Zero Margin for Error: Effective Strategies for Teaching Music to Students with Emotional Disturbances
Bryan S. Price, Jr.

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Effective Strategies for Teaching Music to Students with Emotional Disturbances

Abstract: Although music teachers are likely to encounter students with emotional disturbances in the classroom, many educators are overwhelmed by the challenges presented by the needs of these students. Limited preservice training and a lack of professional development addressing the disability further compound the issue. Available resources often address an audience of psychologists, crisis interventionists, and classroom teachers, but seldom music teachers. Based on the experience of a practicing music teacher, this article offers strategies and considerations for the music teacher to support students dealing with emotional challenges. With greater attention to consistency, structure, room setup, proper planning, and the identification of emotional triggers, students with emotional disturbances (and their teachers) can find success in the music classroom.

Keywords: behavior, classroom management, disturbance, emotion, general music, inclusion, mainstreaming, special education

It was Halloween and early in my study of Krav Maga, an Israeli martial art. My instructor thought it would be useful to reenact some famous horror movie scenes and explain how Krav Maga could be used as defense in those situations. I found one scene to be particularly intimidating: it included a larger-than-life aggressor wielding a larger-than-life edged weapon. After my initial shock wore off, it became apparent that the defense against this was not a complex series of confusing movements. Instead, it was a basic one meant for a combatant with a stick, a defense that we already knew. Disappointed that we were not learning a new technique, a student confronted the instructor, who in cool Krav Maga fashion, answered, “Yes, it is a basic stick drill . . . but with zero margin for error.”

While my colleagues and I debate the various parallels between the preceding scenario and teaching students with emotional disturbances, to me, the “zero margin for error” comment remains the most pertinent. In the general education classroom, moments of hesitation, unclear directions, minor discipline issues, or a misplaced object can usually be mitigated with a little creativity or adjustments to pacing. In a classroom with students with emotional disturbances, however, such moments provide a real opportunity for misbehavior, quarrels, and moments of panic. While our students’ needs might seem intimidating, even insurmountable, educating students with emotional disturbances does not require any skills that the teacher does not already possess. It does,
however, require of the teacher heightened awareness, greater consistency, and increased preparation, and it allows for a much smaller margin for error.

This article offers a very general overview of students with emotional disturbances and illustrates some of their basic needs, particularly those relating to behavior. Second, specific strategies for classroom setup, lesson planning, and instructional delivery are presented. Last, the article identifies concert and performance factors that need to be explored and addressed.

**Students with Emotional Disturbances**

One of the issues teachers face is determining what exactly is meant by “emotional disturbance.” From district to district, the terminology for the disability changes. *Emotionally disturbed and emotionally and behaviorally disabled* are frequently used, but with increased emphasis being placed on “people-first” language, the term *behavioral disorder* is becoming the accepted term. Programs that serve such students are often referred to as Behavior Learning Supports (BLS). Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) uses the term *emotional disturbance*, and because this law governs special education, this term is used here.

IDEA defines an emotional disturbance as:

- A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance.
  - An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
  - An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
  - Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
  - A general pervasive mood of unhappiness.
  - A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

It might, however, be more appropriate to think of *emotional disturbances* as an umbrella term for a collection of conditions that include anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder/manic depression, conduct disorders, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and psychotic disorders. Some health care professionals and organizations also include body image disorders and autism spectrum disorders as well, and it is not uncommon to encounter students with autism in the self-contained BLS classroom. There is no known cause for emotional disturbance, but several factors have been suggested and vigorously researched. These
factors include heredity and genetics, brain disorder, diet, stress, family functioning, and abuse.\(^3\)

An often-overlooked fact about students with emotional disturbances is that they have a genuine medical condition and are usually not willfully misbehaving. In many cases, brain size, shape, and function have been altered by neglect, abuse, or genetic and other factors.\(^4\) When a student with an emotional disturbance acts out, it is often the result of an emotional crisis and not simply a deliberate act of defiance. In these terrifying circumstances, the child is often in a primitive state of reasoning and is deeply afraid of his or her own behavior.\(^5\)

It is not surprising, then, that many individuals (including our colleagues) find it necessary to classify these students by pejorative and shortsighted terms. As a profession, we need to be as vigilant in confronting this type of unprofessional behavior and be the advocates that these students so desperately need.

