

Noisemakers to music makers: developing a school band for students who are visually impaired.

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A school band is a symbol of pride and spirit for the school community and represents an outlet for expression and creativity for the student who is visually impaired. It also benefits the student in developing skills of coordination involving the hands, body, and mind, and encourages respect for fellow performers and teamwork. The first day of classes will be noisy and chaotic, but over time the student will mature and become a musician.

PREPARING FOR THEPROGRAM

A teacher of students with visual impairments will face many of the same challenges that any teacher would face when initiating a school band program. These challenges include raising awareness about the genesis of the program among students, parents, and staff members; finding an appropriate classroom facility that is large enough to accommodate the students safely, provide storage for their instruments, and is sound-proofed to minimize any noise pollution that could result when students are playing their instruments; amassing an inventory of instruments, equipment, and materials to supply a full band; and ensuring that all students who are interested in participating in the band are able to fit the band into their academic schedules. The book *Teaching Instrumental Music* offers more information about the considerations of creating a school band (Jagow, 2007).

Similarly, when devising a method of lifelong music instruction for students with visual impairments, a teacher needs to take into consideration many of the same techniques and approaches that are used by band teachers in a traditional school setting. Important factors in any music program include creating equal opportunities for learning for students at all levels of music comprehension with, for example, beginning band or primer classes in which all students learn to play the recorder; allowing students to participate in the instrumentselection process; choosing appropriate method books and sheet music; and teaching students to assemble and play their instruments and develop concepts of rhythm and pitch and expression. The goals of instruction should always be reasonable so that all students can succeed, but instructors should always seek excellence from their students so that they have respect for what they are learning. What is important for the student who is visually impaired is to develop the braille music-reading and learning skills that are necessary for advanced instruction in band instruments. (See Schleuter, 1997, to read more about general music instruction.)

INSTRUMENT-SELECTION PROCESS

When selecting instruments for the band, the teacher needs to give each student the opportunity to indicate which instrument he or she wants to learn. The teacher needs to review key factors in this regard, including the availability of instruments, the students' capabilities, and the creation of a balanced instrumental sound for the band before a final determination is made. Often, students with visual impairments seek the easiest instrument to learn, and they often prefer the drums. It is important that each student with a visual impairment understands that all instruments have specific demands and challenges, including the drums. One of my female students wanted to learn to play a saxophone, but had a partial paralysis on the left side of her body. Thus, she would not be capable of holding her instrument or learning the necessary fingering positions to play a saxophone. The situation was resolved by having the student learn how to play the timpani. She was able to use and develop her gross motor skills using both sides of her body and perform on a bass drum and several hand percussion instruments. While instruments are being selected, it is also important at this time to assess each student's learning and reading capabilities.

INSTRUMENT SKILLS

Once the instruments have been selected, the process of learning the basic skills that are necessary for playing the instrument begins. Basic instrument skills for all students include instrument assembly, posture and handling, tone production, and technical comprehension. For some students with visual impairments, one or more of these skills will present a challenge that is unique to their instruments.

Instrument assembly requires the student who is visually impaired to use a combination of skills for general and detailed assembly for each day it is used. Gross motor skills are required for the general assembly of all instruments that involve combining the various pieces of the instrument into one body or simply attaching the mouthpiece to the instrument's body.

The majority of instruments require the student who is visually impaired to learn fingering patterns that will require the use of one or a combination of fingers. Woodwind instruments require the use of both hands for their fingering patterns, while brass instruments require the use of only one hand for fingering. String and guitar instruments require both hands for performance, one hand for fingering patterns and the other hand for producing tones. Percussion instruments require hand motions of either one or both hands.

For most students who are visually impaired, the most technically challenging instrument is the trombone. The trombone is designed with a slide. Most trombonists determine the proper position of the slide visually; however, the development of tactile skills by students who are visually impaired has proved to be a successful alternative. Tactilely, a student will use the right hand both to move the slide and to guide it to its various positions.

