Disability in the Classroom: Current Trends and Impacts on Music Education
Joseph Abramo

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What is This?
Disability in the Classroom
Current Trends and Impacts on Music Education

Abstract: This article covers current trends in disability rights and raises questions about how society’s views of disability influence the music education of students in need of special education services. Brief overviews of the disability-rights movement in the United States and of federal laws pertaining to disabilities and education are included. Next, there is a discussion of the “social model of disability,” which defines disability as a social position rather than a medical condition. Finally, “people-first language” and how it applies to music teaching are examined. The article also offers some suggestions to help educators incorporate these ideas into their teaching.

Keywords: disabilities, disability rights, people-first language, social model of disability, special education

The definition of the term disability might seem obvious, but consider this: Both Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven developed disabilities later in life. Bach’s vision faded into total blindness, and Beethoven lost his hearing. Yet, Bach still wrote the Art of the Fugue and Beethoven composed his Symphony no. 9 after the onset of their impairments. Did these composers overcome their disabilities, or is it possible that these disabilities actually contributed to their greatness? Is it even possible that Bach and Beethoven would have written inferior music if they had not developed these disabilities? While Bach and Beethoven are extraordinary examples of people with disabilities creating music, individuals with disabilities and surprising musical abilities are not limited to these geniuses. Recent research in neuroscience suggests that individuals born without sight are more accurate in their pitch perception and spatial placement of sound sources than are those with vision. Similarly, people with autism have a higher rate of perfect pitch than does the general population.

In some ways, disabilities do not “disable” people but, instead, empower them to be “extra able” in music.

These facts prompt us to ask some interesting questions: What does it mean to have a “disability” in the music classroom? Is it possible that disability is not as clear-cut as it may seem? These are easy questions for educators to overlook because we are busy with the time-consuming tasks of devising curricula and instructing students with and without special needs. They are, however, important questions if we want to provide a high-quality education for students, regardless of their abilities, so all have access to a high-quality music education can make a huge difference, both for individuals and for the class as a whole. It’s up to you!
education that both honors and meets the needs of students who require special education services.

Disability Rights: A Background

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, individuals with disabilities in the United States gained some key rights with the passage of federal laws. The civil rights movements of the 1960s secured equal treatment for individuals regardless of their race. In the 1970s, disability-rights advocates lobbied to extend those laws to individuals with disabilities. For example, in 1973, Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, which required that any entity receiving federal funds could not discriminate on the basis of disability. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 and its amendment in 2008 provided equal opportunities and access to employment, government programs, public spaces, and transportation.

Congress also passed laws on education. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) required that schools provide a free, appropriate public education that allowed the maximum possible opportunity to interact with students without disabilities. In addition, EHA stipulated that separate schooling may occur only when the nature or the severity of the disability is such that instructional goals cannot be achieved in the regular classroom. In 1976, an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1972 extended these services to students with physical disabilities entering college. Congress reauthorized EHA in 1990 and renamed it the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act expanded EHA’s definition of disability to include more students who would qualify under the law. EHA and IDEA also established the “Individualized Educational Program” (IEP), which required schools to create a document for each student with a disability that planned a course of action to meet that student’s unique educational needs.

These laws have had positive effects on the actions of society, schools, teachers, and students. It has led to a larger movement of “inclusion,” where individuals with disabilities were afforded greater rights and integration into society. For schools, this means that teachers now face a wider range of learners and a greater responsibility to diversify their instruction. In music, teachers must modify instruments, devise alternative ways of instructing, and alter rehearsal schedules and lesson plans. However, with this added responsibility comes a richer experience for all students, because the increased diversity of learners has positive effects on their cognitive and social development by promoting empathy and accepting differences.

Medical versus Social Models of Disability

Disability-rights advocates argue that while these laws are important and necessary, alone, they are insufficient. In addition, they believe it important to question the social stigmas and “unofficial” barriers that sometimes inhibit individuals from becoming full members of society. That is why in recent years, they have also focused on how disability labels can create an inferior status for those with disabilities. While state and federal laws have specific definitions that educators must legally follow when creating IEPs and services for students, looking at disability’s taken-for-granted definition can show other subtle ways discrimination persists. As educators become aware of this subtle discrimination, they can appropriately modify their teaching to better meet the needs of their students.

