

Autism in the Music Classroom: Techniques for Teaching Students with Autism in
Mainstream vs. Self-contained Classrooms

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AUTISM IN THE MUSIC CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of teaching aids and techniques to support students with autism in mainstream classrooms vs. self-contained classrooms. In this study, teachers of students with autism were surveyed to examine what aids and techniques they use to help students with autism, become successful in their elementary general music classes. The data was collected over a two week period, in the winter, then compiled and analyzed to create a comprehensive list of aids and techniques to use in the elementary general music classroom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I entered my first teaching job I realized how unprepared I felt to teach special learners, especially students with autism. There was no mention of teaching a self-contained classroom. During teacher in-service, my first couple of days in the district, we had a meeting with the special education teachers. That year the related arts teachers (music, physical education, art, and at the time computers) were going to teach a self-contained class. I was very worried about this as I had never had any class or real life experience teaching special learners. Luckily, the other music teacher in the building taught the self-contained class for my first two years in the district, so I had time to work with her and get information. Now I am teaching a self contained class with very little experience or training and no time during the school day to collaborate with the teachers who are with these students the most. In talking with other music teachers I came to the conclusion that many teachers have felt, or are feeling the same way. I did some research about teacher preparation and found there hasn't been much research done in the last twenty years on teacher preparation programs and what types of class's college degree programs are requiring. The research back then seemed to think programs were changing to incorporate more classes on special learners. I was interested to see how other teachers felt as I did not feel my undergraduate program had many classes or real life practice with this subject. This study was developed to help myself as well as other teachers who are feeling unprepared, have a place to find current strategies that music teachers have tried and tested and are working in their classrooms.

I continue to feel that special learners, especially students with autism, are overlooked in the music classroom because the teacher does not have the knowledge or experience to help these students become successful in music. These teachers are not given the tools through their

degree program nor through other trainings. Since autism is a spectrum disorder, there is a variety of severity among these students; there is no one technique or method to use. This study will compile a list of techniques that can be referred to when having trouble reaching a student. Dr. Stephen Shore said, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” (Autism Speaks, 2017)

It is the purpose of this study to identify effective methods of teaching general music to children with autism, based on a review of current research on autism and a survey of music teachers who teach students with autism. I used social media to share my survey with general music teachers, who were asked about the collaboration with special education teachers, training they have had, and what their program looks like in order to identify strategies that have been the most effective in addressing the following areas: singing, playing instruments, beat and rhythm, music reading, and music writing.

I am expecting to find that many general music teachers are in the same situation as I am where they have been thrown into teaching a class of special learners that they were not told they were going to be teaching when they were hired and they have not had many classes or inservices on this topic. I am expecting to find, with the grueling schedules that most music teachers have, that not only do they feel unprepared to teach these students, but they are not given time in the school day to work through their ideas and to collaborate with the other teachers who do. One of the questions I’m interested in finding the answers to, is how much paraprofessional support teachers are given with these students? My school is very low on paraprofessionals and even though the teachers have help in other classes, many times the related arts teachers (music, art, physical education, and stem) are not given the same support or have to ask many times for someone to be sent with the student.

The questions I really want answers to are what strategies are working for other teachers? Are the strategies that teachers are using today the same as the strategies found in the research I have done? Is what works on paper actually what works in real life situations? When finished this project, I would like to feel well prepared with strategies on what to do in different circumstances and how to help special learners, especially students with autism, be successful in music class and feel comfortable and welcomed in my classroom.

Chapter 2: A Review of Current Literature

What is Autism?

Since 2013, Autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD) has been characterized as a range of challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication (Autism Speaks, 2019). “Symptoms of autism include (1) communication delays, (2) repeating words or phrases, (3) unresponsiveness to verbal cues, (4) social difficulties, (5) oversensitivity (sound, light, etc.), (6) resistance to change, (7) lack of direct eye contact, (8) odd or unusual repetitive play, and (9) self-stimulation” (Adamek & Darrow, 2005). Since autism is a spectrum disorder, children may display some or all of these symptoms; every child has their own set of strengths and challenges (Autism Speaks, 2019). Students with autism tend to retreat into their comfort zone but this does not mean they are not paying attention. They may comprehend much more than they are able to express verbally (R. Hourigan, & A. Hourigan, 2009).

Getting to Know Your Students

As with any other student, getting to know students is important to develop a rapport. This will help to build self-esteem and lessen frustration. The teacher can celebrate each small success; which helps build the student/teacher relationship. This helps the student feel valued and a part of the school community (Hammel, 2004). The teacher should also avoid power struggles with students by providing specific instructions and feedback about behavior privately rather than risking a verbal struggle in front of the class. Always remember to be positive whenever possible and reinforce good behaviors (Hammel, 2004).

