Teaching students with special needs

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

According to the latest government figures, published in June 2021, 15.9 per cent of school students have Special Educational Needs. Of these, 3.7 per cent have an EHC (Education, Health and Care) plan. The remaining 12.2 per cent receive SEN (Special Educational Needs) support. Over one million children in the UK have some kind of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). There may be many more children with undiagnosed conditions who have slipped through the net and do not receive the support they need.

Most music teachers have little or no training in coping with and understanding various needs and how to adapt their teaching accordingly. In this resource, I will look at some of the common conditions that are found in mainstream schools. (A previous *Music Teacher* resource, January 2022, was devoted specifically to teaching autistic students.)

What's in a name?

Describing a list of Special Needs as 'disorders' – despite that being the official term for some of them – has very negative connotations. I prefer the word 'condition', which is more neutral. It's better to think of people who are neuro-diverse as being 'different' rather than 'worse'. Indeed, some conditions give special strengths in some areas. We need to delve deeply to try and harness these differences in a positive way, and not treat them as weaknesses. It's important to remember that most conditions are generally not related to intelligence: many people with Special Needs are of above average intelligence and have a unique perspective on the world.

There is a long list of creative, imaginative and pioneering people who are or were neuro-diverse. Mozart is variously thought to have been autistic, dyslexic and/or to have had ADHD, Richard Branson is dyslexic, and Elon Musk recently revealed that he is on the autistic spectrum. There have been arguments put forward that Albert Einstein may have had autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD or all four simultaneously. Many innovators have achieved great things not *despite*, but *because* of their ability to think differently from the norm. Although Special Needs students' behaviour may sometimes be challenging, bear in mind that they may have hidden abilities too.

How do you know if a student has special needs?

Don't assume that schools or parents will automatically tell you about students' Special Needs. It's always a good idea to ask the head of music or music coordinator to routinely inform you about any students on the school's SEN list, or ask the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). A school may be reluctant to divulge this information, on the grounds of data protection. If you are employed by the school, there should not be a problem gaining access to privileged information. If, on the other hand, you're self-employed, it may be more difficult to access this. You may need to take the circuitous route of asking the school to ask the parents to give you the relevant information direct, or the parents might need to give the school permission to inform you of any issues.

If you're teaching privately, it's a good idea to ask for details of any educational or medical needs in your contract for lessons. This can initiate a dialogue where you can find out specific needs, and parents can help to suggest suitable pathways.

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What if we suspect that a child has a learning disability?

I once had a student whom I suspected had dyslexia. Although highly intelligent, he struggled with reading music and found it particularly difficult to process scales and arpeggios. I tentatively asked his mum if he had dyslexia and she replied, 'I'm so glad you've brought this up – I've long suspected this might be the case, but as his school has never mentioned the possibility, I've kept quiet about my concerns.' His school was a private school with small class sizes, yet I, who only saw a student for half an hour a week, had seen something that his class teachers had missed. My question to his mum was the catalyst for assessments and subsequent diagnosis.

As music teachers, we may be the only non-familial adult a student has one-to-one contact with. It's easy to underplay this responsibility – we may consider a mere half hour a week to be rather peripheral in the busy life of a child. We can, however, gain a unique insight into their strengths and weaknesses.

Although this had a successful outcome, we should also be very cautious about playing amateur psychologists. Be warned that parents can be easily offended if you have the temerity to suggest that their child is not entirely perfect. I knew one highly disruptive child who had a habit of throwing chairs around the classroom and was referred for an assessment by his school. His father was furious at the suggestion that his son may have a diagnosable condition and shrugged the behaviour off, saying, 'Boys will be boys.' It may be prudent to discuss your suspicions with a class teacher before mentioning it direct to parents.

Most common Special Needs

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

The term 'spectrum' disorder means that everyone presents in different ways. Some children may need specialist education, while others attend mainstream schools. You may have heard of Asperger's Syndrome, which is also referred to as high-functioning autism. This term is not generally used any more – for one thing, Hans Asperger's name has been dropped because of allegations of some unsavoury connections with the Nazis. The term 'high-functioning' may also be doing sufferers a disservice by implying that their symptoms are less severe. It may be that they are just better at hiding them, resulting in internal conflict between how they feel and how they behave. Figures are much higher for boys (three times as many as girls), but many girls slip through the net because they are generally better at 'masking' or hiding their symptoms.

