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Recent and Continuing Initiatives and Practices in Special Education

Knowing about current practices and national initiatives in special education can help music educators give students with disabilities the best learning experiences.

Abstract: A number of initiatives in special education have occurred in the United States over the years, some mandated by amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Having a working knowledge of these initiatives allows music educators to have informed discussions with colleagues and parents and participate more fully in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Adopting special education practices that are appropriate to music education can also promote consistent and coordinated efforts on behalf of students with disabilities. This article includes summaries of current practices and initiatives in special education. For music educators who would like a basic understanding of their colleagues' discipline, these summaries offer useful information that can facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Keywords: communication, disability, IDEA, IEP, inclusion, interdisciplinary education, music, special education

Jenny, a first-year music educator, returned to her classroom after lunch feeling confused and a bit embarrassed. She overheard several other teachers talking about various programs and initiatives in the school such as PBS, RtI, and UDL. Jenny had heard these terms before but did not understand them and was too timid to ask. Could she be doing more to help all her students learn more effectively, she wondered. Should she be involved in schoolwide initiatives? Jenny decided that the best approach would be to talk with her colleagues to learn about these topics and see if she could become more involved in the process at school. Although she knew it would take additional time, she was a dedicated teacher

who understood the need to stay informed and involved in the most current teaching practices.

Jenny decided that she needed to attend the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting for one of her students. She needed ideas on how to better manage his behaviors in class. Whenever she referred to his disability, she noticed the other IEP team members seemed uncomfortable. After leaving the meeting, she asked her friend Sue why the others seemed uncomfortable discussing her student's disability. Sue responded that they didn't mind discussing his disability but that the terminology she used to describe it was antiquated and now considered discriminatory.

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Interdisciplinary education requires that music educators not only have an understanding of their own discipline but working knowledge of their colleagues' disciplines as well. Successful collaboration between music and special educators begins with interdisciplinary education. Understanding current initiatives and practices in the field of special education can help facilitate music educators' communication with IEP team members, parents of students with disabilities, and school administrators. As with all disciplines, there are also specific terms and acronyms associated with the field of special education. Shared information and a common vocabulary are useful in establishing a framework through which music educators and special educators can best meet the needs of students with disabilities. Being able to converse about current topics in special education also demonstrates professional awareness, an understanding of recent developments in the field, and a willingness to work collaboratively with others.¹ Music educators and special educators can share information about their disciplines and collaborate on strategies to benefit learning for all students.

There are a number of recent and continuing initiatives in special education, some mandated by amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).² The following summaries of initiatives will provide music educators with a basic understanding of special education practices and contribute to productive interdisciplinary communication among school professionals working with students who have disabilities.

Recent Initiatives and Practices

Standards-Based Reforms and Standards-Based IEPs

Standards-based reforms (at the local, state, and national levels) aim to improve school performance and use accountability systems to enforce the standards.³ Historically, schools have resisted including students with disabilities in their standards-based assessments,

arguing that including students with disabilities in these assessments creates an overemphasis on academic skills when vocational or functional skills might better prepare the student for postsecondary school options other than higher education.⁴ Proponents believe the inclusion of students with disabilities in high-stakes testing increases school accountability and ensures access for students with disabilities to the general curriculum. In addition to standards-based reforms, there is also greater pressure on special educators to develop Individualized Education Programs that ensure goals are written and aligned to the current standards and assessments.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in 2015 is the primary federal law that authorizes federal spending to support K–12 schooling and represents the nation's commitment to equal education opportunity for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, English proficiency, or income. Most educators agree that the new federal law, which grants significantly more power to states, is a step in the right direction for all students. According to journalist Michelle Diament,⁵ the most significant change for students with disabilities is a cap on the number of students who can take alternate assessments to the general grade-level tests mandated for most students. Under ESSA, no more than 1 percent of all students will be allowed to take alternate assessments. Alternative assessments are intended only for those with the most significant cognitive disabilities. In addition, state assessment procedures must allow accommodations for those students who receive accommodations under IDEA. Examples of testing accommodations include large-print materials for students with visual disabilities, additional time for students with learning disabilities, and special testing conditions for students with ADHD.⁶

Person-First Language

The movement to use person-first language has been advocated since the renaming of the Education of Handicapped Children Act to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990;

however, there has been recent resistance to person-first language. Person-first language emphasizes the person before the disability, as in “a person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person.” English syntax generally places adjectives before the noun; therefore, a speaker must be particular conscientious about word use when referring to students with disabilities. Advocates of person-first language believe that person-first language reminds us that a disability is not the most important characteristic of an individual. Recent critics of person-first language suggest that putting the disability after the person and eliminating terms such as *autistic students*, *amputees*, or *epileptics* denies the disability and therefore implies that there is something inherently bad about having disability.⁷ Some parents and educators argue that using any label stigmatizes the student, resulting in lowered expectations and fewer challenges given to the student.⁸ The current convention in special education and in writing about persons with disabilities is person-first language; however, music educators can always defer to a student's preference.

