

AN ISME MEMBER'S EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

Learning from Students with Disabilities



Viscardi School student

I RECENTLY COMPLETED a two-year teaching artist residency at the Henry Viscardi School (HVS) in Albertson, New York that has been one of the highlights of a long teaching career. Students with a variety of severe physical and medical disabilities attend the PreK-12 school with many travelling from an hour or two away. My residency was funded through a grant written by a local arts council and Abilities! a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering people with disabilities to be independent and self sufficient participants in society. HVS is a state supported school for children with severe physical disabilities on the campus of Abilities! The focus of the grant was to bring jazz and improvisation to the students at HVS and my role was to find a way for students to experience improvisation through Orff and classroom instruments. It was a perfect blend of my research interests in jazz and special education.

Although I have taught special education and students with a variety of moderate and severe disabilities, I had not taught students with severe physical disabilities before this residency. Many students were in wheelchairs, some on ventilators and several were non-verbal. I worked closely with an excellent staff at the school that included physical and occupational therapists who attended my classes with the students and offered strategies for adapting instruments to the students.

One of the most powerful lessons I learned was the principal of self-determination that is important in special education but particularly important at Viscardi. Students need to have a say in the way they learn and advocate for what they need. Previously my approach was to prescribe the best way for students to play instruments and show the students how to play. Students with physical disabilities are used to having others do things for them and they need to develop skills in learning to ask for what they need and letting others know how to best assist them in learning in ways that is best for them. For example, one student who does not have arms was learning to use her feet to hold a pencil and write. She is verbal and my inclination was to have her sing and have the more physically capable students play the Orff instruments. But she wanted to experience playing the instruments and with the help of her occupational therapist we experimented with

using mallets that she could grip with her toes. Positioning the Orff instrument to be accessible and comfortable came next and the student asked for us to find an instrument that was low so she could play without needing to lift her leg up too high. It took some effort to make it possible for her to find a suitable mallet and size of instrument that worked for her, but with the student's feedback, we found a solution.

I often observe my college students using hand-over-hand techniques to grip the hand of a student with cerebral palsy and then play the instrument for them. As teachers it makes us feel better that the student was successful playing the instrument, but was the student really playing the instrument? Do they feel successful?

Another issue many music teachers struggle with is wondering whether students who are non-verbal with physical limitations are able to participate and understand what we teach. It is tempting to allow them to sit and observe the class but we have to find ways to engage and involve them. At Viscardi I learned to slow down and let the students try playing instruments for themselves and do more observing of how the student engages with the instrument. For example, one student would become upset when her aide tried to help her hold a mallet and play an instrument and would refuse to participate. For most of the two years I tried a variety of different instruments and techniques to involve her with no success. For the final week-long residency I brought an alto glockenspiel that sat on her wheelchair tray and a commercially produced mallet cuff for her to use to hold the mallet. Her aide started to move her hands and the student, as usual, began to protest. The aide stopped. After some time the student used her fingertips to press down on the edges of the bars and she discovered that when she released the bar it would softly ring. I noticed her playing her part in perfect time on the correct bars by using this technique she thought up on her own. It worked and she happily played the instrument that way for the rest of the week. Isn't it wonderful when we can learn as much from our students as they learn from us?

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