Some disability-rights advocates argue that disabilities are most commonly defined medically—as abnormal physical or mental conditions that limit individuals. These limiting conditions are considered ailments that require rehabilitation, such as physical therapy, medicine, surgery, or other correction. For example, “legal blindness” is medically defined as a person whose best-corrected vision is 20/200 or lower. In this definition, the disability is considered a problem with the eyes. On this basis, there is an attempt to rehabilitate this condition through corrections, like glasses, surgery, or other physical therapy that may improve vision. This definition also holds true for learning and emotional disabilities, which on the surface appear to be of the mind instead of the body. But diagnoses like autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and oppositional defiance are defined medically by attributing them to neurological abnormalities or what are called pathologies. These, too, must be rehabilitated through medical means and/or special education.

This definition, which is referred to as the medical model of disability, probably seems familiar and commonsensical. The medical model serves as the cornerstone for laws and special education in the United States and other industrialized countries and helps individuals with disabilities receive the help they need to improve their quality of life. But some disability-rights advocates argue that the medical model fails to capture an equally important part of possessing a disability: what it feels like to “be disabled” in society today. Therefore, rather than use a medical descriptor, they prefer to use what they call a social model of disability, which defines disability not as a limitation of the body or mind but as a social position.

To show the difference between disability as a medical condition and disability as a social position, some scholars make a distinction between an impairment and a disability. In his book Bend over Backwards, Lennard J. Davis writes, Impairment is the physical fact of lacking an arm or a leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access. An impairment involves a loss or diminution of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes a disability when society creates environments with barriers—affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural.

Architectural design is the clearest example of Davis’s idea. If someone must use a wheelchair, that person’s legs are impaired. When ramps are installed
(as are required by federal law in most public spaces) and other accommodations, like elevators and wide entrances, are put in place, then the impairment does not prevent that individual from accessing all parts of the building. But if the person who uses a wheelchair is unable to access the second floor or enter other rooms, then the architecture has disabled that person from functioning like those with the use of their legs. And because the building is a human creation, the failure of the architect and the school community to design and modify the building to meet the needs of those who use wheelchairs disables and disempowers these individuals.

Similarly, musical instruments’ designs sometimes turn impairments into disabilities. A person might be very musical and enjoy the violin, saxophone, or piano. But if the individual does not have the use of both arms, he or she is unable to play these instruments. And like buildings, instruments are created by human artisans. So, from a social model perspective, because these instruments are not designed with a person with an impairment in mind, they prevent some individuals from making music with them even though their impairments do not inhibit them from enjoying music.

Luckily, there are ways to minimize the “disabling” effects of instruments for students with impairments. Manufacturers produce modified instruments. There exist “one-handed toggle-key systems” for woodwinds that allow players to play with the use of one hand.8 Some companies produce recorders that can be played with one hand or by players with fewer than ten fingers.9 In addition, traditional instruments may be played in ingenious ways. Many percussion and brass instruments can easily be played with one hand. Even violins can be manipulated so that people with the use of one arm can play them.10 Finally, new repertoire can be written. For example, a diverse repertoire for one-hand piano exists, ranging from pedagogical pieces for beginners to concertos, like Maurice Ravel’s Concerto for the Left Hand in D major. Figure 1 lists some resources for teachers to research repertoire and instrument and technique modifications. By attending to these issues, teachers find that the instrument no longer disables some students from enjoying performance.

In addition to modifying instruments, teachers can begin to ask if there are unnecessary boundaries in their teaching that can turn a student’s impairment into a disability. For example, in his dissertation, Frederick W. Moss Jr. documented that students with visual impairments were disqualified from auditioning for all-district and all-state ensembles because they could not complete the sight-reading portion of the audition.11 Moss’s example makes us realize something that is easily overlooked: a musician must have sufficient “sight” in order to sight-read. And while most teachers would agree that sight-reading is an important skill for students with vision to cultivate, if teachers rigidly enforce these rules, they can turn a student’s visual impairment into a disability.