Elimination of the Terms *Autism* and *Asperger's Syndrome*

One of the most significant changes in the most recent *Diagnostic Statistical Manual-5*⁹ (*DSM-5*) is the elimination of the separate diagnostic labels *Autistic Disorder*, *Asperger's Disorder*, and *Pervasive Developmental Disorders-Not Otherwise Specified* (PDD-NOS). These terms were replaced by one umbrella term, *Autism Spectrum Disorder* (ASD). The reason given for use of an umbrella term is that autism is defined by a common set of behaviors and should be characterized by a single name.¹⁰ The change in diagnostic label was not without controversy. Parents and caregivers feared their children would lose their diagnoses of ASD and consequently lose support services as well. Some individuals with ASD prefer the term *Asperger's Syndrome* because they believe there are distinct differences between autism and Asperger's Syndrome and because they are proud to be known as “Aspies.”¹¹ Because special educators generally follow the disability

terms specified by the *DSM-5*,¹² music educators might consider doing likewise for communication purposes; however, deference should always be given to the student with the disability.

Increased Emphasis on Transition Services for Students with Disabilities

Transition services are activities that prepare students with disabilities to move from school to postsecondary life.¹³ With the reauthorized IDEA came regulatory requirements regarding secondary transition.¹⁴ The emphasis on effective transition services was new in IDEA 2004, and it has subsequently become increasingly important for students with disabilities. Along with daily living activities, secondary special educators are now expected to prepare their students for employment after high school or a postsecondary education. Music educators who work with students who have disabilities are also being asked to consider the quality of life their students will have post high school.¹⁵ Participation in extracurricular activities has been found to be particularly useful in facilitating older students' successful transition from school to adulthood,¹⁶ and music participation is one of the most popular of all curricular and extracurricular activities for both students and young adults.¹⁷ Engagement in music can provide opportunities to develop transition skills such as decision making, leadership, and problem solving. Students can set goals and develop strategies to meet those goals to be successful in music-making activities. They take risks in front of others and assess their own progress. Music-making necessitates the learning of new information. These are all important transition skills that students develop through music experiences.

Emphasis on Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

Closely associated with transition services is the practice of engaging students with disabilities in self-determination. Self-determination focuses on the degree to which individuals are self-motivated and

able to independently determine their own future and can be a significant factor to enhance postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.¹⁸ Students with disabilities who are self-determined are more likely to succeed as adults and are more likely to be employed, living independently, happy with their lives, and less isolated. To attain these goals in adulthood, efforts to build self-determination skills need to be integrated into every area of a student's education. Adam M. Croom,¹⁹ associate editor of *Frontiers of Psychology*, makes the argument that music engagement contributes to an individual's well-being by influencing positive emotions, engagement with others, achievement, and self-awareness. These music-making characteristics are also foundational to the development of self-determination.

Positive Behavioral Support

The purpose of positive behavioral support (PBS) is to create a supportive and successful environment for all students, though particularly for those with the most challenging behaviors. It refers to a range of preventive and positive interventions designed to eliminate problematic behaviors and replace them with behaviors that are conducive to academic and social success. PBS is also a comprehensive research-based approach intended to address all aspects of a problem behavior. It involves a proactive, collaborative, assessment-based process to develop effective and individualized interventions to discourage challenging behaviors.²⁰ Professionals who use PBS are equally committed to teaching and reinforcing prosocial behaviors.²¹ Prosocial behaviors are positive behaviors that promote social acceptance and friendship.

The core features of PBS include the following:

1. *Application of behavioral design* by administering functional assessments of behavior, structuring the environment, teaching substitute behaviors, and applying rewards and consequence;
2. *Implementation of comprehensive interventions* by addressing behaviors across all settings and in all contexts;

3. *Attention to lifestyle outcomes* by addressing and assessing an individual's quality of life; and
4. *Emphasis on culture and organizational systems change* to adapt the environment such that students are provided the support needed to lead productive lives.

