

The role of assistants

By Dara Cumin, Leipzig, 2022

The topic of having assistants in the eurythmy lesson with the student they assist daily is a broad and multi-faceted one and cannot be answered easily with a simple yes or a no. Every person and situation has its unique variables and aspects and no two situations will be the same. For that reason I have thought of the following criterion to consider while deciding on whether or not to invite the participation of an assistant in my lesson, and given that they do participate, what is important to communicate with them. I emphasize though that remaining flexible and open to the changing phases, seasons, and individual development of the student is of utmost importance. What seems to be the solution one week could no longer be true for the next. So remain aware and conscious of the dynamics at play and be sure to communicate clearly with the assistant(s) and have them available even if they do not always participate in case their presence becomes necessary at a later time.

In the following paragraphs I will detail some of the experiences that I have had while working in an inclusive school setting with students in the middle and upper grades and the things that have come to mind when I consider supporting the future work of colleagues in similar working situations.

Level of physical/mental capability of the students

The individual level of both physical and mental capability of each student is important to consider when determining the appropriateness of having the assistant in the eurythmy lesson. For some students it is clear that without an assistant there can be no moving with others or participation from the student. In these cases I invite the individual assistant from the beginning to participate alongside the student. Often this is a student that is not capable of understanding direction or participating alone within a group setting. For these individuals, when we are moving as an entire group, for example opening together, they are with us in the circle next to their assistant, and the rest of the lesson they rely heavily on their assistant and are usually either enjoying moving to the music with them or doing individualized work in one part of the room because the attention is not there to be able to participate fully and regularly to build up an exercise with the others. This is a clear case for having the assistant support in the lesson.

Trying first without assistance

Unless the case has been made clear to invite the assistant in from the beginning, I have tried for all students with an assistant to start the school year without their assistant there. I do this for a variety of reasons. Many times the assistants are new-hires and I have not built a relationship with them, nor has the student fully, and this can bring to the eurythmy lesson a multitude of problematic and unharmonious things. I also want the students to feel safe and invited on their own terms, and attempt to design lessons that feel inclusive and enjoyable for them. My preference is for them to be able to participate fully in their own way without assistance if possible.

This is made possible by building their levels of trust for me, the room, and the class itself, and is accomplished to different degrees based on the individual. One strong determining factor is the level of independence that they already have developed in the school setting. For students that are comfortable transitioning classrooms during breaks or going to the cafeteria alone it is usually not necessary to have an assistant in the eurythmy lesson.

The assistants themselves

For each of us, we must decide for ourselves what we prefer. My preference is to not have the assistant present in the lesson if possible. For one reason, it allows the students to integrate in the lesson and to be fully on their own and to blend their individuality with the group dynamic during group participation. For another reason, the assistant can be a wildcard in the lesson, and that is not a pleasant thing to be dealing with while trying to facilitate a lesson.

By wildcard, I give the following scenarios I have personally experienced that have effected the harmony in the lesson.

- The assistant decides to do their own thing in movement with the student he/she assists and takes the space of the entire eurythmy room ignoring the other participants in the lesson.
- The assistant is in bad mood, or is in general not happy with his/her job or life situation and brings that inside the eurythmy room energetically, or is otherwise distracted in thought and not completely present.
- The assistant participates in the lesson and tries to either challenge themselves or outdo the students by going faster, for example, in a concentration exercise.
- There is more than one assistant in the room because there is more than one student with an assistant, and they are socializing in the corner and completely ignoring the students they are there for.
- The assistant gives feedback in the middle of the lesson, because they do not see the challenge given to the students as pedagogical.
- The assistant distracts the other students with conversation not pertaining to the lesson.
- Something else to consider, especially for the middle and upper grades is that the presence and attention of another adult in the room inhibits the movement expression of the students, because they are feeling the feeling of being watched.

Those may seem like extreme examples, but have nevertheless been experienced in my lessons, and from them, I have learned a lot.

When assistance is necessary

The criterion I consider before inviting an assistant in helps to ensure a harmonious experience and a successful lesson for all. If the student's participation is becoming limited or otherwise non-participatory without his/her assistant, I consider the following aspects concerning the assistant to determine if their presence could be of benefit:

The relationship with the student they assist is of utmost importance. If there is trust and joy, it is possible that they could enhance the experience of the student that is otherwise not integrating well in what is happening in the class. Their relationship with eurythmy is also important, and for this we often have the responsibility of introducing eurythmy to them for the first time. Naturally, their relationship to their job is also important and their openness to participating in the lesson and staying flexible for what is needed throughout the year.

Their expression/impression in the constellation of the entire group. Is this someone who easily and regularly harmonizes with the students? Although they are only there to assist one student, their presence is felt by all, and their relationship with the rest of the class is important to consider.

Their relationship to you is also very important to consider. Are they open to your consideration and requests? Are they open to go with the flow of the lesson and respect that they may not understand or 'get' eurythmy, but are on board for the adventure? Can they stay present? Can they joyfully participate?

How to handle the assistant if they do participate?

When welcoming the assistant into the lesson communicate what you have envisioned for his/her participation. This is of course situationally dependent and is determined by the content of the lesson, the abilities of the student, the relationship between the student and the assistant, and also the relationship of the assistant to eurythmy and his/her willingness to stay present and participate. This relationship to eurythmy relies on our communication and openness with the assistant. When we speak about our intentions for the lesson and how they can be helpful openly and consistently, we easily guide them through the lesson without any unpleasant interruptions like the ones listed above.

What is important for assistants to know?

If the assistant has been invited into the lesson it means that his/her presence is beneficial for the student (s)he supports. Many things can come up to initiate this, the increasingly challenging material in the lesson, the changing social dynamics of a class, a changing developmental phase of the student, or any other consideration that is situationally specific that we encounter in this kind of work.

This is what I always communicate beforehand

How their participation is envisioned, for example; individual participation with the focus of encouraging the participation of the student or acting as a proxy, specifically supporting the

student with choreography or other details of the lesson, minimizing the distraction of others by the student, i.e. limiting disruptive behavior and bringing the focus to what we are doing in the lesson.

In conclusion, with all of these things to consider, and likely a multitude of others that are specific to you, your setting, and the constellation of individual schools and facilities, it is recommended to trust your intuition and remain flexible, observant, and open during the school year in order to be aware of what is the best for everyone involved in the lesson on any given day.