CREATION OF BRAILLE MUSIC

The initial period of instruction will focus on developing sounds and rhythm patterns with the instruments, which gives the teacher the time to obtain or create reading materials in print or braille formats. All music instruction can be reinforced for the student through an audio recording, whether created by the teacher or provided by the publisher. Method books can be purchased using special funds that are set aside for textbooks. Since music publishers do not offer braille or large-print method books, band teachers or professional transcribers will need to transcribe all learning materials. When ordering sheet music for the program, it is best to order a whole score, rather than parts for specific instruments, and use the score to transcribe the

individual instruments' parts. Sheet music can be costly, and each part is priced individually; ordering scores, and transcribing parts from them, will allow the teacher to purchase a larger quantity of music and build a music library at a faster pace.

Technology can be a great help to a teacher who is establishing a band program for students with visual impairments. Music notation software can be used to create individual parts in braille or staff music, and high-quality versions of the software have been capable of producing audio files. Recording software packages can be used to develop large audio files and produce compact discs that can be used in both classroom rehearsals and individual practice sessions. The use of audio files in instruction has proved to be a valuable tool for the instruction of musicians who are visually impaired, because it reinforces students' abilities to memorize and perform the assigned music.

SPECIAL BANDS

Most band programs have a feature that gives them their central character. In some schools, special programs are offered as extensions of the regular band program, giving it greater depth or enrichment.

Marching band

The school marching band is a publicity gold mine for any school. In 1998, I wrote a research paper for an orientation and mobility (O&M) class on marching bands and visual impairments.

On the basis of my research for this paper, I created a marching band for my students so they could perform as a parade band for special occasions at school in 1999 and 2000. Since my students had no concept of a marching band, the process of introducing them to such an activity was extremely challenging. Eventually, the training and performing experiences provided everyone with a combination of rewards and challenges.

The primary task in this activity involved teaching the students to move and perform together as a team. Although training was not extensive, challenges occurred daily and varied from student to student with regard to O&M issues. General O&M instruction typically focuses on building independent travel skills and awareness of the surrounding environment. In marching band, such skills were challenged because students needed to approach O&M from a different perspective. In fact, one school O&M instructor raised objections to certain aspects of the marching band because they seemed to undermine his teaching goals of independent travel.

As the time for performing grew closer, the level of interest around the campus grew. Different tactics were used to build an understanding of marching band techniques, moving from individual to group instruction. Eventually, the students were able to demonstrate skills in parade marching while playing their instruments. After the students successfully performed as a marching band, the dissenting O&M instructor told me that he now understood and supported the activity.

Drum circle

The drum circle is a unique percussion ensemble that allows all students to participate. It allows for flexibility in scheduling; does not require extensive training; gives students the opportunity to play drums without giving up their chosen instruments of study; provides students with the opportunity to perform ethnic or world music and demonstrate and develop creativity; and allows students to "let off steam." The students perform as an ensemble using only hand drums and

hand percussion instruments. The investment in instruments can be small for the basics and moderate to high, depending on the size, number, and type of drums that are purchased for the drum circle. The goals for this type of ensemble may vary, but developing skills in improvisation is high on that list. Drum circles provide opportunities for creativity and music scoring to both students and teachers.

Staff band

An untapped resource at any school are the musical abilities of the school staff members, whether they be in instructional or noninstructional roles. Often, certain members of the school staff have some type of musical experiences that can be beneficial to your band program. Membership of the staff band should be open to all individuals who have any experience playing an instrument. The goals for this type of band may include performing as an independent ensemble, providing support to students in their band performances, developing a special bonding between students and members of the staff band, promoting a level of appreciation of instrumental music within the school community, and enjoying the experience of performing in general.

In conclusion, the difference between a noisemaker and a music maker is growth and maturity. These attributes will be demonstrated in the students not only through their individual performances, but through organization, support, and teamwork in the program, which will represent a large dichotomy of individuals, unified as a team with a common purpose or function. Experiences such as these may be rare in the regular classroom, but will be valuable for any student who is visually impaired who leaves the classroom to engage in a larger, more diversified world.

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