

Chapter One

Rationale for using bells and chimes Skills needed for success Goals and objectives Long-term benefits

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Rationale for using bells and chimes

Parents of children with special needs often approach school administrators requesting some sort of inclusion in the music program of the school. In many instances such a request is politely ignored, and in others the request may be forwarded to music educators, whose training usually does not include information about providing music experiences for special learners.

If the request is forwarded to the choral director, he/she soon discovers that:

- (1) The special child cannot sing at all or can sing melodies without the essential words.
- (2) The special child has a beautiful singing voice but cannot **read** (even the words) necessary to be included in the choir.
- (3) The special child has an unusual appearance and/or strange behaviors that make his/her inclusion very difficult.

If the request is forwarded to the band or orchestra director, he/she soon discovers that:

- (1) The special child does not have the cognitive ability to learn to read music.
- (2) The special child does not have the physical dexterity and coordination necessary for playing a standard band or orchestral instrument.
- (3) The special child has an unusual appearance and/or strange behaviors that make his/her inclusion very difficult.

If number three (unusual appearance and/or strange behaviors) was the ONLY problem, I would recommend that these teachers receive a crash course in compassion and tolerance, but this is not usually the case. In most situations it is the lack of well-developed **skills** (academic and motor) that is the major stumbling block.

The alternative to inclusion in the choir, the band, or the orchestra is participation in a handbell choir using methods designed for special learners. Many school systems **do not** consider this option because:

- (1) Handbells, a relatively new musical medium, are not generally accorded the respect and status of the standard band/orchestra/choir programs in the schools.
- (2) If handbell choirs do exist in the school system, there may be the perception that only standard methods of instruction are available, and these require a certain amount of cognitive and motor skills.
- (3) In most instances state laws only require that schools provide special education, and no mandate exists for offering music experiences that are comparable to those offered to normal students.

School systems should be encouraged to consider this option, because:

- (1) Handbells can produce music that is as satisfying to audiences and to participants as that produced by the band/orchestra/choral ensembles.
- (2) Handbells are very **cost-effective** compared to the start-up costs for band and orchestra.
- (3) Directing a handbell ensemble does not require specialized training for directors, as long as information about alternative methods of instruction is provided.

In one school district the parents of three teen-age young men asked the board to establish a handbell choir for their children. The board refused. After paperwork for a lawsuit was initiated, the board decided that they could provide this service. These men became participants in a chime choir that rehearsed and performed regularly. After graduation they joined a local handbell choir for persons with developmental disabilities. It was a very positive experience for them.

Were the eyes of the school board opened by this experience? No. As soon as these men graduated, and the possibility of a lawsuit was not longer a factor, they discontinued the chime choir and went back to "business as usual". Attitudes like this change very slowly, but the good news is that they are changing.

Skills needed for success

It has been mentioned that the major factor preventing inclusion of special learners in the standard school musical ensembles is lack of appropriate **skills**.

The following skills are **not** required for participation in a handbell choir that is designed for special learners:

- (1) The ability to read music or printed material
- (2) The ability to recognize pitch or to sing on pitch
- (3) The physical ability to hold or manipulate a handbell
- (4) The ability to recognize letters, colors, or symbols
- (5) The ability to count internally to coordinate rhythm

The following skills are usually **required**, with the exception of those noted by an asterisk:

- (1) The ability to visually follow cues from a director*
- (2) The ability to respond (ring) on time following the cue
- (3) The ability to track letters or numbers on a chart**
- (4) The ability to demonstrate appropriate social skills
- (5) The ability to remain silent in the absence of cues

*Persons with no sight have been integrated into special choirs with the means of an electronic sensor that tells them when to ring.

**If all persons in a choir are unable to track information on a chart, the choir would use direct cueing altogether. When some members can track a chart, and other cannot, the methods of direct cueing and chart tracking may be combined with two or more directors.

Goals and objectives

If most educators understood the many goals that are possible in a handbell choir, they might be more interested in developing these programs.

Goals and related objectives for communication skills

- (1) Improved attention span**
 - a. improved on task behavior with significant distractions
 - b. improved ability to understand the "give and take" (play and rest) involved in effective communications
- (2) Improved ability to follow directions**
 - a. improved understanding of the importance of listening for the purpose of making music
 - b. improved ability to process and respond to information presented on charts

Goals and related objectives for academic skills

- (1) Improved ability to recognize letters, numbers, symbols**
 - a. improved ability to recognize printed information in a timely manner that allows the motion of the music
 - b. improved ability to discriminate and find certain academic information in the presence of other symbols, etc.
- (2) Improved ability to learn new places, and new facilities**
 - a. improved knowledge about new cities and the routes and directions involved in travel
 - b. improved knowledge of workshops, residences, etc. in other places that the choir visits

Goals and related objectives for motor skills

- (1) improved eye-hand coordination**
 - a. improved ability to hold the bell for optimum sound
 - b. improved ability to create motion necessary to ring the bell
- (2) improved ability to learn to care for bells and equipment**
 - a. improved ability to clean and store handbells
 - b. improved ability to assist with transportation of bells

Goals and related objectives for social-emotional skills

- (1) improved ability in getting along with peers**
 - a. improved ability to cooperate with peers in making music
 - b. improved ability to share responsibilities during performance
- (2) improved ability to learn social skills with other individuals**
 - a. improved ability to learn social skills related to new places
 - b. improved ability to demonstrate social skills in performance

Goals and related objectives for organizational skills

- (1) improved ability to assist with setting up equipment**
 - a. improved ability to locate bells and place them properly
 - b. improved ability to follow directions effectively
- (2) improved ability to structure set-up in new environments**
 - a. improved ability to set-up tables and accessories
 - b. improved ability to visualize set-up in new locations

Someone might say that the list above is more goals and objectives than we would ever need in a lifetime. My point exactly - the goals and objectives related to handbells are so numerous that they are worthy of consideration by persons who plan activities for special learners.

Long-term benefits

When I organized my first handbell choirs at the state school in 1978, I had no idea that I would be leading some of these same individuals in ringing bells twenty-five years later. This lifetime of sharing between us was **not planned**, but how very nice it is for us that it has evolved in this way.

We are very much like family to one another. I know that some professional therapists will say, "You can't make friends with those persons you serve in a therapeutic capacity." I understand this concept, especially as it relates to counseling, but with regard to quality of life and the long term benefits of friendship, I am very proud that it has turned out this way.