

Designing Music Teaching Based on Learning Skills

The hazards of labeling, classifying, and pigeonholing have already been discussed. If we are to effectively plan for individual needs in both music and learning skills, it is necessary to be aware of each child's strengths and weaknesses in both these areas. Often, when teachers consult school records to seek out information about a child, they are confronted with test names and scores that are incomprehensible to them. Consequently, they garner information from what they can understand, which is often anecdotal records. While these records may provide some valuable insights into a child's behavior, they do not always give a complete picture of the child's *potential* for learning or the specific learning areas in which difficulties are encountered.

Prescriptive Teaching

In prescriptive teaching, strengths and weaknesses are first evaluated by clinical testing, teacher assessment, or, ideally, both. Next, long-range goals are formulated, and teaching strategies that will create an optimum learning environment for the child are developed. Each instructional objective is planned to sequentially advance the child to a new level of achievement. Strengths are used as supportive skills to guarantee a degree of success in those activities specifically planned to improve areas in deficiency. Subsequent activities must be planned to help the child generalize new learning and to facilitate transfer to new situations. After teaching, the results must be evaluated to determine if the child has really made progress toward the goals. If not, the same prescription may be modified, or a new one substituted. This type of goal setting and evaluation for each special learner is specified in Public Law 94-142. Called an *Individualized Education Program* (IEP), it requires each school to draw up goals and short-term objectives, at least annually, for each handicapped learner in the school program. To improve areas of deficiency, a comprehensive plan of progressively challenging goals and objectives must be formulated. In music, continually spontaneous sessions reap only random and spontaneous skills. Although this may be desirable in the beginning stages, a time must come when the child is called upon to develop and generalize these skills. Only when this level is reached does a child become a *learner*. Structure is essential, but there can be freedom within structure. When working toward a goal, it is often a spontaneous response that signals when a new plateau has been reached and the child is ready for a different challenge.

Goals and Objectives

Successful teaching of special learners in music lies in planning and technique, not in materials *per se*. The formulation of goals and objectives is the first and most important step. The novice teacher invariably begins planning from the activity or materials, rather than the objective. When objective and activity are simultaneously conceived, one has truly reached a high level of sophistication in planning. Similarly, formulating music objectives in relation to

learning skills also reflects sophisticated planning, as one must be familiar with basic learning skill development and its relationship to music skill development.

Goals, as used here, are long-range achievements described in general statements. They may be *cognitive* or *affective*, need not be stated in behavioral terms, and are understood to take some time for accomplishment. Some music education goals take the entire public school tenure to achieve! Long-range goals are often based on the six experience areas traditionally considered to essential to the music education curriculum: singing, playing instruments, listening, moving to music, creating, and reading notation. In addition, music education goals largely fall into the psychomotor domain, as we seldom ask children to perceive music (listen, look, feel) without *doing* something as well (sing, play, move).

There are some who advocate formulating long-range goals in behavioral terms. However, since special needs children present a multitude of variables because of physical and/or mental disabilities, it is impossible to generalize behaviorally for any one skill. To illustrate this, consider the following goal as written in behavioral terms.

BY THE END OF THE YEAR, GIVEN ONLY THE TONAL CENTER,
EACH CHILD WILL DEMONSTRATE THE ABILITY TO SING ALL
FAMILIAR SONGS IN TUNE, WITH PROPER PHRASING, RHYTHM,
AND DYNAMICS.

Similar goals are no doubt universally accepted among music educators as attainable by the majority of children in the elementary grades. But consider the problems in achieving this particular goal for the child with a hearing impairment. To begin with, this individual's aural and vocal skills are not likely to be commensurate with those of hearing peers. Therefore, it is probably unrealistic to expect the same conditions and time elements to apply to them when compared to children with normal hearing. Goals for this child are more realistic if they are somewhat general. In addition, special attention may need to be directed toward developing a number of subgoals, many of which hearing peers have been able to develop *without specific instruction*. To reach a general goal, such as the following,

TO DEVELOP THE SINGING VOICE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF
MUSICAL EXPRESSION,

the hearing-impaired child may need first to achieve the following subgoals.

THE ABILITY TO

- USE THE SINGING VOICE (as opposed to speaking)
- SING WITH PROPER PITCH *DIRECTION*
- SING WITH PROPER PHRASING
- SING WITH ACCURATE RHYTHM
- SING WITH A RECOGNIZABLE MELODIC LINE

Note that conditions or criteria, or even a time, under which the above goals will be evaluated are intentionally avoided. These will be determined appropriate to individual abilities when instructional objectives are formulated, and these are written in behavioral terms. It is easy to understand why goals that include such statements as "by the end of the year," "each child," and "will demonstrate understanding by" (doing a specific task) are inappropriate for children representing both psychomotor and cognitive abilities that run the gamut from zero to above average at the beginning of instruction. In addition, the functioning level of some special needs children can improve or degenerate drastically within a short period of time because of a number of physical and/or emotional factors.

Still another reason for leaving the long-range goals open-ended may not be so obvious. Many studies were undertaken in the 1960s relative to teacher expectation. Most showed rather dramatically that children have an uncanny tendency to achieve only as much as their teachers expect they will! Let's again consider the students with hearing impairments. A goal written in behavioral terms and individualized for the child with a hearing impairment would necessarily impose preconceived standards based on what the teacher presumed the child could accomplish. Time and again, children with special needs as well as children considered to be normal have surprised us in achieving an insight or skill that, in the opinion of professionals, was considered too difficult for them. We should take every precaution to keep open minds regarding individual potential, taking each day as it comes. Journals are rife with accounts of achievements of special needs children, some in music, that could have been mentally or physically impossible for them and for which no satisfactory explanation exists.

Learning by Style and Need

Music goals and objectives can most easily be formulated to correspond with the following general categories of learning skills: *auditory*, *visual*, *motor*, *language*, and *social*. In planning goals and objectives, the individual learning style of each child must be considered. Some children learn best through listening (auditory) while others need to see a visual representation of a concept. Still others have difficulty conceptualizing unless they can experience what is to be learned in some way (kinesthetic, tactile). Some children will need experiences in all modalities in order to learn.

It is often through music that the first breakthrough is made – a child makes the first attempt to communicate, cooperate with structure, or relate to others. A period of individual music sessions can frequently provide the ground work that enables other programs to begin productive work with the child as well.