

Teaching Special Learners: Ideas from Veteran Teachers in the Music Classroom

“Don’t be scared!” So advises Charlie Ring, who’s successfully taught special learners in his music classes at Poplar Tree Elementary School in Chantilly, Virginia, for thirteen years. Ring’s words of wisdom identify one obstacle teachers face in working with special learners: fear. But there are other obstacles. Music educators often find themselves lacking preparation to teach special learners. Many had little formal training in college, and some experience a scattershot approach in how special learners are placed in music programs in their school districts. Yet, with creativity, patience, careful planning, and ideas from colleagues, many music educators work successfully with and love teaching special learners. “These kids can do music. You can’t just write them off because they’re different,” says Victoria Hagedorn, music teacher at Walsingham Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida. “You’ve got to have a lot of patience and a sense of humor.”

Preservice Training Many music educators say they received little or no training in teaching music to students with special needs. “Most of what I learned about special ed I picked up in workshops,” says Susan Mann, choral director at Blackfoot High School in Blackfoot, Idaho. However, preservice curriculums are beginning to reflect the increasing number of special learners included in music classrooms. (See Alice M. Hammel, “Preparation for Teaching Special Learners: Twenty Years of Practice,” *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, Fall 2001.) Prospective music teachers need to learn not just about the various types of disabilities students may have, but also how to teach music to those students, says Hagedorn.

Most experienced teachers agree that, in addition to formal training, student teachers need to observe and have practical experience teaching special learners. “I feel bad for preservice teachers. I think they need to develop a class specific to music and special learners. Also, students should go out into the local schools and observe teachers teaching special learners,” said Hagedorn.

Mainstreaming and Inclusion While music teachers with special learners often have a separate class for students who are moderately or severely disabled, some special learners are included in regular music classes. Inclusion and mainstreaming have become commonplace since the 1975 law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required public schools to provide all students with a “free and appropriate education” in the “least restrictive environment.” IDEA also required every student with a disability to have an Individual Education Program, or IEP, a plan to guide placement decisions and instruction. A student’s IEP can provide insight and guidance to music teachers. “In schools using inclusion, a music teacher has as much right to information about an included student as anyone else,” said Elaine Bernstorf, professor of music education and associate dean of fine arts at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. “If a student is included in music, the music teacher needs the same information and support as the regular teacher.”

Correct classroom placement can make the difference between a successful music experience for the special learner and a miserable situation for all. It’s no surprise to veteran teachers to hear that special learners have been placed in music classes more out of convenience to the overall schedule rather than what was appropriate for the child.

“One of the biggest problems I’ve had to fight at my school district is scheduling music with the kids that have resource learning,” said Ruth Rice, choral director at Van Antwerp Middle School in Niskayuna, New York. In Rice’s school, resource children were often not placed in music until the seventh grade. It was discouraging for a child to enter a class with students who had already had an additional year of music. “It is much better to start the resource children with all the other students,” said Rice. “I know with their extra resource time it is hard to schedule, but now that administrators, guidance people, and teachers realize that music is more than just recreational singing, special learners are more and more being placed in music as sixth graders,” said Rice. “This type of change takes communicating about your program and sharing it with the other folks in school.”

Mann says “I’m amazed that they are still trying to include kids in regular choir where

they are not successful.” Ring echoes the thoughts of many music teachers, “You’re not a glorified babysitter; you are an educator just as much as a classroom teacher. In fact, even more because you work with all the kids, all the age levels.”

Strategies Planning, planning, and more planning. Teaching special learners is not something to be dealt with hit-or-miss. It takes careful thought, study, and above all, planning. “When we have problems with special learners, it is often because we didn’t do the planning we should have and are skipping steps we should be doing,” said Bernstorf. “Teachers have to be observant about students. You have to be monitoring students and not learning the lesson as you teach it.”

The key is to look at student behaviors, says Bernstorf. “The only thing you can respond to in class is their observable behaviors. If you are watching their behavior, you will see a small behavior and can prevent it from escalating. If they are starting to delay in their responses, you know they are getting lost, and you can deal with it before it becomes a tantrum,” she said.

