

# Integrating autism spectrum disorder (asd) students into the classroom

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## Autism and Music

In recent decades, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has gained an immense amount of prevalence in society and schools. Researchers, parents, and teachers are becoming more familiar with the symptoms of the disorder and proper interventions for students with this disorder. With more understanding about this disorder, more students with ASD are being integrated into classes with their peers that do not have a disability. This integration also extends to music classes. Much research points to the benefits of having students with ASD participate in an integrated music class. In fact, according to Darrow and Armstrong (1999), “ children with autism have consistently shown unusual sensitivity and attentiveness to music.... they often respond positively to music and sound vibrations....” (p. 16). In addition, a variety of research asserts that students with autism will have positive academic and behavioral outcomes when integrated into a music class. So, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the characteristics of ASD and how elementary school music teachers can integrate these students into their classes. In addition, I will look at disability law and the responsibilities music teachers have when educating their students with disabilities.

Over the last few decades, the American Psychological Association (APA) has revised its thinking on ASD. With new research and discoveries about this disorder, researchers have pinpointed a variety of characteristics of children with ASD. The first characteristic is intellectual functioning. Researchers have noted that children on the spectrum may show a full range of cognitive development. However, many children with mild, moderate, or severe ASD

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will show some degree of intellectual impairment. Children with ASD also exhibit deficits in their social interaction skills. Social interaction includes nonverbal gestures (eye contact, body posture, etc.), failure to develop relationships, lack of spontaneous sharing, and an absence of social reciprocity. This type of deficit in social interaction is called joint attention by researchers. When children have problems with the skill of joint attention, they will also encounter difficulties with observational learning. In addition, students with ASD will show no expression in fun activities or they will lack a coordinated gaze. Even individuals that are higher on the spectrum will have difficulty with social interactions. Individuals with ASD can also experience problems with social exchanges. Therefore, picking up on social cues or social norms would be difficult. The third characteristic of ASD is problems with communication. According to Gargiulo (2015) “ 25 to 30 percent of children with ASD never develop language” (p. 339). Some common communication deficits are delays in expressive language, improper use of pronouns, repetitive use of language, and echolalia. Repetitive and restrictive behaviors are another feature of ASD. This means that individuals with this disorder will have a preoccupation with one pattern of interest, a strict adherence to routines and repetitive mannerisms. An example of this characteristic would be a child showing a strong attachment to inanimate objects or strictly adhere to the same routines or placement of objects.

Along with the obstacles the disability presents, a student with ASD are known to also have a wide variety of strengths. One of these strengths deals with their attention to detail. Researchers believe the brains of students with ASD may react more strongly to pattern recognition in comparison to the

average brain. This attention to detail helps students become experts at any particular subject because of their ability to dive deep into a topic that has meaning and importance to them. Another strength of students with ASD is that they have high levels of problem-solving skills. In a study between Harvard University and the University of Montreal, they found that participants with ASD were able to solve problems 40 percent faster than the participants without ASD (Panzano, 2018, Problem Solving Skills section para. 1). Students with ASD have also shown to have strong visual skills, and this is related to their attention to detail. Therefore, these students have been noted to be visual learners, so using pictures, diagrams, and written reminders have been noted to help their learning. A final strength of students with ASD is their strong memory skills. This dates back to the early decades of research with autism. Early researchers noted that students with this disability showed strong long-term memory skills (Panzano, 2018, Excellent Memory Skills section para. 1).

As a protected category under IDEA, students with ASD are guaranteed a free and appropriate education, the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment, an individualized education plan, appropriate evaluation methods, active participation from all parties involved and procedural safeguards for the participants (Hullet, 2009, p. 33). In addition, after their secondary education, people with ASD are also protected by the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA). One of the biggest debates regarding special education and disability law is what constitutes a free and appropriate education. Under the law, an "appropriate" education must meet the needs of the student with the disability as much as the needs are

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met for their peers without disabilities are met. An “appropriate” education must also adhere to every aspect of a student’s IEP, and it encompasses the academic and functional needs of a student. In addition, students will undergo re-evaluations to assess whether they are receiving “educational benefit” from their education. However, since educational benefit has not been clearly defined by IDEA, many cases are being taken to the court system to create a working definition of educational benefit. Another important facet of IDEA is an appropriate intervention. As mandated by the law, children with disabilities must be allowed a variety of services such as identification services, assessment services or customized interventions. This is especially important for children with ASD. For a young child with ASD, an early intervention plan would start with the creation of an individualized family service plan (IFSP). This type of plan is used for children up to age three and focuses on things the family can do to support the child needing the early intervention. (Stuart, 2018, IFSP: A Plan for the Family section para. 3). It is worth noting this plan is different from the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which focuses on a student’s special education with any related services. When it comes to disability law and music classes, music teachers are held to the same standards as general education teachers. In fact, the National Core Arts Standards were reviewed by arts and special education professionals to include responsibilities arts teachers have to their students with disabilities. Some of these responsibilities include: having a knowledge of a variety of disabilities, working with special education teachers to devise pedagogies that will be beneficial for their students with disabilities, understand and be able to implement accommodations from a student’s IEP,

and to create a positive environment that encourages inclusion for all students. (Malley, 2014, p. 7).

