Dyslexia, ADHD and the Missing Middle

**Part One:** The middle of life, that time between the end of high school and the late aging process, is generally overlooked in discussions on learning differences. What happens from the end of high school through the late career phase of life? It’s what our colleagues and we have coined “the missing middle.” It’s the middle because the challenges that individuals with dyslexia and ADHD face at this juncture in life are very different than those in grade school or late adulthood. What’s missing is that it’s rarely discussed and not one School in a university or college studies learning differences in adulthood. For some odd reason there is a notion that skills and strategies for the lifespan are mastered by 12th grade. That is for those who make it to 12th grade.

During this middle time, individuals with learning challenges must navigate significant barriers to higher education and meaningful work. Most importantly these barriers can’t be solved in a university’s School of Education, School of Psychology, School of Medicine or a reading research agenda. In fact, if we solved the illiteracy problem today, the same barriers that dyslexics experience after 12th grade would still exist. And all the ADHD medication in the world won’t address the working memory and executive function experiences faced by those with this profile. This is because the systemic barriers to a meaningful life and work after high school have very little to do with reading and distractibility. They have everything to do with what and how we measure ability and achievement. Take Kate for example. Kate has struggled through high school but has been able to achieve a 3.9 GPA at a very competitive private school. She is dyslexic and ADHD combined type. She was first tested by a clinical psychologist when she was 6, then 12, then 16. Her IQ has always tested around the 90th percentile. Her elementary school grades when she was learning how to read, calculate and write were mostly C’s and D’s and she received no special support because she went to a private parochial school that simply said “no.” She barely passed math not because she didn’t understand the advanced concepts of mathematical reasoning but because she could not recall the procedure fast enough under the standard time constraints of the exams and because her dyslexia would cause her to confuse mathematical signs and symbols. She was not even allowed to use a basic four function calculator to solve long division even though the teacher admitted the point in evaluating long division was not speed of math fact retrieval. In fact, her tutor would repeatedly state, “I don’t get it----she knows this! When I give her the practice tests she does very well.”

As the work in middle school and high school became more advanced with respect to higher order and conceptual thinking, problem solving, making connections and application of ideas, her grades improved. She was also able to receive accommodations as a student with dyslexia. She took all of her tests with extended time, starting with 50% and eventually needing 100% on the ACT and SAT. She met with her teachers during office hours, with study groups, used Kahn academy videos and spent literally twice as long on homework as her peers without dyslexia. She excelled in American Sign Language which she took instead of a phonetically based language, conceptual physics, geometry, photography—all various forms of visual and spatial thinking. Her teachers always commented that her essays were amazing because she detected patterns and made connections in ideas, academic resources and literature that no one else did. She completed a neuroscience internship at one of the top three medical universities in the world during her senior year, and was told by her supervisor that he had never seen someone her age keep up with the doctoral students and post-docs the way she did. He praised her
contributions as significant. She took the SAT three times and the ACT four times and eventually performed somewhere around the 88th percentile and was accepted to a college that was respectable but far below the rigor she had hoped for. Her goal was not an Ivy League school, but one where she simply felt challenged more than the one she was going to attend. The range of grades in her early transcripts nailed those opportunities shut. How could she explain her incredible problem solving and thinking ability in the face of such variable grades?

This story illustrates one of the inescapable barriers for the thousands of dyslexics: the transcript that accompanies dyslexics into the college admissions process. It’s especially loaded even more with peaks and valleys if the diagnosis comes late—and it often does among very bright students with learning challenges. Many individuals with dyslexia and ADHD have had amazing accomplishments and had to navigate these obstacles in one way or another. But some youth don’t navigate this well or end up in a school not commensurate with their ability. Others who come from first generation college or low income environments have added obstacles that make the possibility to scale these barriers impossible. And this is why this span in a dyslexic’s life is so important for us to understand. Positively, some leverage their athletic, musical, artistic or other talents to succeed in high caliber universities.

Carol Greider, Ph.D. and Daniel Nathans Professor and Director, Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics at Johns Hopkins is dyslexic. Dr. Greider received her Nobel Prize by learning how chromosomes are protected by telomeres. This scientific discovery is important for understanding the science of aging, cancer, and certain types of genetic disease. In an interview with Drs. Brock and Fernette Eide (Dyslexic Advantage), she noted that looking back on her education she admitted getting low scores on her SAT and GRE. She said she had many rejection letters to college. However, she said two schools decided to interview her because she had many A’s and lab experience. She also added, “Perhaps my ability to pull more information out of context and put together difficult ideas may have been affected by what I learned to do with dyslexia.” As researchers and practitioners in this post high school generation, we see that quality often noted in dyslexics and ADHD: that about making connections that other don’t see, just some of the unrecognized gifts of learning differences.

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