The areas of interest for each student can be built into many activities and will help the child stay focused and engaged. Try to use many interests in the lesson to help the student stay engaged (Davis, 2003). The most important thing is for a teacher to know the student’s strengths

and weaknesses, focusing on what the student can do, not just what he or she cannot do (Darrow & Adamek, 2018). The teacher should collaborate with other school professionals; talk with the parents and with the student to find what works for them. This team should create a list that includes the student's strengths, preferences and interests, and then a second list that includes fearful and frustrating situations. These lists can then be shared with everyone that comes into contact with each student (Davis, 2003). "Questions you want to ask may include the following: (1) does the student respond to visual or aural teacher? (2) Does routine comfort the child? (3) Are there sensitivities that may impede his or her learning (e.g., loud sound)? And (4) what is the current cognitive level of the child" (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009)? Some students may be capable of completing a self-evaluation, which will help them understand what is expected and what will earn them rewards and consequences (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009).

If the child has a behavior checklist, it can be provided by the classroom teacher or therapist, or by the music teacher. The time spent at the end of your class filling out this checklist with the child is a great time for developing a working knowledge and relationship with the child. If an aide is not available, pick a classroom buddy who can be an escort back to the regular classroom (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009). When challenging behaviors arise, make sure to talk with the classroom teacher. They may have already determined what triggers these behaviors as well as effective rewards and consequences. Music teachers should communicate with the classroom teachers to find out what is already in place. To help prevent behaviors, the music environment should be structured to decrease distractions and increase students' attention (Darrow & Adamek, 2017).

Getting to Know the Staff at Your School

Another way music teachers can work to benefit students with Autism in their classroom is to check with classroom teachers to see if there are of any special services these students may receive in their general classroom (Hammel, 2004). The paraprofessionals are with the students all day so the teacher can learn a lot from them and should allow them to offer suggestions based on their experiences (Hammel, 2004). Music educators may need to spend time with other professionals and parents strategizing how to bring students with autism out of their chosen isolation and into the music classroom (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009).

Most of the time it is too difficult for the “team” to include the music teacher in IEP meetings as they are usually scheduled during the teachers prep, which is the same time the music teacher has the student. The music teacher should make sure to ask about the possibility of attending an IEP meeting for a student in their class. They should let administrators know that they consider this an important part of their preparation to teach special learners (Hammel, 2004).

Teacher Preparation

Many teachers are coming out of their undergraduate program with very little experience learning about and working with special learners. Hammel (2001), found teachers felt lacking in experiences with IEP conferences, diagnostic tools, and strategies for learning, and structured field experiences with special learners. Music teachers said, in pre-service experiences, they observed fewer learners than what was discussed in class and actually taught less than what they observed (Hammel, 2001).

“Teachers recommend that college and university faculty create courses that are ‘More real life and less ideal or perfect’ and include methods and materials for adaptation in the music

classroom. Several teachers even suggest that sign language classes would benefit future music teachers” (Hammel, 2001). Hammel says programs need “more hands-on and/or observation of how mainstreaming really functions on a day-to-day basis. How do you help the special learners without ignoring the needs of the other twenty students” (Hammel, 2001)?

Music educators feel frustrated, fearful, and powerless when it comes to teaching special learners because they feel unprepared to teach such a broad range of students (Adamek, 2001). The mixture of student abilities and learning styles found in classrooms today is often daunting to educators early in their careers (Darrow & Adamek, 2018). Music teachers are overcoming what was missing by attending workshops, graduate courses, in-service conferences, and collaboration with special educators. Although many teachers don’t feel adequately prepared to teach special learners, they are adapting their teaching methods and materials to the best of their ability (Hammel, 2001). Music teachers are increasingly being asked to teach music to self-contained autism classrooms, often without support or training (R. Hourigan, & A. Hourigan, 2009). To develop effective strategies, music educators often need to collaborate with other professionals in the school, on their own time, to gather information about students’ abilities and special needs (Darrow & Adamek, 2018). Teachers are continually feeling overwhelmed with not enough time in the day to adequately prepare for the instruction of these special learners.

Challenges

A major challenge that faces students with autism is that they are more prone to meltdowns, an intense response to overwhelming situations. Meltdowns usually occur when students lose control verbally by shouting, screaming or crying; or physically kicking, lashing out, or biting (National Autistic Society, 2016). Students with autism usually show signs of distress before they have a meltdown. They start to exhibit behaviors such as pacing, seeking

reassurance through repetitive questioning or physical signs such as rocking or being very still (National Autistic Society, 2016). One cause of a meltdown could be a change in the routine. These students want consistent, predictable routines and can become distressed with the slightest change (National Autistic Society, 2016). Some students are able to control themselves enough to avoid a meltdown and will usually express their overwhelming feelings in other ways such as refusing to interact, withdrawing from situations they find challenging, or avoiding the activities all together (National Autistic Society, 2016).