Common traits:

- Affects how people communicate and relate to each other.
- Difficulty understanding the subtleties of language and can take things very literally.
- Sensitivity to sounds, touch, smell, light and colour.
- Repetitive physical movements, known as stimming.
- Repetitive verbal routines, such as needing to tell you about their bus journey to school, before the lesson can commence.

Strengths:

- Sound can produce intense reactions, so they may have a fascination with some patterns of sound and a dislike of others. While they may be very particular about intonation and sound quality, a possible downside is that they can be very sensitive about inevitable tonal blemishes, so they may be distressed at unintended squeaks, scratches or buzzes when they play.
- Extreme focus, sometimes to the point of obsessiveness.
- Repetitive behaviour, which might be beneficial for developing practice routines.
- Great attention to detail – they may notice things you don't.
- Perfectionism (this can be positive and negative).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

Common traits include:
- Hyperactivity (ADHD only).
- Short attention span: inattentive and easily distracted.
- Restless and fidgety behaviour.
- Compulsiveness.
- Repetitive tasks may be boring.
- Daydreaming.
- Disorganisation.
- Forgetfulness.

Strengths:
- Energy.
- Spontaneity.
- Creativity.
- Paradoxically, they can also be hyper-focused.

Dyslexia

Common traits:
- Difficulty in reading and spelling fluently. In music, this may manifest in misreading or skipping notes and failing to hold note-lengths correctly. Students may find it hard to tell whether a note is on a line or in a space.
- Difficulty in processing sequences – this may include sequences of notes, such as scales.
- Issues with short-term memory.
- Difficulty differentiating between right and left.
- Poor special awareness and limited concentration.
- Difficulty with time management.

Related conditions:
- Dyscalculia: a difficulty with maths and arithmetic, including number patterns and sequences.
- Dysgraphia: this is specific to writing, with trouble organising letters, numbers and words.

Strengths:
- Creativity.
- Vivid imagination.
- Seeing patterns and making connections.
- An ability to see the 'bigger picture'.

Dyspraxia

This is a form of Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). It can affect:
- Fine and gross motor skills and general coordination – this is an important consideration when choosing an instrument.
- Poor hand-eye coordination.
- Problems with balance, and can be perceived as clumsy.
- Speech difficulties.
- Difficulty planning and organising.

Strengths:
- Creativity.
- Original thinking.
- Determination: as with all the above conditions, spending their lives competing with neuro-typical friends, siblings and classmates can give inner reserves of strength and resourcefulness.

General strategies

The conditions mentioned above have many overlapping characteristics, and many people fit the criteria for more than one – indeed, some may have multiple diagnoses. The list below is intended to give you some general pointers on how you organise your lessons. Some strategies may be more relevant to certain conditions, but I have put them in a general list: it's important to be as open-minded as possible and try out as many different strategies as you can.

Inevitably, there will be plenty of trial and error along the way. Be flexible and don't impose your dogma too rigidly. Strategies that work for most students may not work for children with Special Needs. This isn't their fault or yours, but if you refuse to adapt, things can become frustrating for both of you.

- Try to have fast-paced lessons to keep students engaged, with frequent rewards. Spending a whole lesson on a single bar may make the student quickly lose interest (or it might fascinate them – it's up to you to make that call).
- Think about where a student is physically positioned in the room – if they're facing towards a window, they might easily be distracted.
- Make sure your lessons follow a very logical and systematic approach, with lots of repetition and revision of concepts.
- Don't get in a rut – be prepared to set aside what isn't working and keep learning varied, stimulating and, above all, fun.
- If you're finding that reading is problematic, focus more on aural development – for example using the Kodály method.
- Make the music and theory more memorable by making up stories, or using mnemonics, pictures and diagrams, so the brain makes visual, oral or aural associations and connections.
- Remember that everyone's brains are wired differently. Try to look at things from different perspectives, making things practical rather than theoretical.
- Enlarge sheet music on a photocopier and cover any other music on the page to avoid distractions.
- Some students find the use of colour helpful, such as a coloured transparent film over the music or copying it onto coloured paper.
- Track the music with a pencil as a student plays, to encourage them to read. Some students' eyes are constantly flitting around the room, rather than focusing on looking at the music on the page.
- Use a highlighter pen to mark such things as accidentals or dynamics – different colours for different things. Some notation software allows you to colour every pitch differently. To your brain, this may look like a confusing array of unrelated colours, but don't forget that a student's brain may be wired differently – to them, it might be perfectly logical.
- Always stay positive and focus on what's possible, not what's impossible.

