

Inclusion in the Music Classroom: Four Tips and Strategies for a More Enjoyable Experience for Everyone

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As many of the school systems across North America are moving more and more into inclusion models, music educators are being forced to think outside the box in how to accommodate these individuals in general music classes, bands, and choirs. For some, this may feel like a daunting task since training on making classes accessible varies. Due to the lack of standardized training available, I am going to share with you some of the tips and strategies that I like to start with when working with music educators.

Tip #1: Strive for Equity over Equality

Being fair is something that we always think of as a good thing, and it is. However, we often link fairness in how we deliver our materials rather than trying to create fairness in the outcomes. When we shift our focus to the outcomes, equity is much more readily achieved. For example, let us pretend you are a parent of two children (for some this will be easier than others). One child has perfect vision while the other child needs glasses. Since you do not play favourites with your children, you are now getting glasses for both of them, right? Of course not, that would be silly on multiple levels. The goal is not to give each child the exact same thing, the goal is to give them what they need in order to achieve the same outcome. In this example, what they need is perfect vision. Now let us continue this vision example into your classroom. You have a student who has low vision, and the typical score is not big enough for them to read even with glasses. What are a couple of things that you can do so they can read the music? Increase the font size, only have their staff on the page so they are not having to read other individual's parts, perhaps you would change the position of the music stand. Are some of these accommodations different from what their peers are getting? Absolutely, but when you focus on outcome equity you will be able to create a barrier-free environment where everyone can thrive.

Tip #2: Allow for Accommodations and Modifications

In the above example we discussed a variety of accommodations for your low vision students. These most likely feel the easiest to achieve when thinking about the diverse learner. Essentially, accommodation is anything that needs to take place in order for the student to achieve the same expectations as their peers. Bigger fonts, extra time to take the same test, visual schedule so they know where they are in the lesson plan, etc. Modifications allow the students to complete an altered version of the task or assignment. Providing modifications can sometimes feel tricky especially if we are still focusing on equality over equity. Rather than having them play two octaves of the B flat major scale on their instrument, you are looking for them to play one octave. Providing modifications requires the teacher to look at the assignments on a granular level, decide what the actual learning outcomes are, and adapt this to meet your diverse learners. Is this tricky, for sure, is this doable, absolutely!

Tip #3: Look at your Physical Space

Have you ever been to someone's office or seen their space on a zoom call and the amount of clutter gives you a bit of anxiety? Well, the same can be true about how your music room is set up for some of your students. I am not saying it has to be spotless all the time, but you can look at certain areas of your room and see if the setup is enhancing or detracting from their learning. Here is a concrete example: the bulletin board. We love our bulletin boards, who doesn't? But how many messages are you trying to show on one board? Do you have pictures of note values, treble and bass clef lines and spaces mnemonics, and a bunch of pictures of composers mashed together? Do we do this to help our students? Yes! But is it actually helpful- maybe not. Would you get more mileage out of your resources if you posted one thing at a time and then changed them regularly, or had a wall for notes, then a different wall for composers etc. A lot of us can tune those things out, but for some of our students that is too much distraction and then you and your beautiful lesson plan is what gets tuned out which is not helpful for anyone.

Another big trigger can be lighting. As a migraine sufferer, I can attest that if I am having an off day, one of the sure triggers for myself is being in a room with fluorescent lights. Honestly, I do not know many people who state that fluorescent lights are helpful to them, but I digress. It is not just about those of us who are migraine or light sensitive. There is something about using natural light to help calm the energy down in a room. Picture this, it is the middle of January, and it is so cold that your students have not been able to be outside to blow off steam for say, I do not know, the entire month of January. Those students are probably climbing your walls and you are supposed to be teaching them. Have you ever tried switching to natural lighting? There is a shift in energy sometimes, or just even a novelty of newness when we make some changes that might be beneficial for all. Obviously, some band rooms I have been in do not have any windows to the outside, so that is not super helpful. In those cases, what else can you do to support your students' energy?

Tip #4: Find your Students' Strengths

Something that is tricky as a music educator in a school system is getting to know all your students the same way a classroom teacher knows the students. Therefore, it takes you a lot longer to figure out all of your students' strengths, both musically and non-musically. Utilize the resources you have in your building to help you figure out what some of your diverse learner's strengths are. Your support team (counsellor, resource teacher, instructional assistants etc.) may not know about their musical strengths, but they would know their non-musical strengths, likes, and even dislikes which will help you successfully teach these students at a deeper level. Is there a way to have some one-on-one conversations with these students? One thing to look for in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder is where on the perfect pitch spectrum they fall (if at all). I will list a couple of resources at the end of the article if you want to delve deeper into this topic. But in a non-scientific look at my private music studio, my students with ASD also have either perfect rhythm or perfect pitch in a much higher prevalence than my neurotypical students. Once I was able to tap into these gifts and skills, it changed how I taught them music or how we approach learning. Music can connect and open neurodiverse learners in a way that we may not see in a math class. So, while I did say to use your support team at the beginning of this segment, also do not be surprised if what you see in music is completely different than what they are experiencing in general education classes.

It can feel like the weight of the world is on our shoulders, trying to create this amazing learning environment for everyone. At the end of the day, going back to some basics might help ground us. In connecting with parents around what they hope inclusion looks like for their children, common thoughts have included the following: a desire for meaningful and purposeful inclusion, wanting educators to see their child first and not the diagnosis or behaviours, time to be with their peers, and a desire for educators to think outside the box so the above can happen. If you let those principles lead you, your students will flourish no matter what!

If you are looking for additional resources, I have included a couple of books.

Kupferstein, H. & Rancer, S. (2016) *Perfect pitch in the key of Autism: A guide for educators, parents, and the musically gifted*. iUniverse

Ott, P. (2011) *Music for special kids: Musical activities, songs, instruments and resources*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Hammel, A. & Hourigan, R. (2020) *Teaching music to students with Autism*. Oxford University Press