**Summary**

Many school districts are implementing policies of full inclusion for children with special needs. As a result, there have been an increased number of special needs students in performing ensembles. Conductors must now find ways to include students with disabilities who were not previously in the ensemble.

While many conductors will have auditions, playing tests, and informal demonstrations of achievement in a typical rehearsal, these exercises may reinforce the stigma that students with disabilities are not as capable as their peers. Furthermore, these exercises might discourage students with special needs to participate. A music educator must prepare to consider his or her philosophy and the way changing demographics in schools will be reflected in future programs. In order to understand a performers disability a teacher must contact or consult with members of a student’s IEP or 504 Plan team. These meetings are beneficial as they may help the teacher understand a student’s talents and capabilities. If a teacher cannot attend the meeting, she should seek out any existing documents or recordings from the meetings.

It’s imperative that a teacher spends time consulting with special educators, reading available articles in music education, and talking to parents. Educators should also be aware of whether a student is at grade level academically and whether they are on track to receive a diploma at the end of their high school career. Most students with special needs will have a transition plan in place during their high school years. Gathering this information will take some time, but will ultimately be beneficial.

In general, most music educators are much more qualified than they realize. Music educators should understand many ways students learn music, including students with special needs. Teaching a special performer may require an examination of ideas about how students inherently learn music and a sincere effort to be creative when accommodating performers. The teacher needs to know how a student can best learn and succeed. All students have different learning styles and preferences, and it is acceptable and encouraged to try new ideas or techniques for students both with or without special needs who need help in ensembles.

There are many ways that technology can be used to assist students when practicing including the use of video clips to assist with the audiation of musical passages. Also, Smart Music can be used as a great tool to extract parts, make recordings, and choose appropriate literature for a student with special needs. It can also modify assessments, and help with students’ anxiety about performing in front of the instructor. Notation programs can be used in a variety of ways to extract, modify, and simplify parts for individual performers, as well.

Placing a special needs student properly is imperative for the success of the student. Select ensembles should be for select students who qualify. Many conductors leave students with special needs out of the assessment process assuming they are exempt. Holding these students accountable is part of the teaching and learning process.

**Reflection**

With the ever-growing inclusion of special needs students in ensembles and so-called “mainstream” classes, it is vital that teachers become well-versed in teaching students with special needs to the best of their abilities. A more student-centered approach to teaching will be required of conductors and music educators to accommodate these students effectively. Technology can be an excellent way to assess and instruct students in an individualized way. All students should have the chance to be in a performing ensemble and be held accountable in order to have the opportunity to learn.

Having a brother on the autistic spectrum, I’ve seen firsthand the impact that the arts can have on a student with special needs. While he does not have a severe case, it has still affected him socially and emotionally. He received personalized care from an aid throughout middle school and high school, but was also enrolled in mainstream classes and programs. Though he was still held accountable and expected to finish work on time and to an acceptable standard, his teachers accommodated him in such a way that he could both participate in class and learn at his own pace in a way that was best for him. Now, he is studying art and animation at a private college and has served as a mentor in several programs – similar to Ball State’s PRISM Project – to other students with special needs. Thanks to his current academic advisor and his aids in secondary school, he has opened up socially and has established professional and academic goals for himself on par with his peers. I believe that with the right accommodations and a student-driven curriculum from the teacher, any student can be successful in any discipline.