(Dis)organisation

If you teach in a school, you may not be able to rely on students to remember their lesson times. It's helpful if you can arrange a fixed time, though sometimes it may be essential to rotate students. In a primary school, give the student's class teacher a copy of the timetable. If they do forget, it's normally relatively easy to find students. This may be more difficult in large secondary schools, which may be spread across several large buildings. Students often have laptops or tablets that they use in class lessons, so send them a reminder email a few minutes before they're due (for safeguarding purposes, always use a school email account). A reminder email the night before may be prudent, to ensure they remember to bring their instrument and music to school. Although we can hope that parents will help, sometimes disorganisation is inherited.

Communication: don't judge a book by its cover

I once had a student who barely said a word and always had a distinct air of indifference about his trumpet lessons. I was astonished when his mother told me how much he loved his lessons, and that they were the highlight of his week. Verbal and non-verbal communication can be problematic for many students, and many misunderstandings can result. As a result of their misreading of facial expressions, children can take the default position that all teachers hate them. If you and the student get a feeling of mutual dislike, however far this may be from the truth, there is much less chance of developing a positive relationship, and the outcome from lessons is less likely to be successful.

Is your student listening to you and understanding what you say? And vice versa? Remember that communication is a two-way street and very often we are constantly talking to a student without receiving much feedback. Sometimes what you might consider to be a straightforward statement can be completely misconstrued, but students are often reluctant to say when they don't understand. Ask them to repeat back what you have said, or check their understanding by asking them to apply an instruction in a practical way.

When a student says, 'I don't like this piece of music,' what they sometimes *mean* is: 'I do like this, but it's hard.' It's fine to abandon a piece of music midway through learning it if you're not making sufficient progress and it's not engaging the student, but make sure that's what the student wants. Indeed, you should be offering new things all the time, in the hope that something appeals to them, rather than always imposing your own choice of repertoire.

Try to have a dialogue with each student, though admittedly they may be reticent, in which case don't make them feel uncomfortable by forcing them to speak. Things you might ask them:

- What are you enjoying about the lessons?
- What would you like to do again?
- What do you find easy?
- What do you find hard?
- What music would you like to play?

We want to push them forwards without disillusioning them, striking a balance between staying in their comfort zone and introducing new challenges.

Small steps: breaking a piece into small components

What we may consider to be a very simple piece of music actually contains a large amount of information: pitches, rhythms, articulation marks, dynamics, and perhaps performance directions in Italian. Add to that particular technical issues such as fingerings or breath marks, and a student can feel overwhelmed. Information overload may cause students to shut down completely and do bizarre things, making you wonder if they've understood anything you've said over years of tuition. It can be exasperating, and teachers may be tempted to belittle the student with 'What on earth was that?'

It may be better to focus on one area at a time. Rather than saying, 'Be careful to hold your minims for two beats, don't forget the F sharps and play this bar forte,' just focus on, say, holding the minims for two beats. You may have the excruciating experience of listening to a piece in G major with F naturals, but at least the timing will have improved. Hopefully the student will have noticed the lack of a key signature without any further intervention from you, and you can congratulate them on correcting a mistake on their own.

Warning: not all students like breaking music down into its components. Some like seeing the bigger picture. I remember being baffled that a student was unable to clap a rhythm accurately, but then *played* it perfectly – along with all the right notes – in the context of the piece. Again, we must work to students' strengths: while my brain reads music very logically, this student was playing intuitively with a successful result.

Flexibility

When we teach, we may allow a student to get away with some minor bad habits, but other things are non-negotiable. An example in my own teaching is playing with a steady beat. I can't bear to hear a student playing with an elastic pulse, and I once even snapped a pencil on a music stand from tapping a beat so energetically, trying to keep my student in time. I use piano accompaniments and backing tracks, or I make up duet parts in order to inject a sense of pulse and rhythmic precision. Even boring technical exercises have to be played rigidly in time.

