

ers together once in a while. I know, keeping plants separate most of the time is good. However, they probably will enjoy the company of each other, particularly when they know there is nothing to fear from sharing.

Hymn choices

Choose hymns that teach our heritage and the Gospel. Old and new crops can be tasteful when you know they contain proper nutrients and substance.

Go to market

Take your harvest to the “farmer’s market” and share it with others. Take a choir mini-tour or a week-long tour and see what blessings are in store for your choir and others that are blessed through God’s beauty in this experience.

Look and listen beyond your garden

Looking at and listening to others’ produce is a good thing. Gather a file of great church choir recordings and learn from your regular listening sessions during the off season. Order copies of favorite works and increase your musical garden’s plant types. Suggestions include: St. Olaf College Choir, Mormon Tabernacle, Atlanta Sacred Chorale, and the National Lutheran Choir. There are many others, I’m sure.

Water your garden

Learn to water and feed your garden in an appropriate manner. You personally need rest and proper nutrition. Take time for your family and yourself and get away from it all, knowing that God will tend the garden in your absence. You know he’s been doing it with you all along. And don’t forget to allow the choir plenty of rest. They have earned it.

The Creed of a Chorister (Howard Swan)

To love great music, to believe my fellow singers, and to serve Jesus Christ with a sincere devotion – these are three

great principles embodied in the creed of a chorister. It is with the acceptance of these articles of faith that our music program will continue to grow. Not only will this happen with numbers of singers and their activities but with the knowledge that our service is enriched because the spirit of Christ is present in our hearts and is working through our lives. (from *Conscience of a Profession*, Howard Swan, Hinshaw Music, p. 16, ISBN 0-937276-07-3



“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Inclusion of Special Needs Students in Choirs

by

Vicki Baker

Texas Women’s University, Denton, TX
(Reprinted with permission of *Texas Sings*, Fall 2008)

As music teachers we often find ourselves faced with integrating special needs students into our classes. This can be challenging, particularly in a performance-based ensemble.

I recently had the opportunity to observe two special needs students participating in a middle school beginning treble choir. One of the special needs students sang incorrect pitches so

loudly while the choir was attempting to sight read that it was difficult for the other students to maintain tonal accuracy.

Later, when the choir began to sing one of its pieces, I was thoroughly enjoying the performance until I suddenly heard loud, off-pitch singing that, to my mind, destroyed the musical moment. My negative reaction led me to question the director after the concert.

How do you feel about having special needs students in your choir class? “I am in a school where my administration truly supports my call on this issue. I have special needs kids only in the choirs they can handle, and in which I can meet those needs. Mainly, these students are in my beginning-level classes. Rarely do I have them in a contest level group, and if they are, it is because I have had them for several years and can manage them in that setting.”

“I like having special needs kids in my choirs because I think, at some level, we all have special needs. I believe having these special individuals helps me keep a sense of perspective in my life. This job is not about me or just about music. It’s about people who are involved in a deeply emotional activity that touches the heart and soul, not just the ears and mind.”

Do you think special needs students are distracting to other students? “Every fall I have a discussion with the regular ed kids while the special needs students are out of the room. We talk about the fact that all of us have things we don’t want the world to see or know, and that we need to be respectful of these special needs kids because they can’t hide their problems. Usually, the other students adjust quickly and move forward. I also give each special needs child a study buddy, an advanced, mature student who can tutor and help them in class—give them a better chance of keeping up.”

Are the special needs students distracting to you? “The study buddy thing really helps me. I have had some students with autism who were more distracting than I could get past. Most of the time I can trust the inclusion teacher and the study buddy to help keep everything moving. I learn what type of signals work for the individual child to help him or her blend in with the class. One year I had a Down’s syndrome girl who sang very loudly and on one pitch. Eventually I learned I could give her a

certain look and she would smile and sing much softer. It takes a little time, but it is worth it.”

