

Students With Learning Disabilities in the Music Classroom

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Abstract

There are a number of disabilities that music educators may never encounter among their students in the music classroom; however, all music educators will have students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities may have a variety of “presenting problems” that limit their academic and social success in the music classroom. The students’ level of difficulty or success in music will depend on how the disability presents itself and how music learning is subsequently affected. This column highlights the benefits of music instruction for students with learning disabilities and the benefits for music educators who have these students in class.

Keywords

music learning, students with disabilities, teaching strategies, accommodations

Several years ago, I was covering learning disabilities in my Music in Special Education class. One of my graduate students admitted, “I have a learning disability, but I prefer to call it a learning difference. I can learn most anything my classmates are capable of learning. I just have to go about it differently.” Since that day, I have referred to learning disabilities as learning differences. I appreciate this student for sensitizing me to a term that is more appropriate to the characteristics of learning disabilities, and perhaps less stigmatizing than a label that includes the word disability.

The term *learning disabilities* is still used under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and its definition has been debated since the term was first coined in the early 1960s. Students who qualify for special education services because of a learning disability must demonstrate a severe discrepancy between their potential and their achievement, as measured by intelligence tests and achievement tests. For example, a student may score high on a verbal intelligence test but have difficulty reading. The definition of learning disabilities is also a definition of exclusion. After eliminating the possibility of other factors such as an intellectual disability, a hearing loss, emotional problems, or from extrinsic factors such as limited opportunities or cultural differences, a learning disability is assumed (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2010).

The term *learning disabilities*, or *learning differences*, describes a heterogeneous group of disabilities that may be related to reading, writing, math, or memory skills. As with the other disability categories, a student with a learning difference may have mild to severe forms of the

disability, and he or she may have only one specific learning difference or a combination of specific learning differences. The chart below describes the many types of learning differences that a music educator may encounter among their students.

Disability	Difficult	Symptoms	Sample
Dyslexia	Processing language	Reading, writing, spelling	Letters/numbers written or pronounced backward
Dyscalculia	Math skills	Computation, remembering math facts, concepts of time and money	Difficulty counting by 2s, telling time, counting money
Dysgraphia	Written expression	Handwriting, copying	Illegible handwriting
Dyspraxia	Fine motor skills	Coordination, manual dexterity	Trouble with scissors, buttons
Dysnomia	Wording finding	Trouble with speech, stutters	Difficulty saying what they want to say
Auditory processing disorder	Interpreting auditory information	Language development	Learning speech, anticipating how a sentence will end
Visual processing disorder	Interpreting visual information	Reading, writing, math	Difficulty distinguishing letters such as q, p, d, b

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There are a number of disabilities that music educators may never encounter among their students in the music classroom; however, a music educator's chances of having a student with learning differences are high. Currently, almost 2.9 million school-aged children in the United States are classified as having specific learning differences and receive some kind of special education support. In fact, more than half of all children who receive special education have a learning difference. They encompass approximately 5% of all school-aged children in public schools. Learning differences is by far the largest category of special education (Lerner & Johns, 2012).

Learning differences are caused by a central nervous system dysfunction; however, the cause of this dysfunction is still not known. There is evidence of a strong connection between family history and learning differences in children. Additionally, environmental factors such as exposure to chemicals during critical periods of brain development may cause neurological dysfunction. Alcohol and drugs ingested by the mother during the development of the fetus have been linked to the development of learning differences as well as other disabling conditions in the developing child (Turnbull et al., 2010).

Students with learning differences may have a variety of presenting problems that limit their academic and social success in school. These problems include (Turnbull et al., 2010)

- Inability to perform well at school
- Restlessness, constant activity
- Sluggishness, often viewed as "lazy behavior"
- Inflexibility, inability to change from one activity to another
- Short attention span
- Poor printing, writing, and spelling
- Physical awkwardness
- Executing executive functions
- Extreme slowness in learning to talk, confused speech
- Difficulty sleeping
- Expression of worry, anger or frustration at inability to deal with school problems and get along with other children, poor social skills
- Poor organization and time management skills
- Slow to start and complete tasks
- Difficulty controlling behavior
- Difficulty following oral or written instructions
- Inability to remember what has been taught on a day-to-day basis

Students with learning differences may or may not have problems in the music classroom. Each child is different in abilities and needs. The students' level of

difficulty or success will depend on how the difference presents itself, and how music learning is subsequently affected. Many students may even excel in music since the information typically is presented through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic means. Students with learning differences may be able to compensate for their area of deficit if the teacher uses a multimodal approach to instruction (Davis, 2001; Pagliano, 2001; Ware, 2006). Some social and emotional problems, such as low frustration tolerance, difficulty with peers, and lack of attention or hyperactivity, may cause problems for the student and will need to be addressed through collaboration with the classroom teacher and development of appropriate instructional accommodations (Lerner & Johns, 2012).

The music classroom can provide a safe haven for students with learning differences. Some of the benefits of music learning for students with learning differences are as follows:

- Gives them a place to succeed
- Gives them compensatory skill
- Gives them an alternative way to express themselves
- Gives them a place to make friends
- Gives them a mnemonics device: Academic information can be imbedded in songs and chants (numbers, letters, words, names, . . .)
- Musical cues and prompts can be used to structure time
- Music activities can be used as reinforcement for completing work
- Music activities can be used to structure socialization and introduce social skills

Richard Lavoie, a leading expert in the field of learning differences, believes that having students with disabilities makes teachers more creative and more successful in the classroom. The creative strategies they learn to promote the success of students with learning differences will ultimately improve the learning of all students. As a teacher, I must add that I have likely learned more about adaptive instruction from my students with learning differences than I ever did from reading a book or taking a class. Some of what I have learned is

- To find multiple ways to approach a task
- To break a task into its smallest parts
- To appreciate successive approximations to the task
- To be more patient and encouraging
- To find multiple ways to vary and practice a task

- To use cues and prompts more effectively
- To use more visuals and nonverbal forms of communication in the classroom
- To ask students how I can best help them

This final strategy has been the most successful for me since most students with learning differences have preferred modes of learning. In talking with students about how I can best assist them in class and with their work, I have learned about learning differences, and have been able to establish relationships with students that have greatly enriched my professional life.

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Bio

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