

# The Role of Music in the Education of Special Learners

## The Music Education of Special Learners

Preparing teachers to effectively teach special learners includes the development not only of teaching skills but of attitudes as well. Some teachers will need to come to grips with personal feelings and expectations regarding handicapped individuals. All will need to understand the implications of certain disabling conditions for music learning. Music teachers who intend to achieve music goals in their work with special learners must acquire special teaching techniques and develop skills in selecting and adapting appropriate resource materials.

Music is a multisensory experience. Listening, seeing, moving, and feeling are all important in the music education curriculum, making music a natural discipline through which to develop sensory perception and psychomotor skills. Music education, in addition to being a valuable content area of the curriculum in its own right, can also be an aid in developing basic skills in all children. Children actually *learn* to learn through music activities, since music helps develop skills that are necessary for cognitive, affective, and psychomotor functioning utilized in all areas of the school curriculum. Unlike activities dependent on verbal interaction, music rarely fails to communicate with every child. In addition, because of the flexibility and vast resources available in music, a single activity can include children of widely differing abilities. Thus, music enables every intellect to be challenged, no matter how inhibited. Music provides an alternative means through which children who are unable or unwilling to speak can express feelings and ideas.

Music educators for special learners should not attempt to replace other teaching methods in developing basic learning skills, but music should *supplement* them by providing a different medium through which they can be reinforced and refined.

## Special Education Music

The primary purpose of music education programs for handicapped children (as for all children) is to actively involve the child in meaningful music experiences that will develop music concepts and skills appropriate to individual functioning level.

A special education music teacher must be prepared to be a member of a multidisciplinary team of professionals who coordinate their individual efforts with each child. Such a team might include the school psychologist, psychiatrist, resource teacher, classroom teacher, nurse, health officer, social worker, speech therapist, and any other school staff member directly concerned with the development of children. Communications among team members must be continuous, with problems and progress discussed freely. All must appreciate each other's expertise in his or her respective field when decisions are made concerning a child.

Labeling has created stigmas and stereotypes that do a great disservice to individuals with disabilities. A disability or an impairment is not necessarily a

handicap. Most often, society determines what is a handicap by the way it accepts or rejects certain disabilities and impairments. As educators, we must strive to educate not only those individuals handicapped by society's attitudes, but society itself.

Throughout the years, educators have accepted the labels and classifications of exceptional children given them by other professionals. The medical profession most often labels by etiology, or the cause of the disability. The psychology profession most often labels by the dysfunction itself. Although these terms may be meaningful to those professionals, they do not provide much insight that will enhance the educational management of children and, therefore, are not helpful to educators. As a result, teaching is often designed to fit labels rather than individuals. What teachers need to know in order to deal more effectively with all children is a profile of both strengths and weaknesses in specific skill areas. IQ scores alone do not provide functional data in this regard; an inventory of basic skill development, on the other hand, will give both the classroom teacher and the music teacher something more concrete on which to base goals for individuals. The Individualized Education Program (IEP), when made available to all teachers, has the potential to coordinate the various curriculum areas in planning goals for special learners.

Specific learning skills are generally grouped into categories such as gross motor, language, auditory, and visual. All learning skills can be dealt with in any music situation, but some are nearly always inherent in every music activity. These fall into the perceptual motor classification, since most music experiences involve sensory perception (i.e., listening, seeing, feeling) combined with motor acts (i.e. singing, playing, moving).

Even today, there are those who are unaware that children with cognitive and physical impairments can, *with effective teaching*, learn music concepts and skills, and that music programs for them need not be relegated to a merely recreational or entertainment level. Of course, there have always been dedicated and imaginative music teachers who were unwilling to compromise their professional goals. Fortunately, these individuals accepted the challenge to teach the deaf to sing and to play instruments, the retarded to learn fundamental music skills, and individuals lacking functional hands and fingers to play instruments. Those music educators, who can be found in countries around the world, have led the way in applying special education research to music teaching and have been responsible for this new aspect of music education.

