



The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

Exemplary Programs and Approaches

Music Participation as a Means to Facilitate
Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life
for Students with Disabilities

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Music Participation as a Means to Facilitate Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life for Students with Disabilities

MARY ADAMEK AND ALICE-ANN DARROW

Much has been written about cultural democracy and the importance of music education for all students, even those with the most severe disabilities (Adamek & Darrow, 2010; Hammel & Hourigan, 2011; Jellison, 1999). All children who have the opportunity to participate in music have a better quality of life and a deeper understanding of the world around them (Dahan-Oliel, Shikako-Thomas, & Majnemer, 2012). For students with disabilities, however, music study must prepare them not only for a cultural life, but for a functional life as well. These students often face additional challenges as they prepare for lives as independent adults. In order for students with disabilities to assume responsibility and control for their lives, they will need to develop a skill set that includes goal setting, problem solving, and decision making. Students with disabilities who are self-determined are more likely to succeed as adults. Individuals who are self-determined are more likely to be: employed, living independently, happy with their lives, and less isolated (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). To attain these goals in adulthood, efforts to build self-determination skills need to be integrated into every area of a child's education (Wehman, 2013).

Promoting self-determination has been recognized as best practice in the education of adolescents with disabilities since the early 1990s, when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated increased student involvement in transition planning; however, it has been only during the past decade or so that research on self-determination theory (SDT) has been applied systematically to specific disciplines. "Basic research expanding and refining motivational SDT principles has continued at a vigorous pace, but the huge increase in the volume of published studies has been most apparent in the applied fields—in sport, education, and health care, for example" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). With the exception of Jellison (1999) however, little has been written about the role music education can play in preparing students with disabilities for their lives as adults.

In her article, "Life Beyond the Jingle Stick: Real Music in a Real World," Jellison (1999) discusses the need to identify and to teach skills that will "enable students with disabilities

to function appropriately, successfully and as independently as possible in a variety of environments, now and in the future” (p. 15). Music curricula for these students should include activities that teach them about the arts, but that also have meaning and relevance to their lives. Fortunately for music educators, our subject matter is highly valued, and can serve as a motivator and reward for engaging in many activities that support one’s general well-being, self-determination and transition to community life. These activities are generally directed toward physical or cognitive functioning, and socialization. Music, because of its pervasiveness, universal appeal, and flexibility in terms of tempo, complexity, and genres, is particularly suited to accompany numerous physical, cognitive, and social activities. Music can be used to provide structure for physical and social activities, to provide emotional support, and to promote lifelong learning and engagement. It is the teacher’s task to structure music learning such that the cognitive and social skills required for self-determination and transition to community life are developed through continued engagement, practice, feedback and more practice.

Issues Related to Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

Self-determination (SD) focuses on the degree to which individuals are self-motivated and able to independently determine their own future. Self-determination is “a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults” (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2). A person is considered *autonomous* if he or she acts according to personal preferences, interests and/or abilities, and if he or she acts independently from external influence or interference. An individual’s behavior is *self-regulated* if the person makes appropriate decisions about which skills to use, or emotions to display in a situation; and if the person is capable of analyzing a task and formulating, enacting, and evaluating a plan of action. Individuals are considered *self-realized* if they set goals based on a thorough, and reasonably accurate, knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitations. With these skills and attributes, individuals have the ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Challenges for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities face many challenges as they progress through elementary and high school experiences. A student with a disability may be disadvantaged in terms of achieving success with the academic and social demands of today's schools. In addition to the challenges related to disability, students may encounter additional difficulty related to violence in schools, high stakes testing, limited access to general education, and social acceptance and peer pressure. Positive and negative features of the current educational setting affect a student's experience throughout school years and beyond. It is important that students develop competence in skills that promote success in school as well as successful transition upon completion of their school years. Students who have opportunities to develop self-determination during their school years may improve their quality of life as they transition to adulthood (Wagner & Newman, 2012).