Students with ASD may have trouble following directions. This usually has more to do with understanding what is expected and being able to organize themselves in order to respond appropriately than it does with wanting to follow the direction. If a student is not responding to a direction, the teacher should ask themselves if the instruction is something the student needs to understand this one time or is it a lifelong direction (Vicker, 2004). When the student knows what to do, they may not respond consistently. Reasons for this might be the teacher never got the attention of the child before giving the direction; the child was distracted by something else before being able to answer; or the child is simply refusing to comply with the request (Vicker, 2004).

Imitation or rote learning, the ability to observe and reproduce the behaviors of a model, are key concepts in teaching music. Students with ASD find these very difficult (Rogers, Hepburn, Stackhouse, & Wehner, 2003). They are not able to copy and perform movements, learned through imitation, with the skill and refinement of other students in their class (Rogers et al., 2003). These students experience more difficulty in imitating seemingly non-meaningful gestures, such as those associated with games, where the teacher performs motions that correspond to elements of music and students imitate these actions (Scott, 2016). Scott (2016),

recommends that teachers provide opportunities for children to perform both gestures that mean something to them outside of music, as well as non-meaningful gestures so the students are not overwhelmed and frustrated by continuous expectations to perform tasks they do not understand.

Behavior disruptions can be a challenge for the student with ASD as well as the students in the class and the teacher. When a student with ASD is continually disrupting the class it is taking away from the instruction time and the learning of all the other students in the class. The teacher needs to be able to look for “triggers” that may cause such behavior (Hourigan & Hourigan, 2009). Triggers may include giving instructions that the student doesn’t understand. The teacher may be talking about a subject that is over the student’s head. The student doesn’t know the proper procedures or way to behave in the specific classroom. The teacher should make sure to walk through procedures with the students (Davis, 2007). The student with ASD may not like a partner or group they are working with, as social etiquette can be difficult for them. They have trouble interpreting the emotions of others, picking up on body language, glances, looks, or other emotionally charged social cues (Hourigan & Hammel, 2017). They don’t know how to properly work with other students and if those around them aren’t helpful, it can make the situation worse. Just because students with ASD have problems working with other students, does not mean it should be ignored. Children on the spectrum still need to learn how to appropriately interact with their peers for them to be successful in school (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009).

Many students with autism have difficulty with overstimulation in music class. This could occur from the noise of students working in groups, the loud music, or many instruments playing at the same time. The student may need to leave class when the noise level gets out of hand or use headphones during these times (Darrow & Adamek, 2018).

Strategies

Since ASD is different for each student, it is important to have many strategies to try when having difficulties. Here are some of the strategies found in the research. One of the challenges discussed was a student having meltdowns. Some strategies a teacher should try if they see signs of a meltdown are trying to distract the student, creating a diversion, help the student use calming strategies such as fidget toys or listening to music, and knowing what the students triggers are and removing them. The most important thing to recognize in this situation is that the best thing a teacher can do is to remain calm (National Autistic Society, 2016).

Two different strategies to help students be successful are accommodations and modifications. Examples of accommodations that can be made are, learning the same material but with additional support, enlarging music for students with vision loss, using a microphone for students with hearing loss, having a student with ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) sit where there are no distractions or allowing students to use adapted instruments that enable them to play the music as written (Darrow & Adamek, 2018). Creating a felt board or other raised-texture board with heavy rope one to two inches thick to represent the staff, this would be very beneficial for the kinesthetic learners or the visually impaired (Hammel, 2004).

Modifications are changing what is learned for a student who cannot complete the assignment in the same way as the rest of the class. These could include allowing a student to play an alternate part such as an ostinato or descant, or only the downbeats or the steady beat in a particularly difficult passage if he or she is unable to play the part as written (Darrow & Adamek, 2018). The teacher may also need to adapt the amount of material that students are expected to learn such as recognizing that a melody moves up or down vs. the rest of the class recognizing that it moves up by skip or down by step. Another way to adapt the material is to give the

students separate rhythmic and melodic assignments until they are able to combine the two (Hammel, 2004). Using shorter tests more frequently will help students to work at an even pace rather than trying to study a large amount of material right before a long exam (Hammel, 2004). When giving these exams it is recommended that the student be given the same exam as the rest of the class, but the teacher should circle a certain number of questions that the student is responsible for. This way the student will not feel different from their peers (Adamek, 2001).