Teachers also have to decide what they expect from their students. “Teachers often go for the end product and rush through the process. For the kids, the process is the product, and they may never have the perfect product,” said Bernstorf.

Think outside the box. Teaching special learners requires thinking outside the box, says Ring. “Let your creativity come through. Think of different ways to use things,” he adds. Karen Goodrich, who teaches choral music at Robert Stuart Junior High in Twin Falls, Idaho, says she often discovers successful strategies by chance. “You try something, and sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t.”

Hagedorn has the same idea. “A lot is baptism by fire.”

Slow down pacing. Pacing is the number-one problem when teaching special learners, according to Bernstorf. “Pacing is usually too fast, sometimes even for regular kids. We think we’re going to bore them, but instead we just skim over the material. Kids often don’t want to interrupt the pacing to ask questions. As teachers, we’re not paying attention to when kids ‘get it,’” said Bernstorf.

Structure, structure, and more structure. Special learners, more than most students, need structured learning—structure both in how things are taught and how the class is managed. Bernstorf says the best way to teach is to use scaffolding. “Break things down into smaller pieces,” she said.

Hagedorn offers this advice: “You just have to go slower, use more repetition, give them more opportunities to play, accept other responses than singing a response. I use lots of concrete examples, slow down, teach by rote, don’t use text, and use nongraded materials.”

Rice shares this thought, “One special ed teacher told me that when you are totally sick of whatever is going on, they are just getting the concept or activity.”

Structure includes how the music classroom is set up. Ring puts his students’ chairs in a circle or semicircle so the children have their own physical space. He also likes to start off with a greeting song and end with a goodbye song—personalizing the songs with the students’ names. With the greeting song, Ring holds a mirror in front of the students to reinforce their self-awareness.

Some teachers find that once established, the routine for students in a separate special needs class is very difficult to change. “I can’t start a class unless I’ve done ‘Hello, Everybody’ on the piano, and I can’t end a class unless I do ‘Goodbye, Everybody,’” said Rice. “I’ve tried it. I’ll say, ‘Time to go,’ but they won’t go until we sing the song.”

Rice has another idea about how to start, whether a class has special learners or not. “Every day, when I call roll, I ask them a question like, ‘What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?’ or ‘Who do you think will win this baseball season?’ There’s not a right or wrong answer,” Rice says. Those questions then work well for crowd control. “For example, if you said that chocolate was your favorite ice cream, you get to go to the keyboards first today. One of the reasons I do that is they can’t all run up at the same time.” Sometimes to be in the first group at the keyboards, students show completed academic work for music class, like note names and matching solfège. “This is extremely hard for a special learner. He would be the last to go to the keyboard.

However, on another day, when I say the ice cream, he has a chance to go to the keyboard first,” Rice said. “It is too frustrating for him if every time the selection is because of an academic activity.”

Use all the senses. Using all the senses is particularly important in working with special learners. “We don’t do enough movement with special learners,” said Bernstorf. “With older kids you might want to call it conducting.”

“I use a lot of tactile things with them: instruments, a lot of visuals, streamers, small parachutes—a lot of sensory stuff,” says Ring. Lillian Atkinson, who teaches music with Ring at Poplar Tree Elementary School in Virginia, shared this idea that works if she has a special learner who can keep steady beat and is wearing light-up tennis shoes. “I’ll turn off the lights and put on music, and as the child moves the shoe, you can see the lights race up and down to the steady beat. The kids love it,” she said.

Atkinson also uses balloons. She says that children who won’t reach for anything else will often reach for a balloon. She adds, “You can tie bells onto their wrists or use Velcro. Or put them [bells] on their feet if they’re tactile defensive and you can’t put anything in their hands. You can start with their feet where they can’t reach.” She likes to use a trampoline, too. If they can’t jump, pick them up by the waist, with help from an aide if needed, Atkinson said. Or take one foot and move it up and down. Then they get the idea of bounce when you get the beat going. Every June, Atkinson uses the song “Jump into June” (from *Everyday Songs*, see Resources). After teaching that song, some kids who couldn’t jump at all are able to jump, she said.