While teachers, regardless of subject area, are held to a variety of standards to ensure their students with disabilities receive a high-level education, there are still inequities in place that do not make the educational system as equitable as it should be, especially when it comes to ASD. One of the biggest disparities comes into play when diagnosing the disorder. When diagnosing ASD, there is a large disparity between white and minority children. Anthes (2016) states “ that minorities are less likely to receive an autism diagnosis or are diagnosed later than white children are” (para. 3). Therefore, from early childhood, when early interventions can make a difference in the child’s development, due to a lack of diagnoses (or late diagnoses) minority children are not receiving the help they may need if they truly have ASD. In addition, data suggest that white children are more likely to have a diagnosis of ASD in comparison to black or Hispanic children. Finally, researchers analyzed 2, 500 census records from Arizona, Maryland, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Utah. Looking for links between demographics and records of ASD in schools, they found that neighborhoods with a large white population have the highest proportion of ASD cases. In addition, they found a connection between a child’s ASD diagnosis and the level of the parent’s education (Anthes, 2016, Record Gaps section para. 2-3). There are many hypotheses as to why this disparity in diagnosis exists. One reason is that parents of higher socioeconomic backgrounds may have the means to push for more diagnostic evaluations have multiple doctor’s visits, as opposed to parents that may not be able to finance or take the time

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off from work for these evaluations because their employer may not allow it. In addition, researchers note that children that live in neighborhoods with a large minority population may not have the same access to medical services that children from largely white neighborhoods may have.

A student with ASD in an elementary music class could present a variety of challenges for the music teacher. However, none of these challenges are insurmountable. One of the main challenge's music teachers may have to face, with a student that has ASD, is the student's difficulty with communication. Elementary music requires an almost constant amount of communication and social interaction. For example, children are often singing together, playing musical games together, or are playing an assortment of instruments in an ensemble. Therefore, a student with ASD may have difficulties being integrated into this type of setting, because they often struggle with these types of skills. However, there are ways of overcoming this challenge and successfully involving the student with ASD into the music class. Much of music education research points to unstructured improvisation as a beneficial way to encourage communication skills among students with ASD. Unstructured improvisation would be when the student is free to create whatever kind of melodies and rhythmic patterns they would like. As opposed to structured improvisation, where the student would need to follow a prescribed set of chords and chord progressions. These unstructured improvisation activities would be things like using instruments to create short melodic patterns or doing "question and answer" (the teacher will make up their own pattern, the question, and the student will answer with any type of rhythmic pattern they would like,

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the answer) rhythmic activities. In addition, a great deal of research on students with ASD and musical improvisation was done by Nordoff and Robbins in 1977, and “ they developed a technique that stressed using musical improvisations as a nonverbal means of communication...” (Darrow and Armstrong, 1999, p. 17). By using unstructured improvisation music teachers can help to bridge the gap between a student’s non-verbal and verbal worlds (Darrow and Armstrong, 1999, p. 17).

Another challenge to integration that elementary music teachers may face deals with problems with cognitive functioning that students with ASD may have. According to Hourigan and Hammel (2017) students with autism may exhibit a weak central coherence, meaning students may have a tendency to focus on small details of a story or song rather than the work as a whole (Hourigan and Hammel, 2017, p. 23). This would present difficulty in music class because, when singing a song with lyrics and a storyline, the student may have trouble putting the big ideas of the story together. The student would spend more time focusing on the little details of the story, rather than find the main ideas of the storyline. To overcome this, Hourigan and Hammel (2017) suggest creating a visual map for the student (Hourigan and Hammel, 2017, p. 23). Next, to each song lyric, the teacher would create an image that is illustrating what is happening to the main character. This way, any student is able to easily follow along with the storyline. Another aspect of a student with ASD’s cognitive functioning that may present difficulties to integration is their attention to detail. As previously stated, students with ASD have a strong attention to detail, that helps them to really engross themselves with any topic. This is also related to their weak central



functioning because they are focusing on the small details rather than the overarching ideas student (Hourgian and Hammel, 2017, p. 23). While this is a strength, it can also present difficulties to integration because the topic or idea that the student may be interested in may not be the topic of the songs in music class. A way to overcome this challenge is by combining the student's interests with music. For example, if a student has a particular interest in trains the teacher could create a variety of activities that relate music to trains. Students could identify the types of sounds trains make and try to imitate those sounds on classroom instruments, or they could take those sounds and create a song to perform at the next concert.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is becoming more widely known in schools and society. With an understanding of the disorder, proper interventions, and teaching strategies, teachers regardless of their subject area can successfully integrate students with ASD into their classrooms and create positive experiences for all involved.

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