Like instruments, teachers can modify their instruction in notation to accommodate students with disabilities. Students with visual impairments could learn the basic functions of notation by providing them with music braille.12 And although music braille is unlike standard notation because it proves to be too cumbersome to immediately read on the spot or sight-read, it allows students to experience notation in another form. Teachers can register for a free online course to learn the basics of braille notation at http://www.brl.org/index.html and can download free software to translate standard notation into braille at http://deysid.org/freedots.html.

Because music braille requires specific knowledge and materials, it may prove infeasible for some teachers to implement. But teachers can still modify the curriculum in other ways. They can provide students recordings so that they can learn and practice the music at home. Teachers should provide recordings of the student’s individual part as well as of the entire ensemble so the student can understand how his or her part fits into the whole. Moss notes that it is important for the teacher to “talk through” the piece

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**FIGURE 1**

**Resources for Educators Seeking to Adapt Musical Instruments and Make Other Accommodations for Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Resources for Adapting Musical Instruments</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>One-hand piano repertoire:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://www.cello.org/heaven/disabled/piano.htm">http://www.cello.org/heaven/disabled/piano.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://pianoeducation.org/pnoonhnd.html">http://pianoeducation.org/pnoonhnd.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modified instruments:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://www.aulosusa.com/aulos-recorders-other-products.htm">http://www.aulosusa.com/aulos-recorders-other-products.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://www.dolmetsch.com/goldseriesrecorders.htm">http://www.dolmetsch.com/goldseriesrecorders.htm</a> (Recorder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://onehandwinds.unk.edu/toggle_key.htm">http://onehandwinds.unk.edu/toggle_key.htm</a> (Saxophone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://www.flutelab.com/adaptive.html">http://www.flutelab.com/adaptive.html</a> (Woodwinds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General resources on choosing and modifying instruments:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <a href="http://www.livingmysong.org.uk/choosinginstruments.htm">http://www.livingmysong.org.uk/choosinginstruments.htm</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
on the recording to provide information, like the key and meter of the piece, and to explain where markings, such as accents or dynamics, are indicated. Also, directors can teach a composition by rote to the entire ensemble, including students with typical sight. This allows all students to develop their aural skills in new ways, rather than too heavily relying on their eyes. It also provides an opportunity for students with typical sight to learn music with a process that is somewhat akin to the ways their peers with visual impairments experience music. This can help all students appreciate the unique strengths of musicians with visual impairments.

Finally, the social model of disability even applies to students who have learning disabilities and behavioral and emotional disorders. The social model of disability suggests that these students think about and process information and music differently than students without disabilities. Students with behavioral disorders, for example, typically have average intelligence, but because they act and think differently than students without disabilities, they are more likely to drop out of school. The social model also suggests that a teacher who does not adapt his or her instruction to those students’ unique behaviors and thinking creates “barriers to access.” And while providing accommodations for students with behavioral disorders may be challenging, music teachers can offer a successful experience for these students by giving clear, simple, unambiguous directions; using consistent classroom management; and wording directions positively. Music educators and therapists Mary S. Adamek and Alice-Ann Darrow, for example, say, “Asking students to do something is a more positive approach than telling them don’t do something—‘Watch me’ instead of ‘Don’t bury your head in the music.’” Similarly, music educators Alice M. Hammel and Ryan M. Hourigan suggest that for students with learning disabilities, teachers can make accommodations by attending to the modality, pacing, size, and color of the instruction and materials. They recommend that teachers use all modes—kinesthetic, visual, aural, tactile, and so on—when introducing new material, slow instruction down, enlarge music and other materials, and use different colors to help students process information.