Self-determination can be a significant factor to enhance post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Self-determination is a combination of beliefs, attitudes and abilities that lead to a person to fully engage in life experiences and outcomes. Self-determined behaviors promote autonomy, self-regulation and self-realization, and they empower the individual to make things happen. Sample component elements of self-determined behavior include skills related to choice making, problem solving, setting and attaining goals, self-observation and evaluation, self-advocacy and leadership, self-instruction, and self-awareness (Wehman, 2013). Students with disabilities can develop these skills by having opportunities to express their preferences and interests, manage time, engage in team work and leadership experiences, solve problems with others, set goals and strategies to meet those goals, monitor achievements, and practice assertiveness (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Music experiences can be motivating, flexible, and challenging while providing opportunities for students with disabilities to practice important life skills that will benefit them in educational, social and employment settings. In a recent music neuroscience article, Croom (2012) makes the argument that music engagement contributes to an individual's well-being by influencing positive emotions, engagement with others, achievement, and self-awareness. These elements are also foundational for the development of self-determination in students. Music educators experience these features of music engagement every day, however they may need additional knowledge to link these every day experiences to focus on self-determination.

Recent research provides a basis for understanding the value of helping students develop these skills in a variety of educational settings.

Selected Research Literature Related To Self-Determination

Researchers have investigated various facets of self-determination for several years and the research continues today. Topics include assessment of self-determination, predictors of self-determination related to specific disabilities, the impact of self-determination on access to general education experiences, and influence of self-determined behaviors on transition outcomes and quality of life.

These findings provide a foundation for developing evidence-based interventions to promote self-determination in students with disabilities. Measures of self-determination include the Arc's Self-Determination Scale (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995) and the AIR Self-Determination Scale (Wolman, Campeau, Dubois, Mithaugh & Stolarski, 1994). These measures are used frequently in the research literature to compare and to document students' self-determination.

According to IDEA, students with disabilities should have access to the general curriculum to the greatest extent possible. Instruction that promotes self-determination and self-directed learning has been found to promote students' success in the general education curriculum. In addition, self-determination skills have been found to positively predict student engagement in the curriculum, and decrease competing behaviors (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, 2008; Wehman, 2013).

Student involvement is a key feature for developing a capacity of self-determination. However, the approach to student involvement and the amount of support needed may vary, depending on a student's level of functioning. Even students with severe intellectual disabilities can be supported in ways to maintain meaningful control in their lives. Supports need to be aligned with the individual's preferences, and those in supportive roles should assist in actively involving the student in goal setting and meaningful decision-making (Jones, 2012; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Washington, Hughes, & Cosgriff, 2012; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003; Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001).

Structuring the Music Curriculum to Facilitate Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life

The self-determination movement promotes students' and families' empowerment

and their decision-making rights regarding services impacting the future. Characteristics such as assertiveness, creativity, flexibility, and self-esteem, and skills such as problem solving and decision-making are developed throughout the student's education to promote self-determination as an adult (Gecas, 1989). These characteristics can be applied to the music curriculum for students with disabilities in various ways. Below are some of the music activities or classroom strategies that can support students in their development of these characteristics.

Assertiveness. Being assertive is an important communication skill. It involves being able to express one's self effectively and directly, while still respecting the opinions of others (Moffet, Alexander, & Dummer (2006). Students with disabilities are often passive or content to agree or comply with others (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Music educators can ask that students assert themselves into the music process by:

- Requesting students to express their desires to play a certain instrument, perform a certain piece, or to play in one group and not another.
- Requesting students to express their opinions about the music curriculum, about the styles of music to be included in the curriculum, about instruments and songs to be included in the curriculum.
- Requesting students to design the physical layout of the music room, to design the covers for music programs, and to design posters for special events—even if the designs are rudimentary.

Inherent in expressing desires or opinions, is the ability to articulate reasons for these desires or opinions. Asking students to articulate their reasons for preferring one style of music to another, or one song to another, is one way to promote critical or analytical thinking. Generally, there are no incorrect answers for expressing such opinions, but asking to students to defend their reasoning when faced with opposing opinions can facilitate higher order thinking.

Creativity. To be creative, one must be able to think in divergent or unusual ways, to take risks, and to explore alternatives (Torrance, 1993; Webster, 2002). Teachers can cultivate students' creativity by:

- Encouraging improvisation, even if it is always in the pentatonic modality on barred instruments.
- Preparing song-writing activities where only isolated words are replaced by the

students, or the lyrics are totally written by the students.

- Asking students to give a name or title to pieces based on the characteristics of the music, or the lyrics of the song.