As Rice puts it, “For some kids, putting it in their body is the only way they’re going to get it.”

Stations. Using stations is another way to organize class time. Of her special learners music class, Goodrich says, “Sometimes I’ll set up several different stations in the room. Several can do Music Ace, several are on the keyboards with headsets, and the remaining kids quietly listen to music they have chosen—on headsets.”

Microphones. Several teachers have found that special learners have success using microphones. “They love to use the microphone,” said Goodrich. “I have one real

one, but I also have six to eight crocheted ones. They have a grey ball at the top, a black handle, and a long cord just like a real one. But of course, they don't make any sound." (Find out where to get crocheted microphones in the Resources above).

Visuals. Visuals are another good way to help both special learners and regular students. Give students pictures of instruments to color while they listen to that instrument or highlight sections of text and music that they need to pay particular attention to. Mann says that if her students can't color by themselves, they can tell a helper what color to use to color it for them. Songs with illustrated books that go with them are another way to provide visual as well as aural stimulation, said Goodrich. Because many special learners are nonverbal, Atkinson asked the special ed teacher to make pictures of the words for some of the songs she would be using. With Velcro on the back of the pictures, the students find the picture and stick it on the board as they're singing the song.

Modeling. Model procedures as well as performance techniques, says Bernstorf. "You can't just tell students how to sit or stand. You need to show them, not just tell," she added. Atkinson has found that when modeling, it's best to stand directly in front of the child.

Homework. With middle school special learners, Rice gives about four major homework assignments in twenty weeks. "A lot of my homework is odd, like making a staccato and legato pizza," said Rice. "I say, 'You all know the definitions of staccato and legato, and you've played them on the piano. Now think about pizza.' Sometimes they'll make a 3-D pizza and the staccato will be pepperoni or peppers (not a real pizza, of course). Or the staccato will be a small piece and the legato will be a long piece. Some of the kids just love this sort of thing, and they'll include a staccato pizza as part of an entire menu. They also need to explain their pizzas, comparing their work to the musical terms to show they know the differences." Rice will often give a concept grade and an effort grade to show appreciation for extra effort.

Finding new ideas. Teachers find ideas for working with special learners in many places. Many use elementary level techniques and materials. Bernstorf says that while not much is adapted specifically for music education, speech pathology and music

therapy materials can be a source of materials. She also recommends the new material being published on sensory integration (see Resources on pp. 56-57 for titles). For information on specific disabilities, try the Web site for that disability (e.g., the National Autism Association). And be sure to talk to the special education teachers at your school as well as other professionals such as speech pathologists, social workers, counselors, and music therapists.

Wheels. And one last idea from Ring, “It helps to have a rolling chair, because you can get to kids really fast. When I first started out, the knees on my pants were wearing out.”

Classroom Support

When working with special learners, experienced teachers agree that extra assistance in the classroom is not a luxury, it’s a necessity. “Music teachers need people help, material help, and administrative help in dealing with special learners,” says Hagedorn. If aides accompany students to their other classes, they should accompany special learners to music also, she says.

Some special education teachers will come with their students to music class. At the beginning of the year, it’s especially important for the special ed teachers to come into the music class to train the music teacher to train aides and other people to work with special learners, said Atkinson.

Mann asks three to five of her top kids who are interested in music as a career to help her with her special learners class. They teach the class something every day and are assigned to help three or four students. “When some of the kids with special needs have been in my class for three or four years, they want to be helpers too. They don’t teach, but help the younger students,” adds Mann.

The Rewards

All of the teachers interviewed said that though they were nervous about working with special learners at first, they found teaching them to be one of the most rewarding things they had ever done. “The most satisfying thing about teaching

special learners is that they love music. They love all kinds of music. Whether they are singing, playing, dancing, or listening, they love being involved in the world of music. They enjoy being active participants and having the music become part of their lives,” says Mann.

They are also very appreciative. “I see such a freedom with them,” Ring says. “They just feel free to express themselves without filter. I find that really neat to see. And they’re so appreciative.”

