effective teacher. Not trying to judge here, but if 28 out of 30 students in your class are failing a final playing exam or a final written general music test, you may want to consider whether you are using an appropriate teaching method/technique for that group of students. On the other hand, if 30 out of 30 students are aceing the test, your objectives may be too easy. Both formative and summative assessment should be used together to gather student information (ability and achievement), monitor student progress, and measure whether initial goals (objectives) were achieved.

What Were You Thinking In The First Place (Goals)?

It is important to recognize that equal is not necessarily fair when we are talking about student learning and special needs students. The reason our schools have resource rooms, special education programs and special education teachers is for this very reason. Our situation as music teachers is kind of ridiculous in a way. Educational leaders easily recognize the need to pull special needs students out of regular science, math and reading classes, but the music, art, gym and tech. ed. teachers are expected to teach everyone, at all levels (with the exception of grade level) at the same time. If you've been teaching for at least a few years, you've probably heard this line—"Johnny (or insert name of choice) is only here for socialization purposes." Yes, the academic goals of many of our educational leaders and special education staff is for many of these kids to just socially interact with other students while you're trying to conduct an academic class. Fortunately for them, you're an excellent music teacher who is working hard to differentiate goals for each student and your classroom activities.

Equal is not always fair and even with a group of regular education students there can be a wide variation on ability level. Are you teaching each of your students to develop them to the best of their individual abilities or are you teaching to develop only a certain segment of your ensemble/class and telling the others, through your actions, that if they don't catch up, they won't pass? In order to set realistic goals/objectives for everyone (yourself included), it is important to differentiate your goals in addition to your activities/methods.

Non-differentiated Objective Example:

Objective: Students will identify the treble clef line and space pitches of the grand staff by playing a simple five pitch melody on a keyboard instrument.

Procedures: You distribute a grand staff paper slip to each student. Using a Powerpoint slide on a big projector screen, you ask each student to recite FACE and Every Good Boy Does Fine for the treble clef and by reading it from the slide. Then you ask each student to write down the mnemonic sayings on the back of the slip. Students are then asked to report to a station on a keyboard lab and asked to find a few of the pitches on the keyboard and play an assigned melody.

Assessment: Teacher circulates and grades (formative)

Non-differentiated Objective Classroom Outcome: In a class where all of the students are of equal ability level: can read/write at a fourth or fifth grade level and have no physical impairments, this lesson with one objective for all may not do so badly. Chances are though, in a typical general music classroom, that not all of the students can read and write at a fourth or fifth grade level and have no impairments or other

learning disabilities. Many of the gifted students will be bored, you'll have some varying results with the regular ed. students, the ADHD students will be ready to run over to the keyboard station, but maybe didn't finish gathering all of the information that they needed, the Autism Spectrum student may still be staring at the projector screen until the end of class, the two Down Syndrome students will be trying their hardest to write what they can, but making little progress depending on their level of functionality, and the student with socio-emotional issues will eventually either quit or vent as they reach a road block.

It is evident that another approach to goal setting and activities may be necessary to ensure that each student is being taught at a level, or with a method that is appropriate. We may need to set different objectives for each student depending on their previous formative assessments.

Differentiated Objectives Example:

Group A Objective: Student's will identify the treble clef line and space pitches of the grand staff by playing a simple five pitch melody on a keyboard instrument.

Group B Objective: Student's will identify the treble clef line and space pitches of the grand staff by flashcard review and by playing a simple five pitch melody on a keyboard instrument.

Group C Objective: Student's will identify the treble clef line and space pitches of the grand staff through flashcard review and computer software exercises.

Note: If you are used to teaching in a differentiated fashion, then you'll probably already have your students split into four or five groups. Groups one through three could be regular and gifted students mixed, and can easily follow Objective A, while the fourth and fifth groups ideally would be a mix of special needs students and peer tutors (students that easily get along with everyone and do their work well), and depending on ability, may be given Objective B or C. It's important to not simply split the class into two groups (A and B), due to the stigma/effect that action may have on students with disabilities or mental handicaps. Also, for groups one through three, differentiate your materials and have less challenging and more challenging melodies to play.

Procedures: Have students sit in groups. Distribute grand staff slips with pitches labeled and mnemonic sayings already listed on back. Using PowerPoint slide and projector, review the grand staff slip and demonstrate flashcard activity. Have students work in groups; reviewing pitch names with flashcards and using the grand staff slip as a reference. Teacher circulates and monitors each group. As teacher identifies

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students who can name the pitches of the grand staff from memory and in a timely manner, they are sent to the keyboards to practice for completion of Objective A and B (simply a time difference as the students in Obj. A will simply not need to review as much and will spend most of their time on an instrument). Students who are not able to cite pitches from memory will continue to review with their partners. After a period of 15-20 minutes though, it will be important to change the activity. Students can continue reviewing with different partners or with computer software or with different materials for completion of Objective C.

Note: Identifying a pitch, for the lowest functioning students in your class, may be by hearing a pitch rather than naming it. For this activity, computer software is ideal.

Group A Assessment: Teacher circulates and grades the melodies (formative). Teacher hands out a written test at the end of the unit identifying pitch names and students complete a formal playing exam (summative).

Group B Assessment: Teacher circulates and grades the melodies (formative). Teacher hands out a written test at the end of the unit identifying pitch names (summative)

Group C Assessment: Teacher circulates to check progress (formative) and uses data from computer software (formative and summative).

Group A and B will eventually participate in a summative assessment at the end of the unit.

While the above differentiated plan would need some tweaking depending on the cosmetics of any particular class of students, it would definitely provide much more opportunity for success for each individual student, and that's just one day. Use formative assessments to see if students need to be shifted into other groups or if groups need to be changed. While there are three objectives, there is also space for three assessments though albeit, a lot of similarity between the three. No matter how clearly defined, differentiated and planned out a lesson will be, there is always need to modify and adjust activities to fit real time needs of students.

There has been a big revival in cooperative learning among public school educational leaders over the last decade. This makes setting separate goals, objectives and learning outcomes a desirable trait for teachers. While more and more teachers are writing multiple objectives and assessments into their formal lesson plans, even just having a mental picture of differing objectives and ways to assess special needs students will help them. In order to assess special needs students, I recommend the following steps:

1. Read the individual IEP's. This takes time, but it is the law and will help you know your students much better.
2. Talk to resource room/special education teachers and learning aides about students in your classroom with IEP's and proactively assign some tentative classroom groupings.
3. Differentiate your goals and objectives with your students. Thinking of your classroom as having stations, labs and activity centers will be more helpful to students with special needs.
4. Differentiate the ways you assess. You can't have a one size fits all classroom.

Special needs students are diverse in their type of disabilities, their needed accommodations and in addition to the variety of regular student issues (i.e. family background, musical experience). It is imperative that education professionals recognize this point, and do everything we can to help students with special needs. To a parent who has a child with special needs, you'll become a shining star in the life of their child when you take time to care.

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, consider joining 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. You can also contact me at jcooper@colonialsd.org with any questions or suggestions for future articles. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.



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References

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