Students with ASD are very schedule oriented. “A “picture” schedule that outlines the day’s activities with pictures instead of words is good for nonreaders and students with autism” (Hammel, 2004). Changes in the schedule can be very stressful for them. If this happens, the “picture” schedule can be changed or a symbol can be used to explain the change, telling the child if the change will affect the whole day or just a part of the day. (National Autistic Society, 2016).

If a child is not responding to a question or instruction the teacher may need to move closer to the child, tap them on the shoulder, use a cue card or picture card to show what they need to be doing, or use a timer to mark the end of the task before transitioning to the next (Vicker, 2004). Make sure to give directions as simply as possible (Davis, 2007). Wherever possible use visuals or gestures to accompany instructions. Many students with ASD are visual learners and this will greatly help them with comprehension (Davis, 2007). Using these cues will also encourage a child to look at you and make eye contact for instructions (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009). If allowing students to choose which song or activity to do next, take pictures of songbook covers or an image that can be recognizable for the song or activity. These images can be displayed in a pocket chart, posted on the board, held out like a deck of cards, or put on popsicle sticks to help the student choose the activity (Scholtens, 2019).

It is a great idea to involve all students in the class to aid students with special needs. A “helper” may be chosen to help with group activities or to be placed next to the student with special needs to help keep them focused. When asked to help a classmate with special needs, children tend to take ownership of the learning community and shift some responsibility from the child’s aide and/or the music teacher (R. Hourigan, & A. Hourigan, 2009).

If a student is having trouble with behavior, many teachers use a prearranged signal or word to notify the student when his or her behavior is inappropriate. This allows the student an opportunity to modify behavior, often before other students in the class are aware of it (Hammel, 2004). For students who have difficulty with constantly touching musical instruments, put a visual ‘stop’ or universal NO sign on the instruments. If possible, allow students at the end of the class period as a reward, to play a musical instrument for a few minutes.

When children are participating in a call-and-response song, such as a name song or a hello song, the teacher should make every attempt to get a response. Children with autism may prefer to be unresponsive. Even a response such as eye contact or a smile should be considered a success in this case (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009). Students with ASD often enjoy being the subject of a song and eagerly anticipate their special moment; this keeps them out of the “hot seat” but allows them to enjoy being in the spotlight (Scholtens, 2019).

Important Skills Learned From Music

“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”

(Darrow & Adamek, 2017, p. 34). Croom (2012), 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 characteristics are also foundational to the development of self-determination. Exposure to songs and singing is a valuable component of a well-rounded educational experience for children on the autism spectrum. The repertoire of songs commonly used in elementary-level music programs provides children on the autism spectrum with multiple, ongoing opportunities to imitate the actions of others and, in doing so, to practice small and gross motor movements (Rogers et. al., 2003). It has been seen that children who cannot communicate verbally have acquired skills in music that go above their typical peers. The challenge for music teachers is discovering how to tap into their responsiveness while avoiding the distractions that arise for these children (R. Hourigan & A. Hourigan, 2009).

A music educators' primary focus is to teach and develop music skills, however most would agree that non-music skill areas, such as cooperation, independence, classroom behavior, and respect, could also be learned through many music experiences (Adamek, 2001).

As challenging as it can be for the music teacher to adapt and find the time to learn about special learners, it has been shown that these students can be very successful and learn a lot from being in a music classroom. If the teacher takes the time, they can gain knowledge from interacting with these students.

Chapter 3: Detail of Study and Research Findings

To find out more about teaching children with autism, I surveyed teachers from schools throughout the United States. My results came from teachers who are currently teaching or have taught elementary general music within the last five years. I created a survey using Google Forms (Appendix A) and asked teachers to address the topics addressed in my rationale. I sent out the survey using social media on Monday, January 20, 2020. In a two week period I received a total of 47 responses. My sample was equally distributed with teacher experience. There was almost a 25% split between four of the five categories which were 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and 16 or more years. One out of the 47 participants was teaching their first year.