Students' cultural background and family experiences should be considered. Along with reducing problem behaviors and teaching desired behaviors, the PBS approach is structured to address plans for a student's future.²²

Because PBS is based on having supportive and successful environments throughout the school, music educators should be aware of how PBS is being implemented. If a student is demonstrating challenging behaviors, it is likely that the classroom teacher has already determined the function of such behaviors as well as effective rewards and consequences when the student exhibits these behaviors. Music educators can seek out this information from the classroom teacher to implement in a systematic way to deal with the behavior challenges during music classes. In addition, the music environment can be structured to decrease distractions and increase success by altering the classroom setting to increase students' attention. Music can be highly rewarding for many students, so additional music opportunities can be provided as rewards for students with positive behaviors as part of the PBS implementation in the school.

Response to Intervention

Response to intervention (RtI) is a multi-tiered, schoolwide approach for the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. This systematic, data-based approach provides a structure to assess needs of students and implement additional support to improve learning and behavioral outcomes. With RtI, all students are screened to determine their progress on specific benchmarks, and students who are not meeting benchmarks are identified for additional support to remediate learning and behavior deficiencies. Ongoing assessments

continue to inform decisions about how to best support the students' learning.²³

Schoolwide teams that sometimes include music educators create the foundation for the decision-making process, with specific teams responsible for navigating the process, evaluation, and instructional support. The team members identify the problem that the student is having, determine why it is happening, implement a process to remediate the student's deficiencies, and then evaluate the student's outcomes. Classroom teachers, administrators, support staff, and related service providers are involved in the team decision making.²⁴ Music participation can be used to provide the extra support needed by some students.²⁵

Continuing Initiatives and Practices in Special Education

Differentiated Instruction

Students come to the music classroom with different educational readiness, learning styles, abilities, and preferences. In addition to these learner differences, classrooms in the United States are becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse each year. Differentiated instruction (DI) is an approach to teaching and learning that allows for these individual differences. Education authors Jacqueline S. Thousand, Richard A. Villa, and Ann Nevin²⁶ define differentiated instruction as "a process where educators vary the learning activities, content demands, modes of assessment, and the classroom environment to meet the needs and to support the growth of each child." Various accommodations and adaptations are also included as a part of the instructional process.

Working with students individually is not the same as differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction involves working with groups of students and individualizing the curriculum for those within the group. It shares many of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) goals (discussed in the next section) for teaching and promoting student learning, with both initiatives established to embrace student differences and ensure students

have every opportunity to learn in ways that best suit their individual needs. Both UDL and DI include built-in supports for students and suggest scaffolding instruction. However, DI differs from UDL in how and when instructional adjustments are made for students. DI makes use of formative assessments with accompanying adjustments in the curriculum.

University of Virginia education leadership professor Carol A. Tomlinson²⁷ identified three elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated: content, process, and products. In brief, curriculum content should be aligned with learning goals and objectives and be the same for all students, with its complexity varied based on students' abilities to comprehend the material. Content delivery is varied based on groupings that are flexible, fluid, and beneficial to both students and teachers. In differentiated instruction, formative assessments are a key feature and are used to direct the curriculum. Formative assessments are used to evaluate students' readiness to learn and acquire knowledge. DI operates under the assumption that not all accommodations for learner differences can be planned proactively. Instruction should be fluid and variable, depending on the changing needs of the learners.

A layered curriculum is one of the most salient features of DI. While the *focus* of the subject matter (the essential concepts) is the same for all students, individual students are learning the curriculum content at different levels of complexity and expressing what they know at different levels of sophistication. Educational accommodation experts Michael F. Giangreco, Chigee J. Cloninger, and Virginia Salce Iverson²⁸ suggested four levels of curriculum design: same, multilevel, curriculum overlapping, and alternative. In the first level, students are taught the same curriculum with only minor changes in the amount to learn or the time to learn it. In the second level, students are involved in the same curriculum with the same goal but have different learning objectives based on subject matter complexity. In the third level, students are engaged in the same lessons, but

the overall goal for learning the material may be different, such as social versus academic. In the final level, alternative, students' goals may be unrelated to those of their peers. The learner goals, objectives, and curriculum content are appropriate alternatives that are more suited to the needs of the individual student. An example might be a student who is involved in a vocational training program while peers study a more traditional academic curriculum.