“They love music so much and you make their day. They have a wonderful sense of humor. They love to be able to do the things the other kids do, that they usually can’t,” said Hagedorn. Atkinson perhaps sums up all of these dedicated teachers’ feelings about working with special learners: “‘Whom you serve, you love.’ You know and love these children after you’ve worked with them. The more you know them, the more you work with them, the more you love them, and the more you want to help them.”

By Elizabeth Pontiff, associate editor, Teaching Music.

Sharing Stories

We asked the teachers we interviewed to share a story about working with special learners.

“I have never been at a school where special learners are so accepted. We do a Jam Day, which is like a talent show. Students have to audition. Every year I have had a special needs child who’s done a performance. Sometimes I invite a special needs child, or the parents or aides encourage them to show me an act. When a special needs child is placed in the show, it has to be pretty good. (I would never place anyone in it who would be laughed at—unless it was supposed to be a comedy act.) One child played the spoons and I accompanied him on the piano. Another loved to dance and impersonated Elvis to the song “Blue Suede Shoes”—his classroom teacher gave him an Elvis outfit, an inflatable guitar, and somehow she got him blue shoes. This [past] year one of the boys did “Me and My Shadow” with his aide, both dressed as clowns.” —Ruth Rice, Van Antwerp Middle School, Niskayuna, New York

“The one I think of is Sam. When he came to the school he could not mirror. When you said pick up the pen, he couldn’t pick up the pen. He was in our sixth grade musical, Candyland. Sam was a lollipop and had a big lollipop head on. He made his entrance through the front of the curtain and as he did, the lollipop turned around on his head, so it was totally backwards. When he got on stage, the audience thought it was on purpose and it was not. He knew it was backwards and it didn’t throw him into a tantrum. He wanted to perform his one word: “halt.” Because he didn’t talk a whole lot, that’s all he had to say. He didn’t throw a tantrum, even though he knew the headpiece wasn’t right, but he stood there and did his part. Then he went down and marched off the stage; it was a milestone. The autism teacher said she could not believe it. He stood there and wanted to do that part so much it didn’t matter if things had turned wrong. That was his focus. It was wonderful.” —Lillian Atkinson, Poplar Tree Elementary School, Chantilly, Virginia

“Last year, while I was teaching a class of regular seventh graders, one of my severe special learners passed by the choir room door in his wheelchair with an aide. I invited him to come in, and when I began talking to him, he became very animated. He cannot talk, but he is able to do some vocalization. After he left the choir room, I talked to the class. I asked them when was the last time they had said “Hello” to one of these “special” kids, when they had ever eaten lunch with them, if they had held the door for them, or when they had even looked at them. After our class discussion, one of the aides told me that it was amazing how many of the regular kids had come up to the special learners and talked to them and also talked to the aides.” —Karen Goodrich, Robert Stuart Junior High, Twin Falls, Idaho

“I was accompanying kids at a solo band festival. I saw a boy who had autism and had been in my class in the fifth grade. He was now in the eighth grade and playing clarinet. He said to me, ‘You know, isn’t it interesting; I didn’t like music in elementary school. But once I found the clarinet, I found my life. I want to be a professional player.’ I asked if I could come in and hear him play and he said I could. He was so musical. The judge only had one thing to say: that he might need a new reed because his wasn’t advanced enough for him. For him to stand up there and play, and to have practiced, and not get angry and accept criticism was just

wonderful. It brought tears to my eyes. Three years after he had left my class, he was still with music. I found that very rewarding.” —Victoria Hagedorn, Walsingham Elementary School, Pinellas County, Florida

Resources

MENC

- Atterbury, Betty W. “Success Strategies for Learning Disabled Students.” *Music Educators Journal* 69 (April 1983): 29-31.
- Butler, Maureen. “How Students with Hearing Impairments Can Learn and Flourish in Your Music Classroom.” *Teaching Music* 12 (August 2004): 30-34.
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- Hammel, Alice M. “Inclusion Strategies that Work.” *Music Educators Journal* 90 (May 2004): 33-37.
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- Jahns, Elke. “Introducing Music to the Hearing Impaired.” *Teaching Music* 8 (June 2001): 36-40.
- Patterson, Allyson. “Music Teachers and Music Therapists: Helping Children Together.” *Music Educators Journal* 89 (March 2003): 35-38.
- Sachse, Carol. “Teaching Music to Children with Special Needs.” *General Music Today* 7 (Spring 1994): 20-22.
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- Thompson, Keith P. “Challenges of Inclusion for the General Music Teacher.”