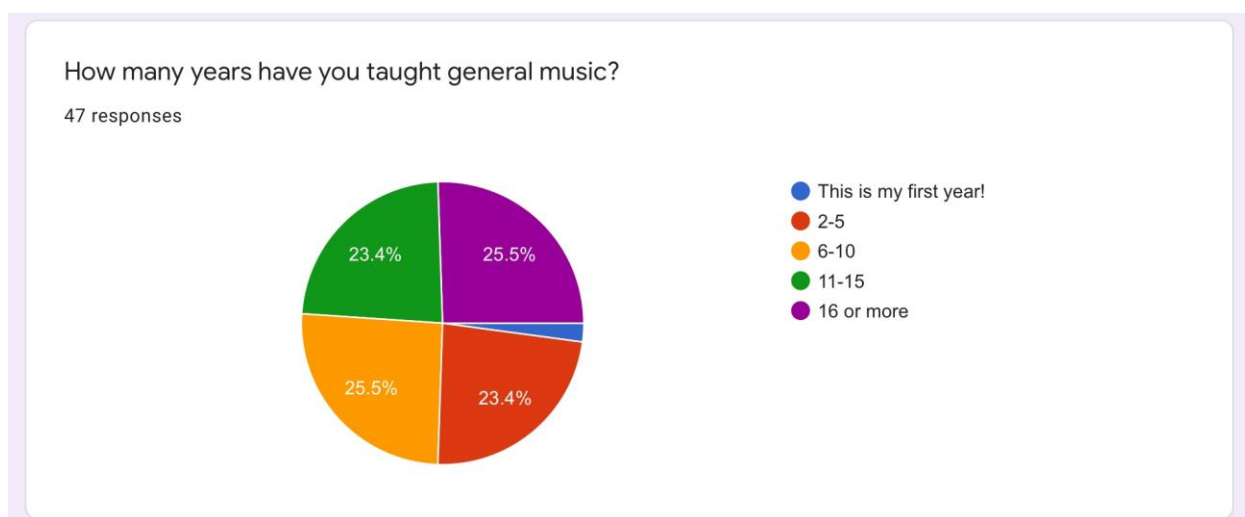


Table 1: Years of teaching experience

Collaboration

To find out about how often teachers are able to collaborate with Special Education teachers in their schools, I used two multiple choice questions. When asked if music teachers collaborate with special education teachers, only 60% said they did. I followed up with a question asking if teachers were given time during the school day to meet with the special education teachers and 96% of teachers said they were not. Of the 28 teachers that said they

collaborate with the special education teachers in their school, only two of them were given time to do so during the school day.

Overall, I found that educators are asked to teach students with special needs but they are not given the time during the school day to meet with the teachers and paraprofessionals who are with them for the majority of the student's school day. A large number of teachers take time out of their day to find out how to help these students be successful.

Teacher Training

Next, I asked questions about background and training. The questions were multiple choice, with ranges of 0-5 hours, 6-10 hours, 11-15 hours, and 16 or more hours. When asked how many hours of professional development teachers had on special learners in the general education classroom, 64% of teachers had 0-5 hours and 15% had 16 or more hours.



Table 2: Hours of professional development in general education

My next question asked specifically about professional development in the music classroom.

Seventy-nine percent of teachers said they only had 0-5 hours while 6% had 16 or more.

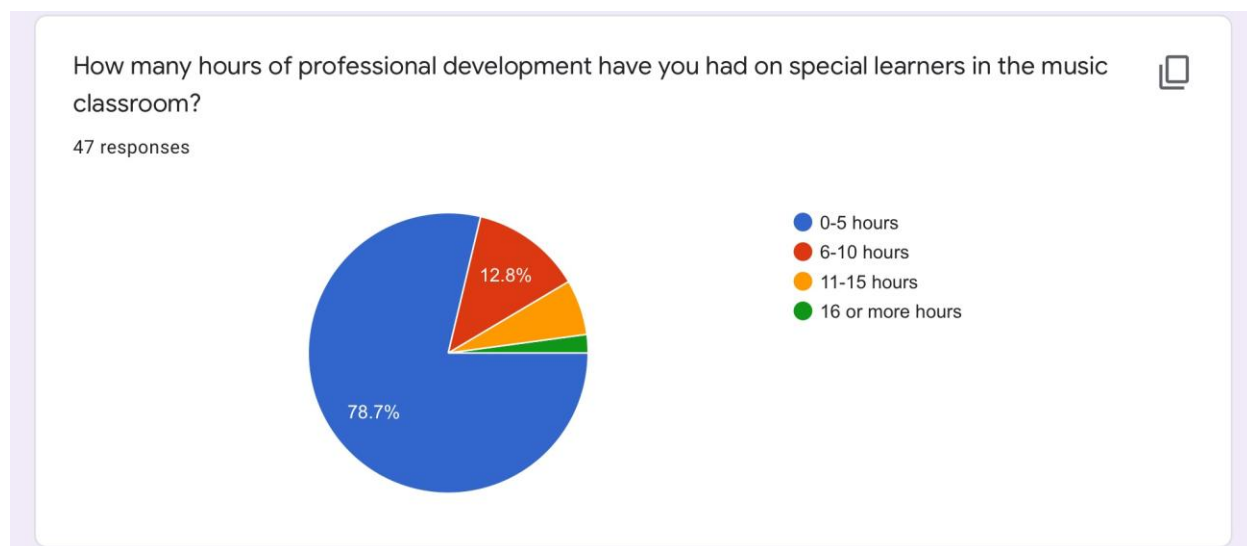


Table 3: Hours of professional development in music classroom

Focusing on autism, a large amount of teachers (85%) have only had 0-5 hours of professional development. Of the 12 who have been working 16 or more years, 7 of them (58%) said they did not have anything included in their program.

