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"The Big Four" by Dr. Alice M. Hammel

Music Reading and Students with Special Needs

When teaching students with special needs to read music, set the stage for success by creating an optimal learning environment. As many distractions as possible should be removed from the environment, keeping the student's area neat and clear of clutter, adjusting lighting and making certain students are not near windows or uncontrolled lighting to prevent glare that may detract from the music reading process.

Students with special needs can sometimes be easily distracted, however, learning can improve if adaptations to music are made in advance. When a task such as music reading is difficult, getting "off-task" in a lesson can be very easy. Preparing necessary materials before the lesson may diminish these issues.

Color, Size, Modality and Pacing

The "Big Four" of color, size, modality, and pacing should guide every teacher's approach.

Color

Students with learning differences have difficulty reading music primarily because they cannot easily see black print on white paper. Adding color to the page heightens the detection ability of the rods and cones that help eyes see and send messages to the brain. Some of the following color adaptations include:

- A piece of colored transparency paper placed over the music helps to organize the visual process and can bring the notes into proper perspective;
- A highlighter with an eraser on the opposite can be used to highlight an area and erase when the music reading focus moves to a different part of the page;
- Color photographs of information also help students visualize materials; and
- Music can be coded with colors or familiar symbols to help students remember notes or rhythms, for example, pink is C, blue is D, and E is green. Colors (familiar to students) remove a step in the music reading process. When students are able to recognize notes on the staff, the next set of notes can be color coded.

Size

Students with learning differences respond very well when music is simplified or made larger and bolder, thereby increasing the student's ability to focus on specific elements in the teaching process. The following recommendations will help decrease a student's frustration level:

- Use an overhead projector, copy machine, or computer to enlarge materials;
- Begin with a blank score and add information as needed during the process to indicate tempo, meter, key signature, note values, or write measure numbers as needed; or
- Create visual aids for difficult words, and provide visual cues for phrases or score markings.

These strategies help students gain control over the speed of information they are asked to process.

Modality

All students learn through various modalities (visual, aural, and kinesthetic); however, students with special needs sometimes process information best through one or two, rather than all, modalities. Music educators should plan to present information in at least three ways and encourage students to respond through one or more modalities. The following examples are multi-sensory approaches that will help address multiple modalities:

- Provide written materials for all spoken instruction;
- Provide multiple opportunities to reinforce concepts with manipulatives such as a felt board, a raised texture board with heavy rope, foam or plastic shaped notes and clefs;
- Allow students to tape record rehearsals for personal practice at a slower pace or in their preferred modality;
- Ask students to respond according to their strongest modality (visually, orally, or kinesthetically); and
- Allow students to use a Word Bank (list of key words) when completing assessments to stimulate memory of definitions or applications of knowledge.

Pacing

Students with learning differences may have to complete the entire process of building a piece from a blank score throughout their music study. This can be a source of frustration for both the student and teacher as the task can appear to be overwhelming. The following process is effective in guiding students to reading music:

- Use a scaffolding technique by introducing and increasing the amount of music reading a student performs independently;
- Separate rhythmic and melodic elements until a student can combine them;

- Provide a list of the multiple steps (or a visual model of the steps) involved for learning the music. The student can follow the list while practicing at home to develop the independence necessary for music reading.
- Separate pieces into small chunks, a measure or short phrase that can be put together at a later time;
- Incorporate computer software programs for students who need extra drill and practice in note and rhythm reading;
- Ask students to practice for a short period of time at more frequent intervals, for example, two 10 minute practice sessions rather than one 20 minute practice session to encourage students to work at an even pace and decrease frustration levels;
- Wait to prompt students for verbal answers to questions until at least 5 seconds have passed; and
- Identify “strong” students who will be a good friend and practice buddy for a special student who needs help.

Students with special needs need a longer period of time to process questions and determine appropriate responses. Music reading processes may need to be reviewed each time the student begins a new piece of music. Students with learning differences will appreciate the extra time to process the information and will begin to feel their input is valuable. Learning will be more successful when students are full participants in the process.

These accommodations are entirely appropriate because students with learning differences complete many more steps than non-disabled students. Frustration levels can be lowered if students can demonstrate competency by completing a few problems or performing a few measures rather than an entire page. Because the process is more difficult for students with learning differences, each response requires much more effort.