

Barriers to Effective Inclusion and Strategies to Overcome Them

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Much progress has been made in the past three decades to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities. Schools have had to undergo complex changes in order to implement the special education laws regarding access to and structure of educational services. Although services have dramatically improved, there remain frequent barriers to successful inclusion that can be summarized in three main areas: organizational, attitudinal, and knowledge (Kochhar & West, 1996). It is important for teachers to recognize and understand these possible barriers and to identify possible solutions within their schools or classrooms.

Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers relate to the ways schools and classrooms are structured, how goals for students with disabilities are defined, how instruction is delivered, and how classrooms are managed.

Music educators typically teach dozens, if not hundreds, of students each day. Some of the major concerns voiced by music educators relate to lack of time to gather information and plan for students with disabilities, lack of support from administrators, and difficulty with classroom management (Darrow, 1999). In addition, some music educators are given teaching assignments for which they may not be trained or qualified, such as teaching students with severe disabilities in self-contained classrooms. These organizational barriers, if not addressed and resolved, may play a role in creating negative attitudes toward working with students who have disabilities.

Another organizational barrier could be related to how the actual music classroom is set up each day. Music rooms tend to be filled with instruments, chairs, props, audiovisual equipment, computers, and other assorted

items. If not organized in a thoughtful manner, these objects could create structural barriers for students who have physical disabilities, students who have visual disabilities, or students who have attention or behavior problems. In addition, teachers may not have access to adapted instruments that would aid them in teaching their students with disabilities.

Strategies to Overcome Organizational Barriers

- Discuss concerns with administrators and offer solutions to solve the problems. Offering solutions will require discussion with others and prior planning. Always keep the needs of the students in the forefront and explain why the current situation is detrimental to the education of the students, if that is the case.
- Choose one or two students to focus on at a time, rather than all of the students who have disabilities. For these one or two students, gather basic information regarding strengths, needs, individualized education plan (IEP) goals, and effective intervention strategies. It is likely that once this information is understood and used, the information will generalize to fit the educational needs of other students.
- Educate administrators about the distinct differences between music education and music therapy. In some situations, music therapists who have extensive training and experience working with students with special needs may serve students with severe disabilities more effectively than music educators do. Music therapists also can work as consultants to classroom teachers and music educators to help develop effective music-based interventions that are appropriate for the age and functioning level of the student.

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- Set up the music room in a way that provides an adequate structure for the needs of the students who are in the classes. For a child in a wheelchair, be sure there is plenty of room for the child to enter, move about, and exit the class with the same ease as the students who are mobile. For a student who is blind or has a visual disability, set the room up in a consistent way each day so that the student can learn the map of the room. If changes are made, give verbal directions so that the student can learn the new set up and adapt his or her map of the room. For a student with attention or behavior problems, make sure that distracting or tempting instruments are not easily accessible or within easy reach.

There are a host of music companies, such as West Music, that have online stores and catalogs and manufacture and/or sell adapted musical instruments and music. Include these items in your next budget, or ask the principal or parent-teacher organization to purchase a few each year. There are also adaptations to existing instruments that the school or district physical therapist, occupational therapist, or rehabilitation engineer may be able to help you make—depending on the needs of the students.

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers relate to the beliefs and attitudes that teachers may have about educational services for students with disabilities, including students' accommodation in the general education setting, interactions with parents and guardians, and students' participation in schoolwide and community activities. The attitudes of students who do not have disabilities toward students who have disabilities may be a reflection of those modeled by the teacher.

Negative attitudes may stem from lack of information, misinformation, previous experiences, or difficult situations that remain unresolved or unsuccessful. Teachers may have misconceptions about working with students who have disabilities, or they may have fears that they will not be effective teachers in an inclusive setting. Teachers may also be concerned with how inclusion will affect the classroom climate and the education of students who do not have disabilities. Inclusion requires new ways of thinking about teaching, new approaches to communication and collaboration, and new attitudes about sound educational practices.

Positive attitudes may be developed and enhanced in many different ways. Teachers are encouraged to

discover students' strengths and develop instructional methods and adaptations that build on those strengths. In addition, developing relationships with individual students helps teachers humanize the experience and learn about the students, beyond the disabilities. Peers may need structure and direction from the teacher to enhance socialization, interaction, and respect for each other (Humpal, 1991; Jellison, Brooks, & Huck, 1984).

Strategies to Overcome Attitudinal Barriers

- Find out information about the strengths and accomplishments of a few of the students with disabilities who are in the music class. What can these students do to contribute to the positive climate of the classroom or the music environment?
- Talk to other teachers or professionals about ways to solve difficult problems related to students with disabilities in the classroom. Collaborative efforts among teachers can provide support to teachers who are struggling with difficult students or difficult situations.
- Talk to students about the many ways that people can contribute to the class so students can see that all students have positive attributes that can enhance the classroom environment.
- Students might be afraid of students who have severe disabilities. They may need information and structured activities to get to know the students as individuals rather than as just a disability.
- Positive attitude, language, and respect by the teacher provide an appropriate model for students to develop positive attitudes about students with disabilities in the class.

Knowledge Barriers

Knowledge barriers relate to the range of knowledge and skills that teachers need in order to provide effective services to students, such as adapting the curriculum and instructional methods, providing necessary classroom structure and management, and developing appropriate goals and interventions based on the age and functioning levels of the students.

Music educators must have adequate knowledge and information in order to educate and include students with disabilities in their classrooms. Some of this information may come from collaborating with the regular education and/or special education teachers as well as with other specialists who work with the students. Collaboration is

key to successful inclusion. Through collaboration the music educator can find out specific information about the students, including strengths and weaknesses, goals, and effective instructional methods used by other teachers. Music educators may develop their expectations for a student's participation in music based on information provided by the team.

Strategies to Overcome Knowledge Barriers

- Educate yourself about the general characteristics of specific disabilities (e.g., if there are several students with autism, learn about typical behaviors and characteristics of children with autism).
- Talk with the team members (classroom teachers, specialists such as art and physical education teachers, and therapists such as speech and language pathologists or occupational therapists) to determine the student's abilities and needs and effective intervention strategies. Find out the student's IEP goals that could be addressed in music.
- Develop intervention strategies and classroom accommodations to support the student's learning in music class. Use music that is age appropriate and music activities with which the student can be successful. Ask the question, "Would I use this

music with same-age students who do not have disabilities?" If the answer is no, find music that is better suited to the age of the student.

Eliminating the barriers related to organization, attitudes, and knowledge could set the stage for more effective inclusion practices. It takes continuous efforts by all professionals to make sure that integration and acceptance is infused in all aspects of the educational system, starting at the classroom level. Seek help, and do not be afraid to ask for it. A school's special educators are often a valuable resource for breaking down barriers.

References

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