Despite the various disorders that make up the emotional disturbance classification, certain patterns of behavior can be expected. “These behaviors include immaturity (passivity, poor coping skills, preference for younger playmates), socialized delinquency (gang involvement), personality disorders (withdrawal, anxiety, physical complaints), and conduct disorders (aggression, disobedience, irritability).”\(^6\)

While it is true that many such students are served successfully with supportive treatments in the regular classroom setting, self-contained programs are a necessity for many students. Students with behavioral disorders benefit from highly structured environments, with clear and consistent routines. To this end, “instruction is best when it is direct and teacher-led with opportunities to practice learned material via independent seat work. . . . Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to provide students with several opportunities to respond to questions and directives.”\(^7\)

When students with behavioral disorders act out, there are many ways in which this can affect the teacher. There is the fear of physical injury if a student is acting out physically, shock over inappropriate behaviors, feeling that one’s values have been violated, and being embarrassed by the behavior and one’s inability to control the situation, to name a few.\(^8\) When one couples this with outside stresses, the teacher is likely to feel quite angry and frustrated by these behaviors. Although these are normal and justifiable feelings, it is imperative that teachers conduct themselves in a calm manner to model appropriate responses for their students. In many cases, these same feelings are a way of life for the students. If teachers are able to display proper reactions to such feelings, it reinforces prosocial behavior for the students.
One of the most common manifestations of misbehavior is the initiation of power struggles with the teacher. In such situations, it is best to prevent the struggle by recognizing the triggers and being supportive at the first sign of anxiety. After this, the teacher needs to become directive, set limits, and provide clear instructions with definitive and enforceable consequences in an “if . . . then” context. It is important to avoid negative ultimatums, as this “can be the spark which ignites the dynamite, in a volatile situation.” Presenting this as a choice places the locus of control with the student and helps reinforce his or her need for control over the situation. When misbehaviors do occur, they are best dealt with through prearranged consequences that are uniformly enforced. When reminding a child of expectations or offering a consequence, I often insert a kind word in an attempt to redirect the student or to minimize misbehavior after the consequence. I especially do this when warning children that they may be removed from the room by indicating that their presence will be missed. (“If you play the instrument out of turn one more time, you'll need to go to the support room. I will miss you terribly, but you will need to go.”) To further limit misbehaviors as a result of teacher-assigned consequences, provide time limits on the punishment or an opportunity for redemption, for example, “I will be taking this instrument back now. If you can show me that you can work quietly and follow directions over the next ten minutes, you will earn this back before the end of class.”

In addition to the confrontation of negative behaviors, positive reinforcement has shown to be very effective in supporting students. The importance of simple acts, such as the acknowledgment of student contributions or offering frequent praise, cannot be overstated. As always, be specific with both your praise and criticism. Beyond these considerations, schoolwide supports, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports and token economy systems that allow the purchasing of tangible items, are widely used and successful systems in many schools.

**Strategies for the Music Teacher**

As with all students, the best form of classroom management is a well-designed, engaging, and rigorous lesson. By its very nature, music class may seem chaotic, unstructured, and disorganized to a student with emotional disturbances and a far cry from the independent, teacher-directed seatwork he or she derives comfort from. Even in a general education setting, “a disorganized and or unprovisioned classroom provokes feelings of unease and anxiety as soon as students enter.” Be sure that students know their routines early on, or provide instruction in them as soon as they join your class. Also make sure that your materials are readily accessible before the class begins. In the mainstream setting, a music teacher may need to work hand in hand with the special education staff to identify social and academic skills that the child may need instruction in to be successful in the music classroom.