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VanWeelden, Kimberly. "Choral Mainstreaming: Tips for Success." Music Educators Journal 88 (November 2001): 55-60.

Weintraub, David. "Adapting Music Therapy Techniques to Aid in Relaxation and Treatment of Children with Special Needs." Update 11 (Spring-Summer 1993): 35-8.

Books

Atterbury, Betty W. Mainstreaming Exceptional Learners in Music. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990. Out of print, but usually available used at Amazon.com.

Birkenshaw-Fleming, Lois. Music for All: Teaching Music to People with Special Needs. Toronto: Gordon V. Thompson, 1993.

Campbell, Patricia Shehan, and Carol Scott-Kasner. "Music for Exceptional Children." In Music in Childhood: From Preschool through the Elementary Grades. Woodbridge CT: Schirmer Books, 1995.

Clark, Cynthia, and Donna Chadwick. Clinically Adapted Instruments for the Multiply Handicapped: A Source Book. New York: MMB Music, 1980.

Cohen, Mary Kemper, Maureen Gale, and Joyce M. Meyer. Survival Guide for the First-Year Special Education Teacher. Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1994.

Coleman, Kathleen A., and Debra N. Dacus. Learning through Music: Music Therapy Strategies for Special Education, volumes 1 and 2. Grapevine, TX:

Prelude Music Therapy, 1994. 3360 Spruce Lane, Grapevine, TX 76051; 817-481-2323. home.att.net/. A collection of songs written by two certified music therapists for use with students with various disabilities.

Kranowitz, Carol S. The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun: Activities for Kids with Sensory Integration Dysfunction. New York: Perigee Books, 2003.

Kranowitz, Carol S. The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction. New York: Perigee Books, 1998.

Sobol, Elise. An Attitude and Approach for Teaching Music to Special Learners. Raleigh, NC: Pentland Press, 2001.

Wilson, Brian, L., ed. *Models of Music Therapy Interventions in School Settings: From Institution to Inclusion*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association for Music Therapy (now AMTA), 1996. Detailed information about music therapy in school settings.

Stuff

Creative Arts Therapy and General Music Education Catalog. MMB Music. Online only at www.mmbmusic.com.

Music in Motion. www.musicmotion.com; 800-445-0649. Music education and gift catalog for all ages.

Silver Lake College, Kodály Related Products, 2406 S. Alverno Road, Manitowoc, WI 54220; 920-686-6173. Crocheted microphones, 8 inches, fiber-filled, gray (mic) and black (handle) and hand-crocheted balls, 4 to 6 inches, nylon-stuffed, multicolored or black and white.

Web Sites

American Music Therapy Association (AMTA). www.musictherapy.org. 8455 Colesville Road, Suite 1000, Silver Spring MD, 20910. 301-589-3300. Information about music therapy and how to find a qualified music therapist in your area.

Hap Palmer. www.happalmer.com. Early childhood songs and activities integrating music and movement.

LDOOnline. www.ldonline.org. Resources for parents and teachers of children with learning disabilities.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). www.cec.sped.org, 1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201; 703-620-3660.

Videos

Lavoie, Richard. *How Difficult Can This Be*. VHS. Explains why the classroom can be an intimidating place for kids with learning disabilities. Produced by Peter Rosen Productions for WETA. Available at www.ldonline.org.

Lavoie, Richard. *Last One Picked, First One Picked On*. VHS. An examination of the challenges confronting children with learning disabilities both in and out of the classroom. Produced by LDOOnline for WETA. Available at www.ldonline.org.

Music

Adler, Ruthlee Figlere. Target on Music: Activities to Enhance Learning through Music, 2nd ed. Rockville, MD: Ivymount School, 1988. Music therapy activities for young children with autism and multiple handicaps.