**Disability and Language**

But while music teachers can modify materials and instruction, the transformation of an impairment into a disability is sometimes more subtle. Language can also disable. For example, think of the negative connotations that blind has in our language, like in blind leading the blind and blind rage. Then, think of the positive connotation light and vision have, like in enlightening and insight. This shows not only the physical barriers that individuals with visual impairments must deal with but also the subtle discrimination they might meet every day in their interactions with others, even when it is not people’s intention to be discriminatory. Because of this, some disability-rights advocates also question how people with disabilities are addressed and described. They suggest that we use what is called _people-first language_. This means, in the construction of a sentence, the person comes before the label. For example, they favor _child with epilepsy_ instead of _epileptic child_. Although this might appear to be a wordy game of political correctness that makes little difference, language has both subtle and profound effects on our thinking. Disability-first language, as in “That autistic child plays the trumpet,” puts emphasis on the disability by placing it first in the sentence. On the other hand, “That student plays the trumpet?” Figure 2 shows not only the physical barriers that individuals with visual impairments must deal with but also the subtle discrimination they might meet every day in their interactions with others, even when it is not people’s intention to be discriminatory.
describes some common language that should be avoided and their acceptable person-first-language substitutions.

Not all disability-rights advocates, however, are proponents of this language. Some suggest that people-first language may actually further stigmatize disabilities. A tall person, for example, is not referred to as “a person with tallness.” Using the wordy, awkward sentence structure, they argue, only calls more attention to disabilities. That is why in the United States, for example, the National Federation for the Blind officially accepts blind person as more acceptable than person with blindness. Also, some disability-rights advocates in the United Kingdom prefer non-person-first language, like disabled person, because they believe person-first language de-emphasizes the idea that disability is a social position.

Despite the debate, teachers should be aware of how language is used in and outside the classroom because many people, especially the students themselves, find disability-first language offensive. To be sensitive to these issues, educators should carefully consider their language when talking to students and to their parents, guardians, and advocates and when completing official paperwork. To do this, teachers of students with disabilities need to find out if all parties have opinions on how they should speak about the child’s disability. Of course, it’s important to be compassionate, but everyone involved needs to become aware of current law. For example, in October 2010, Rosa’s Law (S. 2781) transformed American legal usage, striking “mental retardation” from acceptable language in federal documents.

It is also helpful to “audit” your curriculum and teaching. Are there any materials, like textbooks, worksheets, recordings, or other resources that you currently use, that contain potentially offensive language? Making sure there is appropriate language in the classroom can make students with disabilities more comfortable and can set a good model for all students to use respectful language.

What Else Can I Do?

When working with students with special needs, it is important to follow not only the letter of the law but also the spirit. Merely fulfilling the modifications in a student’s IEP, for example, alone is not enough. It is also important to strive toward the ideals of these laws by providing an education that also honors...
Some Supplementary Resources, Including Websites

**Additional Resources**

**Special Education Law:**
National Education Association page on legislation, http://www.nea.org/home/16348.htm

**Arts Education:**
The International Organization on Arts and Disability of the Kennedy Center, http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/
The National Arts and Disability Center, http://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc

**The Social Model of Disability and Music:**

**The Social Model of Disability and Education:**

**General Resources on Special Education in Music:**

**Music Education Resources on Particular Disabilities:**
and supports students and their navigation of the school and outside world. This means that teachers not only “comply” with law but also continually look for ways to make their instruction more inclusive. Viewing disabilities from the social model perspective allows teachers to approach this task in new ways by looking at disability and impairment as separate. This shifts the responsibility from the students and their physical impairments to the educational environment that might inhibit the students from reaching their full potentials. Figure 3 provides some general resources that teachers can reference to help continue this journey of making their classrooms more inclusive. Appealing to different models of disability and paying careful attention to language can help establish teaching that is inclusive to all students. And regardless of their abilities and disabilities, students deserve thoughtful music educators willing to make these changes in the name of what is fair, right, and just.

Notes


6. Ibid.


10. For video of a violinist playing with the use of one arm, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYMqC5XznEw&list=FLvCPIk6_h6gm6bQZajplcQ&index=4.


15. Ibid., 147.