With certain students, however, I know I need to set aside my natural dogma. Some students simply don't feel the pulse in the same way I do and may get distressed – even reduced to tears – if asked to play with a backing track, which is inherently inflexible. The best we can do is to play with a piano accompaniment, in which I can make allowances for their erratic timing. They still get the satisfaction and sense of achievement from performing something all the way through, even if I have had to 'cheat' a little in order to keep the momentum going.

Repetition

Special Needs students may engage in highly repetitive behaviour. It can give them a sense of comfort and familiarity in an otherwise confusing world. If this can be harnessed, it can be very beneficial when playing a musical instrument: most musicians use a warm-up routine, or play scales which are often mindlessly, and sometimes obsessively, repeated.

They may like returning to familiar pieces over and over again. Consolidating old repertoire is always a good thing, but even better if you can encourage them to try playing with different phrasing or dynamics, or even transpose into a different key. This can be a good way to stimulate and challenge them, but be aware that this might make them uncomfortable – it may be that the repetition needs to be identical on each performance.

Not everyone likes repetition, however. You may need to give constant variety in order to prevent a student from getting bored.

Anxiety

Children are under a huge amount of pressure, both socially, often exacerbated by social media, and academically, with the pressure of exams. While anxiety is not a Special Educational Need per se, it can be amplified if a student already has one of the conditions mentioned above, creating very low self-esteem.

I have one particularly cautious and overly self-critical student, who stops and apologises when she makes the smallest mistake. It's very hard to convince her that all musicians make mistakes and that they are actually a good thing – it's how we improve. It's a difficult balance to encourage students to be self-critical, which is essential for independent learning, without inducing crippling self-doubt.

All musicians aspire to perfection – it's what motivates us to practise. However, perfectionism can be a curse, where the smallest blemish can produce a disproportionately negative reaction: one small mistake, even if it's unnoticeable to anyone else, can, in your own mind, spoil what everyone else may recognise as an excellent performance.

Playing easy pieces fluently is far more beneficial than stumbling through something that is too hard for you. Even if a student is working on Grade 5 repertoire, it's always fun going back over old Grade 1 pieces, or sightreading something easy. Students usually don't really care what standard a piece is. If they can play something fluently which sounds good, that's far more beneficial than a faltering attempt at a hard piece, which reveals all their failings. Challenges need to be strictly rationed and in between, lots of fluent playing will induce a sense of well-being.

My anxious student, mentioned above, recently arrived at her lesson close to tears, feeling overwhelmed by the stresses of school. We set aside all technical and musical challenges and just played music together which was well within her comfort zone. She left the lesson with a smile on her face, saying how much better she felt.

Exams

Exams can be a great way of motivating students and giving them a sense of achievement when they pass. However, they are not the be-all and end-all, and can be detrimental if parents become obsessed by the next exam and teachers become glued to a syllabus rather than offering an imaginative and varied curriculum tailored to each student.

It's essential to have a dialogue with students and parents about exam pressure for Special Needs children. Teachers usually assume that parents want their children to be on the exam conveyor-belt, without consulting them. Likewise, parents often make the assumption that exams are the only available route in instrumental lessons. Stuck in the middle is a child dreading doing them. All three parties may be reluctantly embarking on a path that nobody actually wants to go down. Frequently parents are relieved if you suggest following a route that doesn't involve exams. Another low-pressure alternative is doing online recorded exams, which can be re-recorded if an attempt does not go well.

Performances

Like exams, public performances need to be carefully managed. While some children love performing in public, others hate it. Always gain a student's consent before putting them forward for a school performance. Where so many areas of their life can feel out of their control, it's good to give them a sense of ownership in their music making and allow them to avoid uncomfortable situations. Don't underestimate your student, however. Children who have spent the whole of their lives being perceived as being 'different' might not care what people think of them, and therefore may have no inhibitions about performing in public, giving them an advantage over students who might think it's 'uncool'.

The power of music

Always stay good-humoured and remember that the relationship we have built with the child may have a more far-reaching impact than we realise. Class teachers who teach in large groups often have to follow a rigidly defined curriculum that may lack the flexibility to fully include divergent thinkers. If we handle them sensitively and harness their strengths with imaginative and creative teaching, we can make a real difference to their lives, helping them to engage positively with music, rather than it just being another thing they find difficult. This in turn may help to unlock other areas of their education.

As Einstein said, 'The theory of relativity occurred to me by intuition, and music is the driving force behind this intuition. My parents had me study the violin from the time I was six. My new discovery is the result of musical perception.'