My final question asked whether or not undergraduate college degree programs included any classes on special learners. Out of the 11 teachers that had been teaching 2-5 years, 4 of them (36%) said they did not have any classes included in their degree program.

Mainstream vs. Self-Contained

I was interested in how students with autism are attending music class. In my school district, I have four students who are a self-contained class, and many other students who are mainstreamed into the general music classes. In my survey, I asked if students in their current position are mainstreamed, self-contained or a combination of both. Sixty percent are a combination of both, 34% are mainstreamed, and 6% only have self-contained classes. There

were 31 teachers (66%) who were not aware they would be teaching self-contained classes when they were hired.

My final question in this section was whether paraprofessionals come with the students to music class. The split was close to even with paraprofessionals always coming with the students (51%) and sometimes coming with students (45%). There were a few (4%) who said paraprofessionals never come with their students.

One participant was very particular about autistic students being mainstreamed versus self-contained. They said, “The policy of least restrictive environment has hindered the ability to teach autistic learners. To just place autistic support students in an environment of regular education students without regard to their IEP’s does not help either those autistic or regular education students. Students with autism need to feel successful just as regular education students do but often the curriculum is too sophisticated for them to master. Autistic students also respond to music and enjoy the repetition as well as the ability to respond. If the music environment is above their developmental level, they will not respond or interact with their regular education students.” Teaching fifth and sixth grade general music, I have a hard time finding material that my students with autism can participate with, that is not too “babyish” for the regular education students. Since many of my students don’t have paraprofessionals they don’t always have the support needed to complete the tasks and with the growing number of students added to the classes, it makes it difficult to help these students.

Strategies

My final question was an open-ended question that asked participants to share strategies that are working for them. This was not a required question and of the 47 teachers there were 31 responses. I was most looking forward to the responses for this question and comparing them to

the research I did. A full list of responses can be found in Appendix B. Many of the responses matched my research including:

- Getting to know the students IEP's
- Find out how they learn best (aural, visual, etc)
- Color coding music/symbols
- Using lots of visuals
- Sitting away from loud noises and distractions
- Hands on and sensory focused activities
- Creating a routine and sticking with it (incorporating some of the routines from the student's special education classroom)
- Giving time marker announcements for any transitions that are outside of normal routine.
- Giving clear and short directions.
- Immediate rewards (tapping light, holding a stuffed animal)
- Positive reinforcement with extrinsic motivation for behavior management
- Modifying the content
- Peer helpers
- One on one instruction when possible
- Giving choices for breakout work
- Giving each student a turn to be featured in front of peers
- Reaching out to aides
- Using a calm and slightly quieter speaking voice when teaching because students with autism are sensitive to sound
- Task cards

- First/then statements
- A multitude of instrument options both traditional and adaptive – using drum circles and rhythm sticks
- Being flexible with expectations for their participation

Strategies specific to self-contained

- Incorporate a lot of hand movements and instruments
- Getting to know students' preferences (computers, instruments, coloring, etc.) and designing lessons around them
- Using the curriculum First Steps in Music by Feierabend
- Incorporate music therapy ideas

Some new strategies that I would like to try are

- Having a break corner with a variety of fidgets that students can use when feeling overwhelmed
- When you find something they love, always have it as an option or reward.
- Utilizing music technology apps and headphones when unable or unwilling to participate in the large group.

One participant said they use reverse inclusion where students volunteer to go into the special education class for various activities. This is something the other teacher in my building tried recently. Not only was it a great opportunity for the student with autism but, the regular education students had a blast!!

A participant mentioned that her school had recently moved from having the students mainstreamed to a more “adaptive” self-contained style. They said the new program was

overwhelming at first but seems to be going very well. There is currently one student being mainstreamed and they seem to be “excelling with routine and short bursts of instruction.”

Many responses included giving the students opportunities to play musical instruments, doing drum circles and rhythm stick activities, because they are sensory, hands on activities. Some responses were specific to reading music such as re-writing instrument parts, color coding music and symbols, assigning another student to help with counting, and following the music.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The goal of this study was to create a list of strategies that teachers are using in their classroom, to help students with autism to be successful. Part of my goal was to create a resource for other music teachers who are teaching students with autism. I was also interested in finding whether pre-service teachers were being prepared to teach these students and were getting professional development about this topic after entering the profession.

