

Successful strategies and coping skills of individuals in the field of music: Life stories of six professionals

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Abstract

Dyslexia occurs in 10-20% of the population with severe cases affecting approximately 4%. The cause(s) of dyslexia, which often runs in families, is currently being examined in the fields of genetics, biology, toxicology, and neurology. Many of the traits of dyslexia, such as difficulties with decoding written symbols, phonic awareness, rhythmic processing, physical coordination, and poor handwriting may adversely affect learning music and mastering a musical instrument. Despite these issues, individuals with dyslexia may be among the most intellectual, creative, and gifted people in the general population and among musicians. This study examined six dyslexic individuals who are respected members in the music profession and sought to answer the following research questions:

What strategies and coping skills did these musicians use to succeed despite their learning difficulties?

What special talents and insights have these musicians brought to the music profession?

And what implications may be drawn from this study for school and private music educators, parents, students, and other professional musicians with learning disabilities to help better understand how individuals with dyslexia learn music?

The life story method of narrative analysis was utilized in this study with participants interviewed on two or three occasions. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and participants were given an opportunity to member check their stories for accuracy. The six life stories were then compiled in a manner that highlighted the musicians' own voices and experiences with music throughout their lives and then their experiences were compared. Recurring themes and motifs were sought from the participants' interviews. Particular attention was paid to how these musicians were taught and any strategies they implemented to aid their learning as they progressed through their music education and training.

Preliminary conclusions point to a large diversity in the talents possessed and the difficulties endured by each participant. This diversity, in light of performing music, may be due to the particular source or cause of a participant's dyslexia, along with the severity of the individual's learning disability. Of interest are the struggles all six of these professional musicians experienced with reading words compared to the wide

range of abilities they had in reading musical notation: some participants had no disability whatsoever when reading music, while others had great difficulty in this area. Because of this disparity in music and text reading, it may be proposed that there is some manner of disconnect between the decoding these two different kinds of symbol systems. Another finding of interest in this study is a validation of multi-sensory teaching and individual and/or small group instruction as a way to assist dyslexics in learning music. One participant, a composer of popular music, learned music primarily on his own and with some peer tutoring in “garage band” fashion. Despite the hardships the participants experienced with learning in school, music was very often a positive activity in their formal education. Finally, many, but not all, of the participants thought that their dyslexia had actually contributed to their musical talent and success as a professional musician. It is hoped that the conclusions gleaned from the experiences and insights of these six musicians will provide knowledgeable assistance, career guidance, and encouragement to other dyslexic musicians, parents, and music teachers. The author can be reached at kpnelson@bu.edu