Albrecht, Sally K. Everyday Songs: A Song for Every Day of the Week and Every Month of the Year. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing, 1995. Includes reproducible song sheets. Accompaniment CD available.

Birkenshaw, Lois. Music for Fun, Music for Learning. St. Louis, MO: MMB Music, 1982.

Farnan, Laurie, and Faith Johnson. Everyone Can Move. New Berlin, WI: Jenson Publications, 1988. Music and activities that promote movement and motor development.

Hamilton, Hilree J., and Hiede Muhs. Songs for the Senses: A Primer of Activities for Sensory Stimulation with Music. Hilree J. Hamilton, 14234 Towers Lane, Eden Prairie, MN 55347, 1985. Music activities that students can participate in as independently as possible.

Ritholz, Michele Schnur, and Clive Robbins. Themes for Therapy from the Nordoff Robbins Center for Music Therapy at New York University. New York: Carl Fischer, 1999. New songs and instrumental pieces.

Helpful Tips for Success: Workshop Handout by Charlie Ring and Lillian Atkinson

Involve students in wheelchairs or walkers in movement activities. Have an adult or capable student help push the wheelchair. Move the arms or legs of moderately and severely disabled student in a steady beat. Giving the student a puppet to move is another teaching method.

Use colored socks or colored scrunchies (hair holders) on arm or leg to help the student know which arm or leg to move. This helps teach colors as well.

Use communication boards such as Cheap Talk.

Use bleach or alcohol wipes to sanitize instruments after use.

Use songs that teach directions or social skills to modify behavior. Music often communicates understanding to the brain when the spoken word cannot.

Develop a secret signal between the teacher and student that helps the student be prepared for a question or response. For example: standing directly in front of the student, nodding the head or giving eye contact, or touching your ear.

Provide adequate transition time between activities.

Adapt tests for the abilities of the special needs child.

Use concrete objects, visuals or manipulatives in lessons.

Use cue cards as needed.

Provide short, clear directions.

Repetition is important in music activities. Review new concepts and behavioral expectations frequently.

Adapt lessons to meet the needs and learning styles of the children.

Allow a special education teacher or instructional aide to take special needs students and general education students of similar levels to a designated area for extra tutoring, especially on the recorder.

Using only the body of the recorder and provide opportunities for practice with recorder fingerings through fun drills.

Have the student be responsible for playing one note (e.g., B) on a recorder piece.

Use a cue card or highlighter to help the student see the approaching note. As the student's ability increases, let him or her be responsible for playing a short phrase or two different notes. The student might be given the responsibility of playing a rhythm instrument or a simple bordun accompaniment or percussion sound for a recorder piece.

Karaoke machines also encourage some children to vocalize.

Train and alternate peer helpers for special needs children.

Classroom Management Techniques for Special Learners: CMENC Workshop Handout by Elaine D. Bernstorf

PERCEPTION:

Plan for all perceivers (listeners, viewers, movers, touchers)

Play before you plan: listen to your music examples-what do you perceive (note that looking at the music in a book is different than listening)

Prepare perceptual helps (visual and tactile aides, significant movements or playing activities).

Provide points of perceptual isolation Point out perceptual pinnacles, but beware of “figure-ground problems

PACING:

Pace YOURSELF first! Be in the moment, move into and out of the pacing you want for the lesson.

Prepare for a continuum of pacing issues from students-not all are quick studies-

Take students from where they are and move them to where you want them to be—i.e. Different pace coming from PE/recess than from silent reading.

Prepare the students for transitions

Put program markers in the plan—let students know the plan along the way

Mark progress as part of the pacing and use routines to facilitate pacing

PROXIMITY:

Put yourself in the student’s place-what does he/she see, hear, feel. Place yourself in different parts of the room, choir, ensemble—if not physically then at least mentally---acknowledge what they might be hearing, seeing, feeling.

Play along as appropriate (be “with the group” when the setting is right—i.e.-warm-ups, movement songs, etc.)

Protective Proximity-use proximity to help less secure students feel support when they play, sing or answer

Positive Proximity-use positive proximity for transitions, to point out success, not just for negative situations.