With the increased number of IEP's and students who are being identified as special learners, it continues to surprise me that there are still undergraduate degree programs that are not including classes on special learners or are lacking in the number of classes/hours being offered. In chapter 2 (Hammel, 2001) teachers were recommending college and university faculty create courses that are "More real life and less ideal or perfect" and include methods and materials for adaptation in the music classroom. While students in teacher preparation programs have been required to include more training in this area, teachers in this survey continue to think they didn't have very many hours of professional development on these topics. I was hoping things were changing, but based on those that answered my survey the numbers have not changed that much.

I was not surprised with the number of people who said they were not given time during the school day to collaborate with the special education teachers in their buildings. While I understand how this happens with teachers' schedules being so packed with classes, special education teachers having their planning period during the time students are coming to music class, and faculty meeting times being designated to specific topics, there should be some change to allow for collaboration. My current schedule does not allow for transition time, so I don't have time to debrief with homeroom teachers when they come to pick up their classes or with

paraprofessionals when a specific situation arises and I find that extremely frustrating. By the time I'm able to do anything about it, the child has gone home and the only thing that can be done is to learn what to do when/if the situation were to occur again.

Moving Forward

After looking at my data, I realized there were a few questions I would have liked to have answered. In my survey, more than half of the participants said they were not aware they would be teaching a self-contained class when they were hired. I would like to know; did they end up teaching a self-contained class their first year or had they been teaching for some time, as well as how much notice were they given before seeing the students for the first time?

I am also interested in further questions about paraprofessionals who do not go to music class with students. In my survey, two teachers said paraprofessionals do not attend music class. Since I have experienced many teachers who say they would prefer paraprofessionals not attend their classes because they are not helpful and can be more distracting than the student, I would have liked to ask: Does the teacher decide they don't want paraprofessionals coming with the students or are there no paraprofessionals available? I would also like to know: If paraprofessionals are not coming with the students do the teachers feel they should be?

One of the survey participants said a strategy that works for them is to have technology apps and headphones when a student is unable or unwilling to participate in the music class activity. As I teach fifth & sixth grade students, who are becoming harder and harder to engage in music class activities, I would like to know for specific students: Does this become a battle with the student that more times than not, they would prefer to use the technology instead of what is going on in class? And how to overcome that battle? I would also be interested in continuing my research to find apps that work well in these situations.

Classroom Application

I have tried a few of the new suggestions and found them to be a positive influence in my classroom both with inclusion and main-streamed students. For example, I have one student in my main-streamed class who has a few favorite songs that he asks for every time he comes to music. I found ways to use them as a learning experience, but have continued to use them as reward songs.

Many respondents and information found in my research suggested keeping a routine as one of the most important things you can do for a child with autism. When reading IEP's for students with autism, this is almost always one of the SDI's (specially designed instruction) listed. I try to create a schedule and stick to a routine for all my students. In my inclusion classroom, I have always had a schedule on the board for what we were trying to accomplish each class period. As my teaching schedule has changed over the years, this has posed a challenge at times, but using technology has helped to project that schedule on the board as the students are coming into the classroom. For my main-streamed class, one thing that was suggested multiple times, that I would like to try, is making a picture schedule to help these students recognize what we will be doing for each class.

Autism is found differently in each child so while this list is a great place to start, this is just a short list. I will reiterate what I have read multiple times: the most important thing to remember is that you have to find what works for the student and you may have to try many techniques from this list before finding one that will work. As the education world continues to change, there continues to be more to explore on the topic of music and autism. I hope to discover it as I continue to teach and learn in the years to come.

Appendix A: Questionnaire Distributed to Elementary Music Teachers

Autism in the General Music Classroom

* Required

How many years have you taught general music? *

- ☐ This is my first year!
- ☐ 2-5
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 11-15
- ☐ 16 or more

Do you collaborate with the special education teachers at your school? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Are you given time in the school day to collaborate with the special education teachers at your school? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Background/Training Questions

How many hours of professional development have you had on special learners in general education? *

- ☐ 0-5 hours
- ☐ 6-10 hours
- ☐ 11-15 hours
- ☐ 16 or more hours

How many hours of professional development have you had on special learners in the music classroom?