Where not otherwise limited by directing an ensemble or teaching from a chart, the music teacher should consider the configuration of their room as a first step in ensuring effective classroom management. Chairs that are lined up in single rows are advantageous over horseshoes and circle-type configurations. While the advantages to such setups for specific activities cannot be discounted, they can easily become the source of problems, since they often give rise to the infamous “he looked at me” sort of arguments. Facing students toward the corner of the room directs their attention to a single focus point and allows them to concentrate on the task at hand. Just as directors consider ability, height, balance, and blend, they should take into account behavioral needs when placing students about the group and make sure all students with emotional issues are clearly in the director’s line of vision. Placing such students in an area that provides for a quick exit or entrance is also effective at minimizing disruptions when they arrive to class late or need to be dismissed. Another factor to consider in room setup is the teacher’s own instrument. Upright pianos provide limited visibility, make the teacher a stationary focus point (or often a target), and can prevent the teacher from using proximity control as a behavior management technique. Consider using a portable keyboard for visibility or the guitar, recorder, banjo, and your voice for their advantage in mobility.

Be as specific as possible with your directions, and use a command word that lets the students know when to initiate your request, or segment the directions into student- or group-specific actions. For example, compare “Please line up” with “When I say ‘go,’ I’d like you to quietly, without talking, line up at the door with Josh as the line leader. [Pause.] Go.” The former allows room for interpretation, while the second is precise and allows no wiggle room on the part of opportunist. As your routines develop, you can simplify your directions as student become increasingly aware of your expectations.

Starting each class with warm-ups, breathing exercises, or other focusing activities provides for routine and predictability in the classroom. Adding a movement aspect or hand motions to the warm-ups will facilitate a more seamless transition from movement in the hall to learning in the classroom. Auditory and visual stimuli at the beginning of each lesson will quickly focus and capture students’ attention while having an agenda on the board will answer many questions students may have about the class and, again, provide for structure and routine.

Many students with emotional disturbances also have difficulty sitting still for long or even short periods. Provide many opportunities for movement in the classroom, including dancing, hand motions, or the use of manipulative, such as scarves, rhythm sticks, or tennis balls. “Dancing is a great way for students to learn spatial awareness and promote positive social behavior.” While dancing, it is wise to limit touching and hand-holding between students, as students are more likely to dance if they know that they will not have to touch
another person. There are many dance resources that limit or modify dances so students will not need to touch one another yet still provide a quality and authentic dance experience for the student. Laying tape on the floor, using hula hoops, or making use of painted lines on a gym floor can help bring children into awareness of their own personal space.

Although games may seem a fun activity from the teacher’s perspective, many students are afraid of making a mistake and being the center of attention when this occurs. When teaching games and game songs, one can reduce anxiety for many students by letting them sit out for a few turns to get a feel for the game. When an activity involves competition between groups of students, see if altering the activity to a class-versus-teacher setup is possible. If not, promote good sportsmanship (and, if need be, gamesmanship), inviting the students to give handshakes, high fives, compliments, and other such acts to solidify unity within the class. Often the enthusiasm of the game (regardless of winning or losing) will transcend students’ fears about physical contact or other adverse reactions they may have toward one another.

If an instrument breaks while a student is playing, ascertain the cause as quickly as possible. If there is any doubt that the instrument could have broken due to its condition, do not punish the child, and make sure the child is aware that the instrument broke because of the instrument’s failings, not the student’s. Most, if not all, students in BLS programs have significant self-esteem issues; false accusations, or even the broken instrument, reinforces these notions. If, however, the instrument was broken due to carelessness or a deliberate act, the child should be punished in a manner aligned with your classroom/school rules or (if applicable) the child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

Educators often assume that a child with an emotional disturbance is limited only behaviorally and emotionally, but often, these students have academic deficiencies as well. It is often a requirement that a student display academic deficiencies or at least a failure to make adequate academic progress to be coded as emotionally disturbed. Such academic deficits are the hidden catalyst behind many classroom eruptions, and worse yet, these deficiencies are often the result of frequent exclusions from the classroom. Thus, the problem becomes self-perpetuating. Given that reading is the most likely situation in which the music teacher will encounter such issues, one should “use readings sparingly and if you must, read aloud as a class, or simplify the reading.” When reading aloud, summarize the passage afterward for maximum impact. Just as reading words may be difficult, reading music may be doubly so, particularly with song lyrics. While the goal should be that students learn how to read standard notation, it may be beneficial to use graphic notation to teach rhythm and pitch as well as to make use of rote teaching.