Flexibility. When students are flexible, they allow for different options and for changes in what might have been expected. The ability or willingness to be flexible is especially important for students with disabilities, as being flexible encourages persistence in the face of difficulties. Flexibility is tied closely to problem solving and decision-making (Wehman, 2013). Teachers can promote the development of these skills by:

- Asking students to identify: (1) problems in playing the music, (2) ways or solutions to solve these problems, (3) pros and cons to the various suggested solutions, and (4) based on the pros and cons, the best possible solution.
- Asking students to identify which factors are under their control and which are not for any given classroom dilemma, such as inability to complete a musical task, lack of cooperation from others, cancellation of a musical event.
- Asking students to identify successful solutions to previous problems and how these solutions can be applied to other situations or problems.

Self-esteem. Much has been written about the relationship between music participation and one's self-esteem (Darrow, Novak, Swedberg, Horton, Rice, 2009; Costa-Giomi, 2004), although most reports are anecdotal. Various music interventions have been cited frequently as effective in promoting self-esteem (Hillier, Greher, Poto, & Dougherty, 2012):

- Music interventions such as lyric analysis can help young adults identify and express current feelings about their self-worth and their environment.
- Songwriting activities can provide young adults an outlet for expression and a non-threatening forum for sharing feelings. The songwriting product can instill in young adults a sense of pride and productivity. Songs can also be recorded to share with family and friends to increase positive socialization with others.
- Participating in group music activities can assist young adults in building relationships and having positive experiences with others—which can lead to an increased self-esteem.
- Learning to play an instrument has been shown to be a great source of pride for many young adults. Playing an instrument also provides the opportunity for developing

a leisure skill, which has also been shown to affect self-esteem (Costa-Gioma, 2004).

With contemporary digital technologies, even students with profound disabilities can learn to play an instrument.

Socialization. Much of the attraction to participating in school music programs is the socialization that occurs at rehearsals, on performance trips, and just hanging out in the music room before and after school. Music educators can assist in the social development of students with disabilities by providing opportunities for interpersonal interactions, and encouraging and monitoring such interactions. Ways to promote socialization for students with disabilities are:

- Use peer partners that include both students with and without disabilities. Students with disabilities are often relegated to the role of ‘helpee’ and never allowed to experience the joy of helping someone else. Even if the student sits on the piano bench with the choir accompanist and turns pages when instructed to do so, he or she will have a role that is integral to the accomplishments of the group.
- One way to avoid cliques in any group, is to have individuals sit next to different people and to allow time for conversing. Giving topics for discussion, such as ‘songs you both like,’ or ‘musical artists you both like’ and ‘concerts you both want to attend’ is one way to initiate conversation and to open up opportunities for shared experiences.
- Structure repertoire choices so that students with and without disabilities perform together. The group can pose solutions for questions such as “How will the student who is blind learn the choreography?” Musical solutions, such as arranging the music so that all students can participate, can be solved by the teacher, or the students. When all students are invested in the success of their classmates, socialization will be productive and rewarding.

Educators may have additional challenges when creating opportunities for students who have limited communication skills or who function at a very low cognitive level to practice self-determination skills. Music educators can collaborate with classroom teachers to determine effective communication means for individual students and to understand the appropriate levels of support needed for each student. In addition, lower functioning students may have slower processing skills and will need additional time to engage in the process, so patience on the part of the teacher is always important. When music educators structure their curriculum to enhance students’ self-determination, they also increase the likelihood that these students

will have a smoother transition to community life as an adult. There is wide agreement that the skills highlighted above (e.g., setting goals, problem-solving, decision-making) are important for a successful transition from school to adult life.

Transition to Community Life for Students with Disabilities

Strong transition programs have been shown to provide opportunities for developing self-determination throughout a student's post-secondary education (Morningstar, 2006). These transition programs included student involvement in the transition process, skill development in self-determination and self-advocacy, and preparation for independent living skills. High levels of psychological empowerment, locus of control, and hope have been found to be evident in students who have experienced high quality transition programs, especially when families were involved and supportive (Morningstar et al, 2010).

