



# Inclusive Ensembles: Differentiating for the Singer on the Autism Spectrum

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## ABSTRACT

Exceptional children belong in music classrooms. Music ensemble directors need to overcome complex challenges to meet the goal of inclusion, because ensembles often contain a mixture of ages, grades, social and intellectual development stages, musical skills, and a wide variety of diverse learning needs. This study focuses on how a choral ensemble director may create an inclusive environment for students on the Autism Spectrum.

This study reviewed current research on creating inclusive rehearsal environments. Analysis revealed varied methods for differentiation including modified/adapted scores that make use of color-coding, personalized parts, and symbolic notation; choral ensemble formats, such as self-contained choirs, partner choirs, and mainstream choirs; and student-centered instruction using project-based learning. In conclusion, modifications and adaptations can be made to the components of instruction (content, process, product, affect, and environment) in order to differentiate instruction to best meet individual student's readiness needs, interests, and learning profiles. Individualized instruction can be crucial for the success of a student on the spectrum participating in a choral ensemble.

## BACKGROUND

### Statistics

- "About 1 in 6 children had a developmental disability in the U.S. in 2006-2008..." (CDC)
- "About 1 in 59 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder..." (CDC)
- Many studies indicate increasing number of diagnoses

### Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- 5 Distinguishable Disorders
  - Asperger Syndrome
  - Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified
  - Autistic Disorder
  - Childhood Disintegrative Disorder
  - Rett Syndrome
- Symptoms Include
  - Social Interaction Deficits
  - Communication Issues (verbal and/or nonverbal)
  - Learning disabilities
  - Self-stimulation, sensory sensitivities, etc
  - Obsessive interests

### Inclusion

- Recent legislative push for inclusion in the Least Restrictive Environment appropriate for the individual
- Utilization of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)
- Current research focuses on inclusion in music primarily at the elementary school level

## CHALLENGES

- Large classes
- Students vary in age, grade, social and intellectual development stages, musical skills, and learning needs
- Aides frequently take breaks during electives
- Pressure on ensembles to perform frequently
- Limited time and resources
- ASD specific needs: rigid structure, social interaction challenges, learning styles (Sousa)
- Behavioral issues

## INDIVIDUALIZING INSTRUCTION

### Techniques for Inclusion

- Differentiation- Modifications and adaptations made to individualize education
- Modification- Alteration to the learning expectation
- Adaptation- Alterations to the learning process

### Manipulatable Components of Instruction

- Content- What the student is expected to be able to know, understand, or do
  - The student will sight read Solfege pitches so, la, and mi instead of do, re, mi, so, and la
  - The student will define forte and piano, but not pianissimo, mezzo piano, mezzo forte, or fortissimo
- Process- How the content is taught
  - Sight- reading the rhythm, tapping the rhythm, or learning aurally by rote
  - Individually, small groups, or large group
- Product- An assessment used to measure learning
  - Written exam
  - Video submission
  - Oral response
- Affect- Student's attitude and emotions towards learning
  - Positivity from the teacher
  - Placed among helpful students
- Environment- Where the learning happens
  - Minimizing distracting stimuli (eg. noisy fan, blinking light, etc)
  - Placing a student next to a teacher or model student

### Student Factors

- Readiness- Preparation level for new content
- Interests- Subjects of passion
- Learning Profile- The ways the student learns best

## PRACTICAL DIFFERENTIATION

### Types of Ensembles

- Self-contained choir- An exclusive ensemble for students with special needs
- Partner choirs- An ensemble in which students with special needs are partnered with neurotypical "buddies"
- Mainstream choir- Students with special needs participate in the "standard" school choir among side neurotypical students
- Auditioned choir- A choir exclusive to those selected; likely a more musically elite mainstream choir

### Modified/Adapted Scores

- Personalized part
- Transcribed copy of the music into a score with less extraneous information
- Use of color coding for pitches, rhythms, types of information, etc.

### Other

- Repertoire choice
- Student rehearses with choir, but does not perform
- Student attends part of a class and learns some of the repertoire, but not all
  - Student learns their part from a recording rather than by sight-reading with the entire ensemble
  - Creating a role the student will be successful in (starting pitch giver, choral librarian, section leader, soloist, etc)
  - Printed rehearsal schedule
- Student centered Project Based Learning
  - Social media page for a composer profile
  - Slide show comparing music from two genres

## BENEFITS

### Brain Research on the Benefits of Music

- "Human brains are wired to process music. Music is a whole-brain-whole-body experience. Music is essential for the growth and development of children of *all* abilities and *any* function." (Berger, 23.)
- Movement- Rhythm is related to the motor cortexes
- Mood adjustment- Sound affects the amygdala
- Improved memory- Music stimulates the hippocampus
- Academic growth
- Music Therapy

### Social Benefits of Inclusion

- Shared experiences of individuals in an ensemble creates a platform for social interaction
- Ensemble family creates a stable group of friends
- Sense of belonging for student with special needs
- Social awareness for neurotypical students
- Increased social interaction improves communication skills

### Other Benefits

- Confidence
- Study of emotional expression in music improves emotional intelligence
- Outlet for emotional expression improves communication skills
- May develop into a passion thus providing a sense of purpose

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