Do you feel that the special needs students diminish the quality of instruction or performance? “No, they don’t diminish anything. Of course, I have the ability to control what choir they join, so I don’t have them in high-pressure situations like contest. The benefits to the regular ed kids in the areas of compassion and acceptance outweigh any performance issues.”

How do the special needs students feel about being in choir? “I think they love it! They are a part of something really cool—really impressive to many people, and they are with all the students that they rarely get to be around. They love being a part of what is going on in the choir room.”

How do the other students in the choir feel about having special needs students in their class? “Students today have grown up with inclusion and special needs kids in regular class settings. They take it in stride and accept it as part of what is normal. I think, as a teacher, I set the tone for that, too. If I did not use the study buddy technique, or if I acted like having special needs students was a problem, then I believe my students would pick up on that attitude and respond in kind. I know I have my own special needs, and I am glad those don’t exclude me from things I love to do. I set the tone with my attitude, and my students have the same response.”

My teacher friend’s responses to my questions were genuine. They addressed important issues for all of us in the teaching profession. They showed how much this teacher cared about all of her students. As I contemplated her responses, I thought back to my own experiences with special needs students in my choirs.

Early in my teaching career I taught at an inner-city high school, a magnet school for special needs students. Each year I had students with various disabilities in my choir classes. One of those students, Robert, was an amazing musician. He was confined to a wheelchair due to a muscular condition, but that in no way affected his musical performance.

When I gave interval identification tests, Robert consistently got 100 percent of them correct. He did not allow his

disability to deter him from musical achievement. He earned a position in our Show Choir and served as a back-up singer, singing into a microphone on the side of the stage. Robert's excellent baritone voice earned him membership in the TMEA All-Region Choir.

The auditorium in which the All-Region concert was held did not have ramp access to the stage, so Robert's fellow choir members picked him up, wheelchair and all, and carried him up to the stage. Robert took it all in stride and kept a huge smile on his face. Singing brought him great pleasure.

Shawndale was another special needs student I taught. Due to her learning disabilities, she remained in high school for five years. Each year, she enrolled in choir. She was not a strong singer; she had a speech impairment, so I placed her in my Beginning Treble Choir. Shawndale had one of the special education teachers make a sign to attach to the back of her wheelchair that read I LOVE CHOIR!

She provided the choir with excellent advertising as she would wheel through the halls of the school in her motorized wheelchair. Shawndale also had someone make her a bright yellow T-shirt that was decorated with musical notes and the words, "I love choir," written across the front in large, sparkling letters. She wore that shirt at least twice a week, and each time she did, she made a point of telling me she was wearing her choir shirt.

Shawndale insisted on my giving her a hug each day as she left class. Multiplying five classes a week times five years amounts to lots of hugs! Shawndale's love for music was a daily inspiration to me.

As I think back over my last 20 years of teaching, one of my most memorable moments involved a special needs student named Leslie. At the beginning of the school year, one of the special education teachers came into my office to let me know that I would be having Leslie in my choir that year. She went on to explain that Leslie was confined to a wheelchair, had very little muscular control, and could not speak. Initially I thought this teacher was joking.

I said, "Let me get this straight. You are placing a student who cannot phonate a sound in a class where she is expected to sing." She nodded her head in the affirmative, and from her serious demeanor, I could tell that this was not a joke. I asked her, "Why are you placing her in choir if she can't even speak?

Why don't you put her in another fine arts class where she can participate?"

The teacher told me that Leslie could not play any musical instruments due to her muscular condition nor could she participate in art or drama classes. I felt the request was absurd, but seeing her dilemma, I acquiesced, although I will admit I was not pleased. Little did I realize that Leslie, who literally could not speak, would end up teaching me one of life's great lessons.

The first day of school arrived, and second period, Leslie showed up in her motorized wheelchair. Since my choir worked on standing risers, I designated a spot in front of the risers and told her that was her special parking place for choir.

She simply stared at me. I had no idea whether she heard or understood me. "Oh, great," I thought. "This is going to be a really long year." How was I going to assess her performance in class? How was I going to communicate with Leslie?