One of the challenges in teaching vocal music is that the voice is engaged for most of the class. As a result, students are likely to talk, and the teacher should expect as much. Still, be structured in your expectations of when this is permissible. One place it should not be permissible is while music is playing. You can help reinforce this, as well as audience behaviors, by teaching listening skills. When doing so, begin with short examples and work up to gradually longer examples. As always, model your expectations.

Last, if you have any announcements, make them at the end of the class, when students are most likely to remember. These could include warnings about changes in their routine next class (such as a substitute, special guest, or observation) and reminders about upcoming concerts.
Ending class in a predictable manner (a class song or favorite activity) will help solidify the structure of the class and satisfy the students’ needs for security.25

**Concert Considerations**

Students with emotional disturbances have every right to participate in a school music program, including concerts, musicals, variety shows, and so on. “As long as there is a place in the program for all students, there need not be a place in each ensemble for all students. Select groups should be for select individuals who demonstrate the appropriate skill to be successful in such an ensemble.”26 Make sure students are placed in the area in which they will be the most successful.

Performance anxiety can be surprising when it occurs and catastrophic if not planned for. Many students can practice well in their class and with confidence but may have difficulties in front of an audience. I know from personal experience that such anxiety issues are often absent from a child’s snapshot IEP, the form commonly given to music educators. It is therefore important to have conversations with the students’ case manager/special educator. Once these issues have been identified, you can reduce these issues by bringing in “special guests” (principal, classroom teacher, a younger class, a same-age class) to observe and allow you to gauge what measures need to be taken. Gradually work up the numbers as needed. You should also never assume that a child with an emotional disturbance will be available for the concert. (They may be in a crisis/support room, suspended, or otherwise unable to attend.) Arrange the music to double parts of students for whom this is a real possibility. When assigning solos and parts for a musical, be sure that there are understudies who are capable of filling that role. This is not to discourage you from giving such opportunities to a worthy student, only to remind you of real-world considerations that need to be taken into account when doing so.

**Plan for Success**

While the needs of students with emotional disturbances present their own challenges, they are satisfied by the same mechanisms that an effective music teacher uses on a daily basis. With greater attention to classroom management, planning, and consistency, the music teacher can improve the likelihood of student success. Despite this, the challenges are often frustrating at times, and even the most dedicated music educators will find themselves questioning the value of this work. For this, I will conclude with a story from my own teaching.

Because of an administrative commitment, I had arranged for a substitute to watch my self-contained grade 4–5 BLS class. I was feeling particularly guilty, as it was, by far, my most difficult class—ever. To make it up to the substitute, I assigned the class the movie *Beethoven Lives Upstairs*, figuring that with a movie, only minor carnage would ensue. I knew the video had been favorably reviewed and was supported by our curriculum, but I knew little else about it. When I returned, I was pleasantly shocked to enter a silent classroom. The students were watching the movie intently and had done so for the better part of fifty minutes. After the movie was over, the students asked numerous questions, ranging from “Was he real?” to “Did he really fly off the handle like that?” to “Did his dad really hit him?” and “Did his dad really drink that much?” I was surprised at the level of captivation the composer held over my students. As the class ended and the students walked down the hallway, I overhead two of them talking about the movie, and it all made sense:

“Man, Beethoven was awesome.”

“Yeah, and if he were alive, he’d be in our class.”

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. Ibid., 51.
21. Ibid., 51.