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ABLE 2020: Early Childhood Music for Students with Special Needs

Attendees can expect to learn ways to work with groups of students who have diverse needs in an early childhood music classroom. Miles and Nadia have created a curriculum synthesizing elements of Dalcroze eurhythmics, Feierabend First Steps, Orff Schulwerk method, and Gordon Music Learning Theory, used in a weekly Saturday morning class for 3-8 year olds. Our students have varying diagnoses including Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down Syndrome, ADHD, and various speech and developmental delays. We will cover how to incorporate students that may not be responding in expected ways, and the importance of sharing expectations for class with caregivers.

This presentation is geared towards music educators who have students with special needs, and are looking for ways to keep students with varying abilities engaged in a class. This will include students with high support needs, students who are non-verbal, have developmental delays, and students with attention issues. The session will focus on meeting students where they are, and how music teachers can create an engaging and enriching class for students of differing abilities. Attendees will leave knowing about the hierarchy of prompting, meaningful participation, and how to provide appropriate instruction and accessibility for students in the same class who may be at different stages in their development.

Early childhood music classes taught by Miles and Nadia always start and end with hello and goodbye songs. Music is used not only to bookend our time together, but also engages students in diverse listening (we use modal and irregular meter songs) and participating meaningfully (some students engage by singing the whole song, others by filling in one word or a name, and some by actively absorbing the music around them).

Meaningful participation and response is more than just watching the teacher and responding verbally or singing. A meaningful response emerges when the student is engaged in the least restrictive environment during music class. A response could be a student lying on the ground tapping their toes to the beat of a song; responding doesn't have to be verbal, and students do not have to be attending one hundred percent of the time. Quite a few of the students that attend our classes are in the absorption phase in learning. Absorption is a crucial point in the stages of preparatory audiation as referenced in Gordon's Music Learning Theory. Absorption means that students may or not be actively participating, however they are listening and retaining the music that we make in class. Some parents report that even though their child doesn't sing in class, they do sing at home. When working with students that are so young, the expectation should not be response based, rather experience based.

Contrary to popular belief, silence is a very important part of music class. Silence can indicate that the student is processing information that has been experienced in music class.

Students could be listening, absorbing, and processing during class, however once class is over and they get home, they are then able to express what they have experienced. In the classroom we foster a growth mindset. Growth in student ability or comprehension is not linear, but is possible and expected from all. We could experience silence from a student for weeks or even months before a student will attempt in class responses, and each week we approach the student as if they are ready to respond. Eventually, given the appropriate support and circumstances, they will.

Music teachers should maintain high expectations while also differentiating lesson activities. Having choice boards can aid in full participation from all students in class. In our class, choice boards are boards with two or more different options to choose from, represented by clipart images and sometimes words to accompany the clipart. The themes of the choice boards can vary between body parts, foods, actions, emotions, and many more. Students can have multiple different choice boards depending on the activity, or questions during class. Sometimes students can be reluctant to participate in class. It is important not to force a student to perform and participate in class, only to encourage and provide opportunity. Putting low demands on students who are reluctant can often provide a comfortable space for them to participate when they are ready. For some students, asking open ended questions to the entire class rather than to a specific child is a way to lower demands while also being accessible and inclusive. Using a choice board to ask the class a question such as, “What fruit should we sing about next?” may be more likely to elicit a response and even allow students to generate independent responses.

We use a variety of instruments and puppets in our early childhood classes as well as body percussion and movement. Some of the props and instruments that we have found to be most successful are tubanos, the stretchy band, and hand puppets. Tubanos are such fun instruments to use with young children. Most of our students are just a bit taller than the drum, which adds to the novelty of the experience, and the drum provides a lot of sensory feedback for the students. The stretchy band is ideal for group work like dances and circle time, and it is an effective way to keep everyone in-sync during group activities. Students enjoy how far it can be stretched and how many ways it can be played with. Puppets with mouths that open and close are great for modeling syllabic responses and getting in closer proximity to students without invading space. In some cases students will respond more in class while interacting with a puppet. Students will interact with hand puppets in different ways, some wanting only to watch intently, some who will sing to the hand puppet and with it, and those who want to take a turn with the puppet themselves and willingly take on the role of activity leader. They are also a great social emotional prop to have during classes.

In any given class we will have students that have a vast array of abilities. Through differentiation we are able to diversify the content enough so that it is accessible to all of the students that attend class. We have always made it a point in class to establish a safe space for students to explore and express themselves. One example of differentiation is during an echo

chant activity, in which we typically use the neutral syllable “Ba” to keep the activity accessible to all students. During the activity there are many different responses that we receive. Some students that have high support needs may have a goal to utter “Ba” at least once during their response opportunity. Students that have moderate support needs may be able to chant back some, or most of the rhythms in the response opportunity. Students with low support needs may be able to respond with one hundred percent accuracy to the rhythmic chants, as well as compose their own rhythms and lead the group in chanting. For students that are non-verbal, rhythms can be presented with body percussion, or with rhythm sticks or other percussive material available. We emphasize to support staff and caregivers (depending on what kind of support you have in class) that we are looking more at participation, not perfection. Opportunities are given for students to interact with music activities and we lean into support persons to help facilitate a healthy and safe learning environment. We don’t require perfection when we leave opportunity for student input in class, we just encourage trying out the activities to the best of their abilities.

Bios

- Nadia Castagna has been teaching music to students with special needs for five years. She originally earned her bachelor’s degree in expressive arts therapies at Lesley University, and then obtained her master’s degree in music education with an autism concentration from the Boston Conservatory (now offered at Berklee), which is the only music education program in the world that combines studies with special needs. She is currently working at the New England Center for Children in Southborough, MA, and the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs in Boston, MA, on Saturday’s. Nadia is also one of the percussionists for the Me/2 Orchestra also in Boston, MA. Me/2 is a stigma free orchestra for those that have mental illness, and those that support others with mental illness.
- Miles Douglas Wilcox is a multi-instrumentalist and music teacher with a focus on students with special needs. He is in his fifth year at Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs, where he is co-teaching music classes for young children and rock band ensemble, as well as teaching private lessons in general music, composition, violin, cello, piano, and guitar. Miles currently teaches K-5 general and instrumental music at Ward Elementary in Newton, MA. Miles is currently principal violist in the Me2/ Orchestra Boston, the world’s only classical music organization created for individuals with mental illnesses and the people who support them, conducted by Ronald Braunstein.