This week I was working individually with a student with an IEP in the 6th grade string class. She and her aid explained to me that she was getting frustrated because she was not able to keep up with her peers, and that she was having difficulties using both the right and left hands together; furthermore, the student was having trouble staying motivated to work in class because violin wasn’t as fun as she thought it would be, so she wanted to quit or learn something else. During class, I gave her options during activities (such as clapping, singing, or playing) and specific goals (once we do A, we can move on to B). While the class was learning “Rolling Along,” I had the student hold her violin in guitar position and just work on the fingerings. We then added pizzicato, then pizzicato in the normal playing position, and by the end of class she was holding her bow. While she wasn’t quite able to play the entire song, she was able to play the first half with her peers and seemed to have much more fun than she had in previous classes.

The next day, my C.T. informed me that the student was supposed to have a team meeting with her mother, aid, and teachers and that I was invited to participate. I observed from my experiences with her and from information given by her team that she is sensitive to auditory and physical sensory experiences. While she enjoyed playing along with her peers and participating in class, she did not like feeling left out or behind other students. We decided that the amount of multitasking needed for playing violin would be too difficult for her at this stage, and that it was in her best interest to move her to a piano class. The piano class will allow her not only to participate with her peers, but also use headphones to isolate her own playing and tune out those around her. Furthermore, because piano is a more visual and tactile instrument – you just press a key and the note sounds – that she would have a better experience learning to play the instrument. It was a new experience for me interacting with a student’s IEP team, but it was very rewarding and I was able to see how the administration handles these meetings.

Since my observation on Monday, I’ve been including more singing and modeling and less of the metronome in my teaching. For the 7th and 8th grade orchestra we warmed up with scales as we normally do. However, I decided that we would add in accents and dynamics to each scale, and I allowed the students to volunteer and suggest ideas to provide variation. We began doing two repetitions of each scale, once with the metronome and once without, and I was pleasantly surprised at how well they played together and watched me for time. However, the 8th grade band did not do nearly as well without the metronome. On Tuesday we played through a few chorales that they use for warm-ups. We talked about the importance of watching the conductor (time, style, dynamics, etc.), and I informed them that I would be using rubato (stretching the tempo) and that they should watch me for cutoffs at the end of phrases. They played the chorale very well in time, but only at the tempo I originally counted off. In fact, very few students watched me at all for time, style, and dynamics after the first bar. After a few more attempts I had more students watching me, but it’s still something that we will need to work on. My C.T. and I have told the students that we will be using the metronome less and less, and over the course of the week all the ensembles have been better about watching the conductor. I think I will be incorporating rhythmic exercises into our warm-ups to help improve our internal pulse.

Finally, Tuesday was the due date for the flash card assignment that my C.T. and I assigned to the 6th Grade Woodwinds class. I created the instructions, examples, and rubric for the assignment and presented it to them the previous week. Something I realized form this experience is that pre-adolescents need very specific, detailed instruction for absolutely everything. The example flashcard I used had a flute fingering on it, and thus the fingering was horizontal. However, many of the clarinet and saxophone students put their fingerings horizontal as well. It was a funny result, but if I were to do the assignment again I would definitely need to specify the direction of the fingers and which open keys I wanted illustrated. I also had to have a brief lesson with students on how to construct a treble clef and stem direction, which is not something I had initially anticipated with the assignment.