

# Navigating Special Needs in Elementary Music

Natasha Thurmon, San Antonio, TX

CASMEC, Sacramento, CA

January 2026

[Natasha.thurmon@gmail.com](mailto:Natasha.thurmon@gmail.com)

Under federal law, music teachers are considered “general classroom educators.” This means we enjoy all the rights and responsibilities associated with providing a high-quality education to our many students, regardless of any accommodations and modifications they need. This can present a challenge to the music teacher, who often provides services to an entire campus population. However, good teaching practice and knowledge of special education jargon and resources on site can guide us in our goal to educate all our students.

## Alligator Pie

**Possible Grade Level: Third Grade**

**Objectives: Improvisation, dramatic play**

**Teaching Strategy: Minimal steps**

- Learn speech by rote, discuss type of poem.

**Alligator Pie**

Alligator pie! Alligator pie!

If I don't get some I think I'm gonna die.

Give away the green grass, give away the sky,

But don't give away my alligator pie!



- Try speech with different inflections, voice types, or added movements.
- After practicing multiple times, tuck it away for another day...

### Special Education: A BRIEF Outline

-1973 through today: Various laws, including but not limited to, HRA, 94-142, and IDEA are passed and amended regularly through the decades to adapt to the needs of individuals in our country.

-1997: Important IDEA amendments, including: Individualized Education Program (IEP) is expanded to include a general classroom teacher (which can be the music teacher)

### IDEA: The Six Principles

A: Zero Reject: a student cannot be excluded from a classroom purely because of their disability.

B: Nondiscriminatory Evaluations: a student is evaluated by professional who are assigned to the team, who will meet to discuss what is most appropriate for the child's right to learn.

C: Free and Appropriate Education: The most appropriate educational setting is determined for a student, with an accompanying IEP with specific and appropriate goals and benchmark periods to help evaluate growth. (Doesn't matter how many IEPs we service, we are legally bound to know each IEP and make required accommodations for all students)

D: Least Restrictive Environment: Students will be educated with students who do not have disabilities to the greatest extent appropriate. The LRE is where a student learns best.

E and F: Procedural Due Process and Parent Involvement: Parents may request a formal review of a child's placement, and are encouraged to participate in the process.

## The Crocodile

**Possible Grade Level: Third Grade**

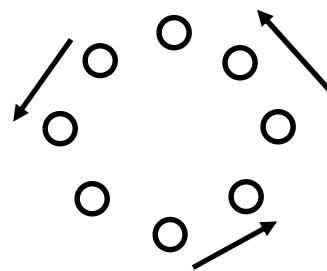
**Objectives: Sixteenth notes**

**Teaching Strategy: Repetition**

- T shares poem, S identify empty spaces, fill in with sixteenth-quarter note combination.
- S practice speaking/patting rhythm, first isolated, then with poem.
- Transfer BP to tubanos (or other instruments that allow for alternating hands: temple blocks, piccolo blocks, log drum, hand drum cradled between knees)
- Instruments in circular shape (or U), and S rotate around instruments.

### The Crocodile

Beware the crafty crocodile  
Who beckons you with clever smile  
To join him in the river Nile  
Or swim with him a little while  
His smile is not a friendly smile  
It springs from his dishonest guile  
And treacherous reptilian style.  
Beware the crafty crocodile!



### Practical Advice

- Work with the Special Education staff on your campus. When they see you reaching out and asking them, it creates a sense of teamwork in supporting your students.
- Be a part of the solution. Take data and give feedback to the teacher. Modify your lesson, and build in time to fill in folders or data trackers.
- Be aware of what an IEP/504 contains. What can help you to provide your students with what they need?
  - ASK where you can access the paperwork. LOOK at it all. CREATE a system to help yourself organize it (folders, color coding, symbols, privacy, etc.)
  - Pay attention to: accommodations, behavior plans, schedule of service (should some be accompanying to music class?)
- Here are some common accommodations to try with your students
  - Extended time
  - Assistive technology
  - Preferential seating
  - Use of mnemonic devices for note names
  - Visual schedule (posted), visual cues (on a lanyard/keyring)
  - Graphic organizers
- Be consistent. Always have a plan, with multiple solutions for various solutions
- Know the difference between accommodations, adaptations, and modifications:
  - Modifications: changing the curricular goal (the what) to help a child succeed
  - Accommodations: adaptions made to help a child succeed (the how)
  - Adaptations: tools and materials used to help accommodate or modify.

