Pedagogy for Every Brain

Neurodiversity in Music Education

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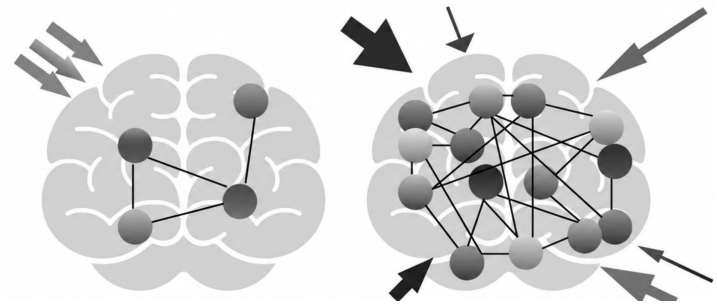
California Music Educators Association Bay Section Conference

Concepts to carry into teaching

Neurodiversity is natural variation. Students differ in attention, sensory processing, communication, movement, and executive function. Strengths and challenges overlap; a label does not tell us how one student learns.

Music combines many tasks. Reading, listening, remembering, coordinating movement, and expressing an idea can place different demands on the same learner. Ask which part needs support.

More pathways to a musical goal. Demonstration, sound, notation, movement, and play offer different ways to explore and retrieve a skill. Offer choices; preferences are not fixed learning styles.



Chapter Fig. 2.7.3 illustrates varied inputs and connections. Offer useful alternatives while respecting each student's sensory comfort.

Start with the student: "What helps you learn? What gets in the way?" Build on strengths, respect sensory boundaries, and let the student help choose the tools.

Tools to try in lessons and ensembles

Support	Try this with singers or instrumentalists
Sensory comfort	Ask about sound, lighting, seating, and proximity. Adjust accompaniment or ensemble placement; offer a quiet break and preview sudden loud passages.
Clear communication	Give one concrete cue, then wait. Pair it with a demonstration or brief written instruction. Ask the student to show or explain the next step.
A manageable task	Separate rhythm, pitch, text, or movement before recombining. Clap a rhythm, echo a short phrase, or mark one score target at a time.
Prediction and processing	Allow time to hear the phrase internally before singing or playing. Model, pause, invite a response, and ask what matched the intended sound.
Play with a purpose	Try one phrase as two characters or emotions. Change articulation, dynamics, or a safe gesture. Compare the sound and ease; keep what helps.
Practice and feedback	Write one goal and a short practice sequence with breaks. Use a recording or optional visual feedback. Revisit later to see what the student can retrieve.

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Further exploration & contact

Resources for further exploration

CAST - Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

Practical framework for offering multiple ways to engage, learn, and demonstrate skills.

Understood.org - Learning and thinking differences

Accessible explanations and practical strategies for attention, processing, and executive function.

Thomas Armstrong - Neurodiversity in the Classroom (2012)

A strengths-based perspective on supporting different learners in educational settings.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities

Research, advocacy, and educator resources about learning differences.

Get in touch

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