Music educators, like all educators, must be concerned about their students' quality of life after graduation. Included in music educators' responsibilities is the task of preparing students for their future and increasing the likelihood that music will be a part of that future. Not all students will continue to participate in music as performers, but it should be every music educators' wish that students continue to be consumers of music. Participation in music, either actively or passively, can make one's transition to adulthood less stressful, and more socially and cognitively engaged. Persons with disabilities often find that transition into community life is easier if they have developed leisure skills that can supplement their, sometimes, limited social lives. If given the opportunity, persons with disabilities can develop musical skills that can be used to promote self-efficacy and motivation.

Music educators can also do much to encourage the continued musical and social growth of students with disabilities by presenting opportunities for music making in the community, both before and after graduation. Community ensembles, church choirs, open microphone night at various venues, civic concerts, and restaurants or bars that host local musicians to play during dinner are all opportunities for music making and/or listening that are generally open to all individuals, regardless of musical skills or disabilities. Students with disabilities may not be aware of all the community music activities available to them. Students' enrollment or engagement in such activities may need to be facilitated by a music educator or parent. As part of the transition plan for students with disabilities, music educators can work with students to determine their interests in various community music activities. The necessary

skill sets, such as concert etiquette or navigating transportation to various music venues, can be a part of their IEP goals before graduation. Participation in such organizations or performance events may make the transition from school to community life more rewarding and less threatening for students with disabilities, and indeed for all students.

Conclusions

Self-determination is a highly desirable, developmental skill that can be linked to success in adulthood. Students develop self-determination skills over time, and this development is influenced by the individual's environment. Skills leading to self-determination can vary by situation and change according to the student's ability to adapt to various contexts. Self-determination is enhanced through the support and advocacy of educators and family members who provide encourage the student to make choices, express interests, practice assertiveness and set goals (Malian & Nevin, 2002).

Self-determination can be addressed through specific skill development curriculum, however efforts to promote self-determination can also be effectively embedded into various curricular experiences. Music education curriculum objectives for students with disabilities should include intentional focus and practice on the self-determination components, and the articulation of plans for a musical life after high school. It is likely that music educators, classroom teachers, school counselors, and parents, will need to assist students with disabilities in preparing to achieve levels of autonomy, self-regulation and self-realization. By identifying long-range goals, and designing music experiences that ensure students gain the skills and connections they need to achieve these goals, music educators can do much to assist students with disabilities in becoming productive and contented musical adults. Helping students plan for a musical future is one of the most important investments music educators can make in their students' lifelong well-being.

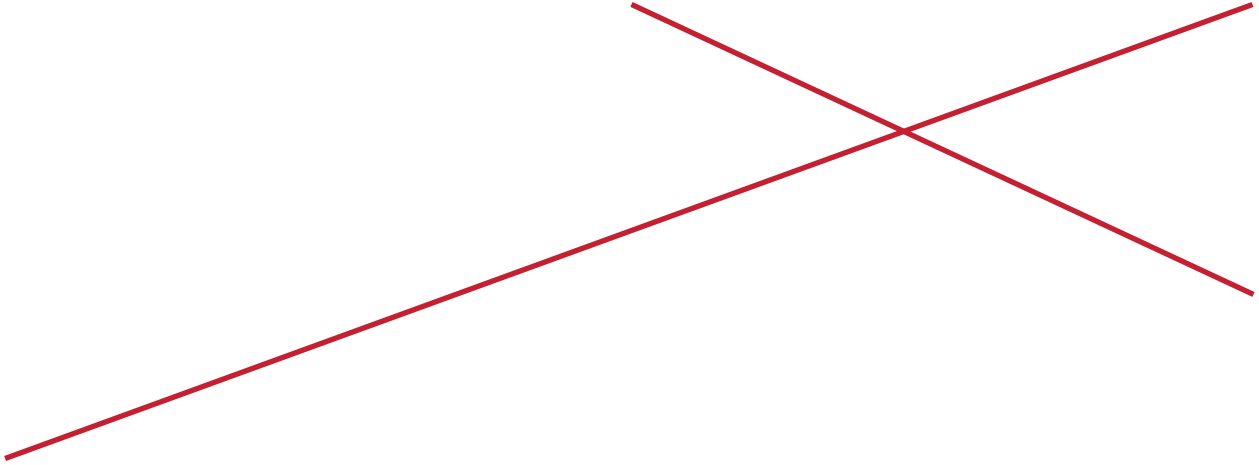
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