



Five Strategies for Teaching Students with Disabilities in Band/Orchestra

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Do you teach band/orchestra? Do you have students with different abilities in your classes? Do students opt out of orchestra/band because they cannot see themselves in the class? Do you want to know more about your effectiveness in reaching all of your students? Then please keep reading.

True or False? The way to teach students with disabilities is to set low expectations for students with disabilities. False. It is not the goal of education to set low expectations. We need to set reasonable expectations and realize that for whatever reasons some of our students are novices, some are experts, (*i.e.* have taken piano lessons), and they have different potentials. For example, if playing an instrument is a goal for a band class, then allowing students to listen to the group instead of playing an instrument does not prepare them to reach the goal of instrumental music. Our end goal is to teach students how to be in orchestra/band in their future lives.

Orchestras and bands play instruments. I do not think that we should ask instrumental educators to alter the goals of the ensemble to the point that we change the key goal of instrumental music. (On a side note, we do need to offer classes in music that might be more motivational for other students, *i.e.* choir, composing, listening to jazz...) But once we have a variety of course offerings in place and a student with a physical limitation decides that band is the “coolest” way to be involved in music, then we need to set a band goal for that student.

The **first strategy** is something that band directors do. They help the student select an instrument. In general, we see if the student can make a sound, fits the size of the instrument, likes the sound of a particular instrument, and then we make a recommendation. However, some students go to “meet the instrument night” and have a difficult time seeing how they can play a traditional orchestra/band instrument. A universal approach would be to offer choices with all learners in mind. What if a student with a physical dis-

ability finds triangle dull and keyboard challenging? Is there a place for a keyboard player in your ensemble? (Perhaps we use midi to make the keyboard sound like a traditional ensemble instrument.) Will they be able to use keyboard in their future life? Perhaps keyboard becomes an at home instrument or maybe there are inclusive adult ensembles that will welcome non-traditional instruments in community band/orchestra--I think yes, if we show them the way.

What other disabilities (abilities) can we be better prepared for by thinking creatively about instrument choice? Are there some instruments that would appropriately challenge and motivate students with hearing loss, intellectual disabilities, or health issues? I am sure that as instrumental teachers, you have some excellent ideas. The important piece is to think about options before the student walks through the doors of the classroom. Let the special education teachers know that you welcome diverse instrumentalists.

Strategy #2. Instrumental directors already differentiate instruction by auditioning chairs. First chair players or section leaders have the ability to lead and play independently. Sometimes, teachers select pieces to showcase or challenge the playing abilities of the ensemble. Some students might need additional challenges; we require them to select solo literature or to audition for ILMEA festivals.

In the spirit of finding the right level of difficulty for a student, some players may need to focus on performing parts of a piece (less). In this case, you might have the student focus on legato playing for a week or certain sections of a work. It might take some creative rehearsal planning. Perhaps you rehearse those sections as a group and ask the student to work with a peer tutor in a practice room while the ensemble works on a broader scope of techniques. In some cases, students might play less by playing what I call the skeleton. The skeleton might be playing only the notes that fall on a beat. Playing the skeleton is usually a way to include students with intellectual difficulties or physical limitations. The altered part is different, but must remain a challenge for the student(s). People are motivated when the difficulty level is just beyond their abilities.

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Most students will be able to read music. However, students with certain disabilities will require alternatives for visual information (**Strategy #3**). Yes, we should work toward reading music. However, as a step to that goal, students with reading problems (learning disabilities, visual disabilities) need to hear their part while they look at/feel the notation. Sometimes, they might play music by ear first. After producing a good tone and becoming fluent, they learn what the notation looks like or feels like in Braille. It is likely that some students will only be fluent when they imitate the sound produced by their neighbors or when they listen to a midi file converted from Finale. In this scenario, students are not ignorant about the notes on the page. They can identify the symbols, but they need auditory support to really perform with flow or in time.

Because the part of the brain that is responsible for executive functions does not reach maturity until late adolescence or adulthood, teachers need to guide executive functions (**Strategy #4**). In music, we expect students to practice. Expert teachers understand how to lead students through at home practice and to work out a plan for taking their instruments home. Once the instruments are at home, these teachers provide practice routines.

- 1) Start by playing your favorite piece
- 2) Record the piece and share it with a friend/parent
- 3) Play the scale for the above piece and create melodies using that scale
- 4) Look through your music and select sections that we marked in rehearsal as “needing work”
- 5) Record the section and listen for improvement (compare with yesterday’s practice session)
- 6) Assigned exercises *i.e.* brass players work on long tones and lip slurs (Is your tone full or open? Are your slurs smooth or faster?—maybe even a more specific chart to illuminate student progress)
- 7) Play along with the recording/accompaniment of the feature song of the week

After leading students through practice, help them to create their own practice routines with a balance of “playing is fun” and improvement is rewarding.

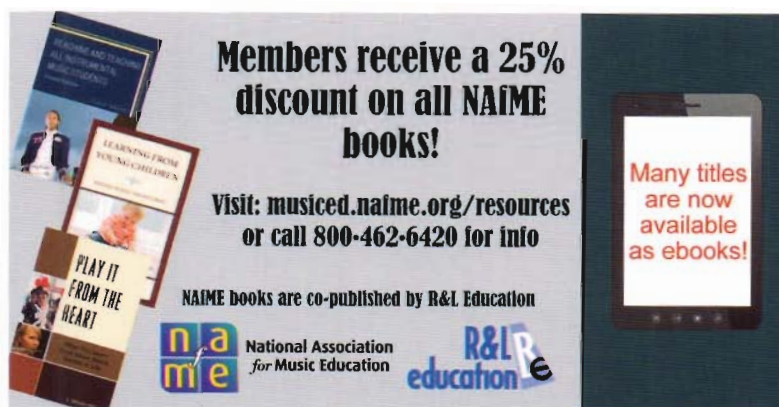
Motivation (**Strategy #5**) is directly related to the above practice guidelines, *i.e.* sharing music with others, playing a favorite song, and creating our own music. In addition, the teacher must remind students why music is important. We play music for a variety of reasons, but we should never assume that our students are making these connections. Help them to select solo literature that they want to play, even if you would

never play that selection. Show them how they can participate in music outside of school. Find out what they want to do with music and make the connections between class content and their goals.

You are probably already doing some of these strategies. Great, you are on your way to having a program that is ready for students with disabilities. If you want to do more, try to incorporate the strategies over time and learn more about how to teach diverse classrooms by visiting <http://www.udlcenter.org>.

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