### **Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) – Implications for Music Education**

“It is the purpose of the Act to assure that all handicapped children have available to them, within the time periods specified in section 612 (2)(B), a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs, to assure that the rights of handicapped children and their parents or guardians are protected, to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all handicapped children, and

to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children." (P.L. 94-142)

It should be emphasized, however, that social attitudes can only be enhanced if the handicapped child can function successfully in an inclusion setting. If not, other children inevitably develop negative, or at best patronizing, attitudes toward that individual and all the handicapped in general.

When compared with children in "isolated environments," the children who have been successfully included have shown better social and academic adjustment. School records indicate that normally intelligent hearing-impaired children have improved skills in both speaking and understanding language, attributed presumably to day-to-day contact with hearing peers; the sight impaired have shown increased mobility and independence, and children with chronic health and crippling conditions seem to be more tolerant of their limitations and more willing to try alternative activities. Also, when inclusion begins at the preprimary level, there is a far better chance for both normal and handicapped children to adjust socially to each other.

No responsible advocate of inclusion ever suggested "wholesale" inclusion of special children. Not every child is able to function in an inclusion situation at any given time. Each child should be evaluated on individual merits as a candidate for inclusion *in every aspect of school life*, and this evaluation should be continuous, even after placement. *Inclusion should not be an all-or-nothing approach.* If curriculum areas are selected at the academic *and* social levels of the child, there is a reasonable chance for success. For the more severely impaired, inclusion may need to be limited to the social aspects of school life until enough skills are mastered to enable success in the curriculum.

### **The Inclusion of a Child in Music**

To consider a handicapped child for successful placement into a regular general or instrumental music class, one must be cognizant of the individual's mental age, motor development, abstracting abilities, attention span, and social development, as well as the level of certain academic skills such as reading and computation. Music education programs designed for the majority make heavy demands on perceptual motor skills, integration and synthesis, symbolization and abstraction, and physical energy. Since the majority of handicapped children are characteristically lacking in many of these skills, particularly in the formative years, music teachers will need to be very aware of individual learning styles and needs in order to plan for their successful participation. The versatility of music activities and the multiple general education benefits that accrue from music education experiences, tend to make the general music class an attractive curriculum area for inclusion.

In addition to their involvement in multidisciplinary team approaches to identifying and planning programs for special learners, music teachers are recognizing the benefits of more direct contact with the parents of their pupils. Many parents report noticing their youngster's positive responses to music at an early age, and they are extremely supportive of music education programs.

Special education music teachers can counsel parents as to musical toys, records, and activities that can be useful in the home. When professionals show a sincere interest in helping parents understand and cope with their child's differences, parents can be powerful allies.

### **Summary**

Music is a content area of the curriculum that not only strives for the achievement of facts and skills, but provides all children with learning experiences that are basic to learning in other areas of the curriculum as well. Because of its multisensory demands, music contributes to helping children learn how to both process and react to sensory stimulation. Since most music activities are perceptual motor by nature, these abilities are continually being developed in the music class and music lesson.

The music education curriculum focuses on activities in which children conceptualize through experiencing the elements of music (e.g., melody, rhythm, form, tone, and color), the styles of music, and uses of music in society. In addition, by relating music elements to other art media, the children learn to integrate and synthesize concepts that are common to all the arts. Finally, through active participation in music, children are guided in analyzing music processes by discovering how the various elements of music are combined in composition. If the foregoing experiences have been amply provided, children are able to make musical judgments based not just on arbitrary personal preference, but on aesthetic rationale as well.

If we believe a music education is a vital part of the general education of all children, then we must more actively advocate music education programs for special learners. This includes providing an equal opportunity aesthetic education through music that offers the same program options that are available to other children (i.e., classroom music instruction, instrumental lessons, and performance ensembles). The challenge to the music educator teaching special learners is in ensuring that the music experiences provided are not only appropriate to the individual abilities of that child, but faithful to accepted music education goals for all children as well.