## **Crocodile Rock**

**Possible Grade Level: Third Grade**

**Objectives: Sixteenth notes**

**Teaching Strategy: Skeletal Structure, respond in the moment**

- T guides S through each slide: rhythm, then letters, then next slide, repeat.
  - S point out similarities and differences from one slide to the next.
- Transfer slides from speech/body percussion to barred instruments
- Practice through several times to allow many turns.

The image shows three sequential slides of skeletal notation for sixteenth notes. Each slide contains four measures of music. The first slide shows measures with note heads B, E, and A. The second slide shows measures with note heads B, E, and A. The third slide shows measures with note heads B, E, and A. Arrows indicate the progression from the first slide to the second, and from the second to the third.

Slide 1	Slide 2	Slide 3
B B B	B B B	B B B
E E E	E E E	E E E
E E E	E E E	E E E
A A A	A A A	A A A

## Specific Strategies

### -Classroom Management Strategies:

- Proximity, visual monitoring, access to teacher, quality ratio
- Clear rules and procedures
- Varied opportunities to respond (individual, small group, whole group)
- Praise: "Catch them being good"

### -Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence

### -Teaching Strategies:

- Modality: aural, visual, kinesthetic (use them all, variety is key)
  - Ex: raised textured boards, movement while listening, 3D manipulatives for abstract concepts, schedule of activities (written or visual)
- Pacing: Slow down!
  - Ex: revise parts (skeletal), less material, student buddies, wait time
- Size:
  - Ex: larger font, larger music score, only what is needed
- Color:
  - Ex: colored visuals, colored dots on barred instruments, colors for new solfège pitches or music notes

-Be careful with have written paperwork. Be factual, not including personal opinion or perception.

-Don't forget about gifted/talented students. You may also have a student who is twice exceptional, needing multiple accommodations.

-ALE units: meet with the aid who accompanies to class beforehand to discuss how they can help.

-Younger classes may need faster pacing, and thus, more teaching material.

-Consider a bin of fidgets in your room for students who have them listed in their IEPs.

-During activities where not everyone gets a turn, help prepare students for that reality.

-Premack Principle: First \_\_\_\_\_, then \_\_\_\_\_. (helpful when waiting for a turn)

-Motivators: Find out what motivates a student (If they don't want it, they won't work for it)

-Ignore minor infractions

-Lots of repetition

-Not too many directions at once

-Seek to learn more (like online trainings)

-Patience Patience Patience!

-Ask for help: special education teacher, general education teacher, last year's teacher, behavior specialist, speech pathologist, etc..

## Put it all Together

Possible Grade Level: Third Grade

Objectives: Sixteenth notes, Ensemble

Teaching Strategy: Repackaging information

- T leads S through review of The Crocodile and Alligator Pie from prior lesson
- S discover form at the bottom of the visual and “walk through” the form of the song
- Add music and play through!

<p>A</p>  <p>    x8</p>	<p>C</p>  <p>BBBB BBBB B B EEEE EEEE E E EEEE EEEE E E AAAA AAAA A A</p>
<p>B</p>  <p>   x2</p> <p>Alligator pie! Alligator pie! If I don't get some I think I'm gonna die. Give away the green grass, give away the sky, But don't give away my alligator pie!</p>	
<p>Intro A B C A B C A B C C C</p>	

### **Resources:**

Hammel, A. & Hourigan, R. (2017). *Teaching Music to Students with Special Needs: A Label Free Approach*. New York: Oxford.

Castaneda, Lupe (2018). Educating Students with Autism. NISD Training, March 2018.

### **Discography:**

John, Elton. “Crocodile Rock.” *Don’t Shoot Me, I’m Only the Piano Player*, DJM Records, 1972.

### **Children’s Literature:**

Prelutsky, J. (Ed.). (1983). *The Random House Book of Children’s Poetry*. New York, NY: Random House.

### **Special thanks to:**

Sabre Menchaca, MS, CCC-SLP, Boldt Elementary

Norma Zuniga, MS, Special Education, Boldt Elementary