- ☐ 0-5 hours
- ☐ 6-10 hours
- ☐ 11-15 hours
- ☐ 16 or more hours

How many hours of professional development have you had specifically on autism? *

- ☐ 0-5
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 11-15
- ☐ 16 or more

Did you have any classes on special learners in your undergraduate college program? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Your Classroom

In your current position: are your students with autism: *

- ☐ Mainstreamed (skip next question)
- ☐ Self-Contained
- ☐ A combination of both

In your current position: did you know you would be teaching self-contained when you were hired? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do aids come with the students to music class? *

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

Open-Ended

Do you have specific strategies that you find work well for students with autism?

Your answer _____

If willing to talk further on this topic please leave your email address.

Your answer _____

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Appendix B: Open-Ended Question Responses

Open-Ended

Do you have specific strategies that you find work well for students with autism?

31 responses

Giving choices for breakout work, utilizing music technology apps and headphone instruments when unable or unwilling to participate in the large group, giving each student a turn to be featured in front of peers, being meticulous with adhering to a normal routine of activities and giving time marker announcements for any transitions that are outside of normal routine.

Permission to sit with distance from noise

Get to know their IEP; find out how they learn best (aural, visual, etc); re-write their parts in band/orchestra as needed; color coding music/symbols; use the buddy system and assign another student to help autistic student with counting, following the music, etc; record the music for them to listen to at home; allow time away from class with aid if sensory input is too much; positive reinforcement with extrinsic motivation for behavior management.

Honestly, iPad communication, task cards, first/then statements, verbal and physical reinforcements, peer helpers, reaching out and working with the aids are probably the most common ones I use.

PECS, schedule, and UDL planning

I have a routine that I stick to - I find that for most of my students with autism, they really benefit from a consistent routine.

Incorporating routines they are accustomed to from their classroom. Lots of repetition from week to week.

Visuals

For self-contained classes I incorporate a lot of hand movements and instruments, especially for my non-verbal students. I spend as much time as possible getting to know students' preferences (computers, instruments, coloring, etc.) so I can design lessons around them, and I collaborate with the classroom teachers and Paras to align my management strategies with theirs as much as possible for continuity. In the inclusion classes, I rely on the Paras to provide extra support if needed, but otherwise I find the students in inclusion classes are able to fully participate, and often excel, in the regular general lessons.

Routine

Hands on activities, sensory focused activities, one-on-one opportunities, a multitude of instrument options both traditional and adaptive

Freedom to explore and move, visuals, 1pn1 check ins

Patience. It takes time to get to know the students. Routine is huge. Visual aids help a lot also.

Physical experiences with music and instruments.

fewer objectives repeated more often. slower instructional delivery. go with the flow.

Depends on the particular student & the students strengths & IEP.

Modify!!

Small group settings. Hands on activities

No

Yes. I use First Steps in Music by Feierabend along with some music therapy ideas.

I actually teach at a school that is comprised of mostly Autistic kids. Please feel free to contact me!

It is difficult to form relationships with ANY students on a 6-day rotation.

I have a break corner with a variety of fidgets that the students can use when they're feeling overwhelmed. I also do my best to maintain a calm and slightly quieter speaking voice when I'm teaching because many of my students with autism are sensitive to sound.

Giving clear, and short directions. Immediate rewards (tapping light, holding a stuffed animal). When they arrive with an aid, I normally follow her lead.

- answering their questions directly
- being flexible in my expectations for their participation

Pair them with a reliable student, one on one instruction when possible.

We just moved from having our students mainstreamed to a more "adaptive" self contained style. The new program while overwhelming at first is going very well. My student (one for now, will be more) is excelling with routine, and short bursts of instruction with breaks built in.

They like to feel safe. Sometimes that means they are comfortable doing the same activity every class. When you find what they love, always have it as an option or reward. Try to give a heads up if you are changing your room around or doing something really different. It also helps if they know a few kids in the class, so we encourage reverse inclusion where students volunteer to go into the Sp.Ed class for various activities. Last, don't feel bad if they have to leave class with their aid, sometimes they just need a break, it's nothing you've done. Embrace the challenge, I've had some memorable experiences with autistic kids in my band and choir, too. Music is amazing!

The policy of least restrictive environment has hindered the ability to teach autistic learners. To just place autistic support students in an environment of regular education students without regard to their ISO's does not help either those autistic or regular Ed students. Autistic students (just like regular ed students) all have strengths and weaknesses. In cases of high functioning autism, autistic students may benefit from mainstreaming. In cases where there is a speech or motor or cognitive impairment, students may not benefit from a regular Ed curriculum. Students with autism need to feel successful just as regular Ed students do but often the curriculum is too sophisticated for them to master. Autistic students also respond to music and enjoy the repetition as well as the ability to respond. If the music environment is above their developmental level, they will not respond or interact with their regular Ed students.

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