Music Majors with Tourette Syndrome: What Teachers Need to Know

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the lives of two college music majors with Tourette Syndrome. Over a period of six months, I collected data through emails, formal and informal interviews, and observations. I also reflected on each question I asked the participants and kept answers recorded in a journal. I then examined the data and searched for themes. I found that the participants discussed five important factors of having Tourette Syndrome, which may be important for teachers to know. I discuss each of these factors and make suggestions for future research.

METHOD

- Reviewed current literature
- Identified two college music majors with Tourette Syndrome
- Collected data through formal and informal interviews, email communication, reflective journals, and observations
- Transcribed all data
- Looked for and coded emerging themes in different colors
- Established trustworthiness
- Wrote cases studies for each participant
- Discussed results and provided suggestions for future research

PARTICIPANTS

Peter
- Male
- Freshman euphonium player
- Music education major
- From suburban community
- Diagnosed at age four
- Vocal tics include grunting and other noises
- Also studied piano and played timpani
- Wants to be a band director

Josie
- Female
- Senior French horn player
- Music education major, currently student teaching
- From a large city
- Diagnosed at age seven
- Tics included knocking her knees and grunting
- Also played trumpet
- Wants to be a band director

RESULTS

Data revealed the following themes:

- Friendship and understanding is important to us.
  - “I wish, I WISH, they would just understand when I said “I’m not in control…I don’t feel like I can control all my actions and stuff. Some of them did understand, some of them, a lot of them, did not.”
  - “One time we were on a field trip to see Dracula, put on at a theater, and the woman in front of me kept turning around and staring at me. I guess I was sniffing louder than I thought. I think she actually moved seats after the first act.”
  - “I had a really bad tic spell in world history my freshmen year and some guy from the back of the class yelled, ‘Hey! I didn’t know we had a tropical bird in the class!’ I will never forget how awful that made me feel.”

- Tourette Syndrome does not represent our identity.
  - “I guess the reason I don’t, like, actively bring it up is ‘cuz I don’t want people to think, ‘cuz you know Tourette’s and autism are like two of the most made fun of disorders this side of the planet and I don’t want people to throw me under the bus; and, I like it when people like me.”
  - “My Tourette[s] doesn’t define me and I really don’t consider it something that anyone needs to know about me before we have any kind of interaction.”
  - “I don’t want people to see me for my Tourette Syndrome. I will tell a professor if I feel like I need to, or if the professor is new, but I don’t want people to know me as the girl with Tourette Syndrome. I want them to know me as Miranda.”

- We wouldn’t choose this, but we tolerate it.
  - “Getting stuck talking to someone who only knows one joke.”
  - “Pretty much everything about them gets on your nerves but you don’t completely dislike them.”
  - “…my annoying twin that I have to take care of most of the time.”

- We have developed our own adaptations of dealing with symptoms.
  - “If I try deep breathing… when I’m focused on one specific thing I find it much easier to keep my impulses and jerks under control.”
  - “I feel like I’m strong enough to control it at least to a functional standard, and that’s enough for me.”
  - “I just let it happen and explain what is actually happening to me when someone asks why I made a weird noise.”

- Quiet time may cause us anxiety.
  - “And it has caused problems before. Particularly in quiet testing settings, or at plays/movies… And even now, if we have a test or something I get nervous because it’s so quiet and I’m like everyone can hear me.”
  - “I never cared much if my tics were a huge distraction to others until other members of the academic team started taking bets on how often I would tic during the written assessment portion of every academic meet.”

PURPOSE

What do teachers need to know about students with Tourette Syndrome?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Does music study help or hinder the symptoms of Tourette Syndrome?
- Would results be different among non-music majors?
- Does instrument choice have a positive or negative affect on tic rates?
- Are people with Tourette Syndrome drawn to more artistic fields as a way to expel or express the elevated amounts of dopamine in their brains?
- What do teachers need to know about students with Tourette Syndrome?

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