

# This I Believe....The Rest of the Story

by Dan Fee



I'm still smiling after my experience helping you "cross the river" during my keynote speech at the AIME Conference in very late January. It was surely a top-ten career experience! Unfortunately, the crunch of time didn't allow me to get to all my points and consequently, give you the needed tools to safely make it through the current of music education. I definitely don't want to leave you treading water in the middle of the river! I hope, with this article, to get you to the other side.

Just as a reminder, at the conference I discussed Discipline/Management, Seating Charts, Cause and Effect, Think As a Child, and Anticipation. Let's go!

## Relationships

The more I read and listen, the more I hear reference to the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships with colleagues, students, parents and community. Get on some committees, volunteer to supervise a PTO function, and bring a treat to the lounge. With your students, try to take any personal interest that is possible. They will love that you remembered they had a hockey game over the weekend or that their mom just had a baby.

There was a time when I was not satisfied with my relationship with the sixth graders. One night I showed up at their flag football game. They were amazed that I'd take the time to do that. It was a simple gesture on my part that yielded great results with students and parents. The next fall, when I did the same but included my newborn son, the results were even more dramatic!

My policy with special teacher requests ("Dan, would you teach my class this song? It connects with what we're doing in social studies right now.") was to always say yes. You will reap the rewards when you need teacher favors just before your spring program, etc.

## Good Songs/Good Listening

This speaks to integrity. Steps across the river of education are easier when you're able to stand tall and proud. Ask yourself questions like, "Do my students really need to spend three weeks learning a silly novelty song about Santa getting stuck in the chimney (or something similar!) or would they better be served by learning a song like "Jolly Old St Nicholas" that has stood the test of time? Would it be best to teach an American folk song or an arrangement of a pop song? Should I use music from a popular Disney movie (no offense, Mr Disney!) or a short piece of iconic classical music that they may never hear again?" I think we all know the answers to these questions.

## Integrity/Legitimacy

This is connected to the thoughts above. Strive to make music class a place of professionalism. It's an attitude of excellence. What we do in music class is no less important than math lessons, for example. Just because we're working with "little kids" doesn't mean our work is not legitimate. (I fear some secondary teachers have this outlook sometimes.)

We have every right and reason to have, for example, "good" instruments and equipment. "It's not good enough for the high school but maybe the elementary students could use it" is an outlook that should bother all of us. Knowing your students have made and experienced high- quality music on top-shelf equipment is a great feeling!

## Let's Have Fun

This is my philosophy of elementary music education. Shhh! Don't tell anyone! It should be longer than three words! I know that in an environment of "fun" that I can deliver curriculum effectively. Of course, there are days when "the fun factor" is not completely on display. But it's still there, waiting to be tapped during our next music class.

## The Reluctant Singer

While crossing the river, you WILL have students who don't want to sing. For some reason that's hopefully not your fault, they do not connect singing with something enjoyable. Perhaps they struggle to match pitch. Maybe it's not valued at home (or even made fun of). Some students will just move their lips enough so you can't say they're not singing. I never had much luck forcing these students to sing. I did not use the in place discipline system to deal with non-singers. Instead, I would try to make music class even more fun. I would compliment them, perhaps in private, when noticing even the smallest improvement. They'll come around. Just be patient. And remember to smile!

Evaluating students on their singing ability is something I'm not entirely comfortable with. "Testing" students' singing quality will seldom create a legitimate sample, I feel. Put yourself in the place of a child. Would you be comfortable singing alone and in front of your peers? Then add the pressure of getting a grade on this "performance." When forced to assess singing, I recommend doing it in small groups around the piano. Another successful substitute to solo singing assessment was to use either a recorded accompaniment or me on the autoharp as the whole class sang (I do wish I had learned to play guitar!) and putting my head between two kids. I could hear both, assess both, and not put anyone on display. Feierabend says, "Any response is the right response."

## Stay Healthy

You can't cross the river if you're sick. Drink gallons of water (you already know that). Eat well. Shop from the outside aisles of the grocery store, staying away from processed food. It's fairly common for first year teachers to catch every bug that takes hold in your school. And remember the value of a rare "mental health day."

## Praise

Hardly anything works better than praise to get the response you want from children. "Crossing the river" is so much easier when the kids crossing with you are upbeat and proud of themselves. Telling a class over and over that they need to sing better will simply NOT get them to sing better! But telling them they sing well, even when that's a stretch, and offering ways to sing even better, will bring better results. I did this intentionally once, telling a fourth grade group who had only a handful of kids matching pitch, that they were good singers. They believed me and in a few months, were singing notably better (no pun intended!).

## Getting a Good Start

This is something I learned while student teaching. My wonderful cooperating teacher at West Junior High in Wisconsin Rapids, Gordy Michels, told me he could tell what kind of rehearsal he would have by the way the students entered the room! My inexperienced eyes widened but sure enough, if there's an expectation even from the hallway outside the music room before class starts, you will ultimately have a better class/rehearsal. Often, I'd put a music stand outside the music room that displayed a small poster with the reminder, "Get a good start!"

Be at the door to greet the class. Visiting with a fellow classroom teacher, even though you might be best of friends, will lead to a noisy group of kids (whom you are ignoring) and misbehavior. That's definitely NOT "getting a good start" and makes "crossing the river" more difficult than it needs to be. In "the old days" each child in grades two through five would most often take a music book before going to their place on the floor. When possible, I would hand them their book, look them in the eyes, welcome them and say their name (This also speaks to "legitimacy," and "relationships" above).

## Be a Sponge

Everyone needs a sponge while crossing a river! What this really means is to always be on the lookout for new ideas or better ways to do things. Soak up information and ideas everywhere you go. You don't have to think of everything yourself! Probably someone has already thought of it! You just have to look for it.

Maybe it's as simple as attending a colleague's band concert and hearing the band play a piece that would work perfectly for your group. Instead of searching for hours online for that next title, you've found it by "being a sponge."

In another situation, you may see a creative way to store recorders while attending a meeting at another elementary school. Don't be above stealing ideas from others.

So there you go! How's that journey going? Please remember that crossing the river of education takes a long time. There will be rough water some days, but you will make it.

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## **Biography**

Dan Fee is a retired elementary general music teacher from Fond du Lac. He has presented workshops in fifteen states and is the author of *Listening Fun* and *MORE Listening Fun*, activity books using props and classical music. He taught *Music Methods for Classroom Teachers* at four Wisconsin universities and twice on a Native American reservation in Wyoming.