Use Paraprofessionals to provide proximity, but also provide your own PERSONAL proximity.

Protective proximity—carefully use your own proximity as a buffer between students when needed (such as, “Sue, let me help you with that fingering,” or “Kevin, come and help me with this task.”) Breaking proximity between problem students can be as Important as your own proximity to those students. Use both techniques as needed.

PRODUCTIVITY: Plan, Prepare, Produce, Point Out, Ponder

Plan for productive lessons—use measurable objectives
Prepare your own products for use In the lesson-be ready
Produce musical products more than non-musical products
Provide periodic progress updates-point out group and individual progress
Use reflection tasks to help student determine their own productivity rates
Make sure everyone is part of the product
Praise accurately and specifically
Produce something to can be proud of as well as you or educate them as to why you
are proud of an accomplishment that they don't perceive
Don't let the production over-ride the process
Take pride in your program so they can be proud, too.
Publicize productivity periodically but be sure to recognize ALL the productive
people.
Productivity doesn't just meet ratings or performances, it is the entire program
Know your “production line” -be able to articulate why each person is important-
personally
Pull in parents—they can be your best means to publicize a productive program

Additional Tips for Teaching Music to Special Learners

From Karen Goodrich—

I do a lot of matching. Especially later in the year, we'll do music bingo and I'll hold up pictures for them to match.

I do a lot of echo songs. They love songs with repetition.

If the orchestra or band is rehearsing in the cafeteria, we'll go in and listen and identify instruments.

From Charlie Ring—

I use a lot of tactile things with them--instrument playing, a lot of visuals, moving the streamers, small parachutes up and down, a lot of sensory stuff.

Beating a bass drum with a side-to-side motion is difficult. If you put the bass drum down flat, the children can stand in a circle around the bass drum and play the beat with mallets.

[Take] the upright piano, lift the lid up, take the music stand off, and let them come up to the piano. Let them move their fingers on it and see the hammer strike the strings. They're fascinated by that. You know, things like that just stimulate their senses.

From Lillian Atkinson—

Drawing to music using chalk on a board works well because you're standing up and you can move their arms.

You can tie bells onto their wrists or use velcro. We've done lots with velcro. With the children who can't move their arms, all you have to do is take their elbow and they can move the bells.

After they had done something correctly they would get a ticket. They'd put [the ticket] in a jar and then when they collect so many tickets they would get a video game day.

We break down tasks. Some of those kids can't blow on a recorder, for instance. So we will have them work on blowing, but I will take off the mouthpiece part. ... You just use the bottom half. Then you never have to worry about them never being able to play right, but they are working. The goal for them is to just use the fingers.

From Elaine Bernstorf—

Just because kids have learning disabilities doesn't mean you can't do sophisticated music. For example they could play an ostinato instead of the melody.

We don't always have to try to get them to play the melody. You could do a simple dance, with one movement for the A section and another for the B section.

From Susan Mann-

We have a composer of the week. We listen to some of his music and color his picture. ... I use Alfred's Meet the Great Composers with full page nice pictures and a CD with music and basic information about the composer.

They love to do anything with lemmy sticks, especially the boys. They will do any rhythm that I put on the board. They will play it over and over again. They love to pass they sticks. I give them four beats to pass the sticks.

I use erasable staffs-the ones that you use erasable makers on. They each have one and will sit on the floor. I'll say, draw a treble clef and they will. I use those a couple times a week.

I use popsicle sticks on the floor to have them write rhythms. I start out using tas and ti-tis, but by the end of the year, I can just clap a rhythm and they can write it out.

They like any kind of manipulatives. They have trouble using pencils.

We sing a lot everyday. I don't worry too much whether they're singing on pitch. I am just glad they are participating. I do patriotic songs and folk songs and some familiar songs from musicals. I don't do a lot of music that they'll never hear again. I teach them the school song the first week of class. They also learn "The Star-Spangled Banner."

I do lots of echo songs: "Do Re Mi" from The Sound of Music, "Miss Mary Mack," "God Bless America," "Who Stole the Cookie from the Cookie Jar?"