I determined that I would treat Leslie just like any other student and that I would operate under the assumption that she understood everything I was saying. Each day when she entered the choir room, I would take the sight reading book we were using for that day, open it to the appropriate page, and lay it on the tray extended across Leslie's wheelchair.

We would proceed with warm-ups and sight reading. When we finished, I would collect Leslie's book and then give her the music we would be rehearsing. I would always assign a student to turn the pages of music for Leslie, since she was unable to do so. We established a comfortable routine, and since she was hardly in the position to cause any type of distraction, I did not mind having her in my class.

One day about midway through the first semester, Leslie came into class and parked her chair. I took her sight reading book to her, opened it to the appropriate page, and pointed to the exercises we would be using that day. We went through our warm-ups and then I instructed the students to open their books to the exercises I had listed on the board.

All of a sudden, I saw Leslie thrashing around in her wheelchair. It appeared that she was trying to raise her hand. I immediately panicked. What was wrong with her? What if she was in pain or sick or choking? What should I do? I walked over to Leslie and asked her what was wrong. Leslie slowly, and painstakingly, worked until she could control her arm's movement enough to allow her to point to her music.

I suddenly realized Leslie was trying to tell me I had opened her book to the wrong page. My eyes filled with tears as I told her I was sorry and turned to the proper page. It occurred to me that Leslie understood everything I was saying. She wanted to be on the right page so she could follow along.

I had no idea what it was like to live in Leslie's world, unable to speak, walk, or move upon command. However, I realized that in spite of the physical limitations, her mind was just fine. She was listening to me and learning. I suppose I had essentially "written her off" in terms of thinking that she would ever learn anything, but the teacher in me had made sure she was provided with equal opportunity for instruction.

This experience reminds me of "The Starfish Story" by Loren Eiseley. He tells the story of a writer who is strolling along a beach and spies a person who, in the distance, appears to be dancing. As he draws nearer to the "dancer," he realizes that the young man is not dancing but throwing objects from the beach into the ocean. Upon closer examination, the writer sees that thousands of starfish have been stranded by the low tide and the young man is throwing them back into the ocean, one by one.

The writer asks the young man why he is undertaking such a seemingly insurmountable task. "Why, there are tens of thousands of starfish on this beach," says the writer. "How can you possibly believe you can make a difference?"

The young man pauses to contemplate the writer's question, and, as he tosses another starfish back into the ocean, replies, "It sure makes a difference to this one I'm throwing back right now!"

In my music classroom, I had no idea I was making a difference in Leslie's life. As far as I knew, she was like a beached starfish with little or no chance to be taught or to learn; however, I went ahead and tossed her back into the sea—helped her—so to speak. By doing that, she learned; she grew; her world opened into more possibilities, just as it did for the other students in the class.

As teachers we never know the degree to which we impact our students' lives. This is especially true in the case of special needs students. Sometimes their inability to communicate makes it difficult to assess how much learning is occurring.

I believe we have a responsibility to toss our special needs students "back into the sea" and give them the same oppor-

tunities to learn as the other students. Who knows how much life and love of living we may be instilling in them by including them in our music classes.

And something else happens, too. We never know the degree to which special needs students can impact our lives. A special needs student, Leslie, taught me one of the most important lessons that I have learned as a teacher. The effect that Leslie, Robert, and Shawndale have had on my life and my teaching has been invaluable. They have truly been the stars in my educational journey.

What are you planning to do about special needs students in your school, in your choirs?



"Only speak when your words are better than your silence."

(Arabic proverb)

Using the National Standards for Choral Teaching

by

James L. Fronczek

Pike High School, Indianapolis, IN

(Reprinted with permission of *ICDA Notations*, Vol 23, No. 1, Fall 2001)

Are you using the National Standards in your choral rehearsals? Do you know what they are? If not, you'd better take a second look at what you are doing because the times are changing. You will be held accountable for what happens in your choral rehearsals if that's not already happening in