Another important component of DI is varying the instructional process, which is similar to the UDL principle of providing multiple means of representation. Ways of varying the instructional process is using multiple instructional formats, strategies, environments, as well as various student and teacher configurations²⁹ (e.g., small-group learning with teacher as coach). A final important component of DI is varying the expected products or outcomes of learning. Similar to the UDL principle of allowing for multiple and flexible expressions of student learning, this component of DI allows students to choose among options or design their own method of demonstrating what they know. Having varied methods of learner assessments in the same classroom also necessitates assigning multiple criteria for mastery of the curriculum content. While DI and UDL share several important principles for learning, the distinguishing feature of DI is that less emphasis is placed on proactive instructional design in favor of a formative instructional design based on student learning.³⁰ See Table 1 for some examples of how DI might be implemented in music classes.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal design for learning (UDL) operates on the premise that the planning and delivery of instruction as well as the evaluation of student learning can incorporate inclusive attributes that accommodate learner differences without excluding learners and compromising academic standards.³¹ Examples of UDL include real-time captioning of lectures for students with hearing losses and use of text-to-speech technology or tactile

TABLE 1**Ideas for Implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) the Music Classroom**

Individualized learning within the group setting: Differentiation of tasks or goals	<p>Increasing or decreasing the complexity of a music task for some students: Learning objectives might vary based on learning needs and abilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an Orff arrangement, assign instruments based on students' abilities to be successful. • Have student sing only repeating lines of a piece if unable to sing entire piece. • Social goals might be more appropriate than a music learning goal for some students.
Adapting time or number of tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide additional practice time for a student to learn music. • Select section of piece for a student to learn along with the rest of the ensemble.
Vary instructional process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information in a variety of formats, such as visually and through movement in addition to auditory. • Set up small groups with varied abilities to work on music tasks; students can take on roles based on understanding and abilities. • Have student mentors assist students who are struggling with material.
Allow students flexibility to demonstrate understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of various notation can demonstrated by moving, clapping, notating, or chanting. • Understanding of melodic contour can be demonstrated by singing, moving an arm or finger, playing an Orff instrument up and down, or drawing a diagram on paper or board.

graphs and maps for students with vision losses. Applying the principles of universal design requires flexibility—flexible goals, instructional methods, materials, and assessments that can accommodate all students. UDL calls for multiple means of *representation*, or a variety of ways that students can acquire information; *multiple means of action and expression* by providing a variety of ways that students can demonstrate understanding; and multiple means of *engagement* to motivate, capture, and sustain students' attention.³² When using these principles of UDL, teachers must consider three different elements of instruction. The first consideration is related to the presentation of materials to the students: There may be multiple ways to present materials, including using visuals, manipulatives, and technology, to make the materials more readily understood and accessible. The second consideration is related to ways students can respond to materials and demonstrate knowledge and understanding, such as by writing, singing, playing, composing, and so on. The third consideration is how to engage students in the learning process by determining what interests and motivates them, such as using electronic games, popular music, videos, and so on.

UDL recognizes the need for multiple approaches to instruction and learning.³³ UDL enhances learning for all students, including students with disabilities, students who are English language learners, students who may learn differently, and students who are motivated to learn in different ways. Many music educators already incorporate Universal Design strategies by implementing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experiences into instruction. Many highly effective teachers use these strategies on a daily basis to promote students' learning.³⁴ UDL is a way to consider the needs of all students when designing curriculum, instructional strategies, and evaluation. With UDL, teachers consider the varied learning abilities of all students when planning. Thus, the need for making accommodations later is reduced, and more students may benefit from the varied instructional approaches.

Share Your Knowledge

There may be settings where it is difficult to implement some of these initiatives due to limitations at the school. Perhaps the school does not have a special educator to approach, the music educator has large classes with many students on IEPs and limited additional assistance, or

information on school initiatives is difficult or too time-consuming to access. Music educators can begin to learn about these initiatives one by one and implement some of the strategies in their own classrooms. From there, it can be useful to seek out other educators who share similar challenges and are seeking solutions to help students succeed.

Understanding of concepts and initiatives in special education is only a beginning to meaningful collaborations. Successful interdisciplinary communication and collaboration can happen when educators have a genuine interest in working with others to benefit their students. Collaborators also have an ally to problem solve, share goals, and celebrate with when students succeed. When music educators and special educators share information about their disciplines and provide support to each other, they have a stronger, united voice. With music educators and special educators as allies, all students receive a better education.

NOTES

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