

## "Special Music by Special Kids"

Michael Monagan

For about a year and a half I have been teaching songwriting in my class at Widney High School. My students are all developmentally disabled. Some have epilepsy; others, cerebral palsy, blindness, Down's syndrome, or muscular dystrophy. Nearly all of them have behavior problems.

When I first started the class, I played a song I had written, and explained its three components: structure, melody, and lyrics. I knew that much of this was not making sense to the kids, so I didn't belabor it but went ahead with some creativity. I had each student sit at the piano and play three notes. This, I explained, was a melody. I then added chords to each student's melody to show how a song is begun. Then I asked what they wanted to write a song about: What was on their minds? One student said, "I want a new car." I asked the kids for details: "What color is it? Where do you drive it? How do you take care of it?" Their responses became the lyric, and a song was born.

The class continued to write songs. If a student had an idea for a lyric, I would ask him or her to sing the phrase instead of saying it. I would then harmonize the idea on the piano, and we would go on from there. If no lyric was forthcoming, I would ask a student to sit at the piano and play a simple melody. I would then put chords to the melody. When the music was finished, I would have the kids close their eyes and tell me what images came into their minds.

In March, 1989, Rounder Records will release an album of 14 songs written by the class: "Special Music by Special Kids." The album carries endorsements from Smokey Robinson, James Garner, Leo Buscaglia, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Tiffany, and The Association of Directors of Special Education.

Needless to say, this success has the students (and their teacher) very excited. The kids have experienced a boost in self-esteem and a feeling of accomplishment all too rare in their lives.

Michael Monagan is a Special Education Teacher. He can be reached at Widney High School, 2302 S. Gramercy Place, Los Angeles, CA 90018.

**Persons with mental handicaps should participate in the many facets of societal life, engage in competitive employment, and enjoy a variety of recreational and leisure activities with handicapped and nonhandicapped peers.**

ized functioning, skills that will move students toward independence. We cannot afford to waste time on objectives that have no demonstrated relation to the real world. Teachers must therefore teach skills that are as functional and as appropriate for the student's age as possible.

*Types of skills that can be learned.* Even students with moderate, severe, or profound mental disabilities have been taught relatively complex tasks. Several studies have also shown the potential of some of these individuals to learn traditional academic tasks such as reading and arithmetic (Brown 1973). Yet, persons who have mental handicaps will often learn better if the stimuli they encounter are real and not symbolic. For example, money skills should be taught using real money and social skills with real people.

*The best time for learning.* Because it takes much time for them to learn a

skill, students with severe intellectual disabilities should start learning early and continue at every opportunity. To learn a specific skill such as riding a city bus to a shopping center, for example, persons with mental disabilities might require 10 or more times the amount of practice than persons of average ability. The implication, once again, is that we must make the most of every moment of instructional opportunity.

In addition, students with mental handicaps may have poor memory abilities, requiring them to have more than an average number of opportunities for practicing functional skills. Overlearning will have to occur if students are to become proficient and use skills for an extended period of time.

*Where learning should occur.* Because these students do not generalize well, the most effective approach is to teach specific skills where they will actually be needed and expand from that point to cover an adequate sample of various situations. Training locales should include the classroom, the school, and the community where, as an adult, the individual will ultimately function (Brown et al. 1983).

*The need for synthesized learning.* Persons with mental handicaps often fail to recognize the interrelation of different aspects of a situation. Thus, even if they have all of the isolated skills necessary for purchasing food in a grocery store, there is no guarantee they would be able to execute the entire act. By teaching skills in natural clusters, teachers enable these students to rely on the context of the entire action and the accompanying environmental cues.

### Appropriate Educational Policies

Based on an understanding of the learning difficulties resulting from mental handicaps, we present the following recommendations for policies to facilitate the normalization of persons who are mentally handicapped.

*Integrate students with mental handicaps with their nonhandicapped peers.* Students with mental handicaps placed in integrated regular school

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.