Episode 103 Dr. Elizabeth Morrow: Multisensory Music Reading & Supporting Students with Learning Differences

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

I thought, well, I wonder what kind of systems there are out there that would mirror how I work with these dyslexic children that I could utilize. And I started investigating and there really wasn't anything. There wasn't anything that understood the depth that is necessary to take a student who is not reading, who hasn't learned to read by traditional methods, develop those skills. So I had an aha moment I was driving and I kind of just almost slammed on the brakes and thought, oh my gosh, we could take this structured literacy that is taught with dyslexic students and apply it to music reading, and what would that look like?

Christine Goodner:

Welcome to the Time to Practice podcast. This is a space where we talk about music practice, the ups and downs that young musicians go through related to practice and learning music, and how we as parents, caregivers, and music educators can support the young musicians in our lives, support ourselves and support each other. My name is Christine Gooder. I'm a music educator, author and podcaster who has made it my mission to talk about music practice and to support educators and families looking to make home practice more effective and to reduce conflict and frustration in the practice room. I'm glad you're here.

This episode is brought to you by my two office hour sessions coming up in November. You can think of them like a cross between a Q&A A session and a mini consultation or problem-solving session. These are small group sessions, limited to eight participants for each hour, we'll split the time between everyone who signs up. Both teachers and parents are welcome, and you can bring your topic to discuss like practice strategies, supporting students with A DHD, preparing for recitals, whatever is on your mind that you'd like to discuss with other people thinking about supporting young musicians in music. There are two upcoming dates for this month if you're listening to this Writers that comes out. One will be this coming Saturday, November 8th at 8:00 AM Pacific, 10:00 AM central, 11:00 AM eastern, and the other will be on Friday, November 14th at 9:00 AM Pacific. The cost is $25 and it goes directly to the production costs of this podcast.

You can go to suzuki triangle.com and scroll down on the homepage to find the links or look in the show notes for this episode Today, I'm thrilled to have an expert guest joining me who I first saw speak at the American String Teachers Association conference back in March on multisensory structured music reading, and she covered in the session a lot of music reading strategies that universally helped students, but particularly students with learning disabilities. And I was blown away by the helpful information she shared. I got very excited about it and I was so excited to connect with her and that she was willing to come on the podcast and speak to us today. So before we jump into this episode, I also want to share that the curriculum that Dr. Elizabeth Morrow is going to share with us in this episode is only on sale through the end of November, 2025, the month you're hearing this podcast when it first comes out. After that, it's going to be donated to a university program for future study. So if you would like to order a set of these materials to help your students or your own children, you can go to her website notes sense music.com. I'll put a link in the show notes and you can see what materials she offers and send her an email to place your order if you'd like to do so while purchases are still possible. This is such a great episode and I'm super excited to share it with you. Let's jump in.

Well, welcome everyone. I am excited today to be talking to Dr. Elizabeth Morrow, and I had the pleasure of sitting in on a presentation that she did at the Ask the conference, American String Teachers Association conference this past spring about music literacy. And I have a vested interest because of some students that I work with in my studio and just trying to connect some dots. I feel like I want to understand better to help my own students, and I know a lot of you listening are always hungry for information about this topic as well. So I'm excited to welcome her today. Thanks for being here, Elizabeth. Thanks for spending some time with us.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Thank you, Christine. Thank you for asking me, and it's a topic I love to talk about, and you might have to shut me up, so tell me when it's TMI. Right. But no, I'm thrilled that you're interested and that I can share what I've learned so far about specifically music reading, music, reading literacy, I would say.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I love that. I would always love guests to start by just sharing anything you want to briefly about your background in music or what you've done in the world of music to give people some background on that as well.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Okay. Well, I am a cellist. I'm a professional cellist. I've had a performing career and 21 years cello professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. I retired from that position in 2012, and in my retirement, I was interested in exploring an area that I had worked in earlier. My son is dyslexic, and I was very suspicious about anyone working with him because the teachers that he was surrounded by at the time were kind of clueless as to what was going on with him. So I wasn't trustful of turning him over to someone else. So I procured a Orton-Gillingham reading system and started working with him, and I worked with him for four years to teach him to read, and I saw how amazingly successful this was. So I had an interest in learning more about that when I retired. I attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas for two years, and Texas has kind of been a leader in reading literacy and dealing with dyslexia.

They were one of the first states to actually have legislation because one of their legislators had a child who was dyslexic and was very forceful about integrating that into the Texas law. So they've had a lot of success in research in Dallas, and that is now expanding across the country. There are many, many more centers where dyslexia therapists are being trained. So I did become trained to be a dyslexia therapist. I continued teaching cello privately and performing in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Once I started working with dyslexic students, I was in private practice working through a school, through a Montessori school. I was also continuing to teach cello privately, and I was beginning to work with students that were at a lower level or more from beginner into intermediate because I wasn't working at the college anymore at the university. And I had a student come in who was probably 13 or 14, then he was auditioning for the Fort Worth Youth Orchestra, and it was an excerpt from a Tchaikovsky symphony, and he was a very talented young cellist.

When I started working with him on this music, and he was a new student for me, I would ask him, I would say, well start on E or whatever, and he would have no clue what I was talking about. And through conversation, I realized, oh, he's not reading the music at all. And he was already playing in advanced repertoire, and he was doing it by ear, by watching, by whatever skills that people who struggle develop to be able to do what they need to do. And I thought, well, I wonder what kind of systems there are out there that would mirror how I work with these dyslexic children that I could utilize. And I started investigating and there really wasn't anything. There wasn't anything that understood, the depth that is necessary to take a student who is not reading, who hasn't learned to read by traditional methods, develop those skills.

So I had an aha moment I was driving and I kind of just almost slammed on the brakes and thought, oh my gosh, we could take this structured literacy that is taught with dyslexic students and apply it to music reading and what would that look like? I was quite certain from the very beginning that it would work because it's just a very, very logical approach to teaching, reading to teaching, processing, print, and integrating it into the brain for use. But since there was no model for that, I really had to start at the very

beginning. Unfortunately, this particular student wasn't able to benefit from this because it didn't exist. And he eventually had to leave for financial reasons. Their family had to make other arrangements. So I never did get to use it with him. But over three years, I began to take all the knowledge I had from my dyslexia instruction and working with dyslexic children and seeing how they learn, understanding this process and putting it on top of music reading and what does that look like?

And what I discovered is that it looks very different from the way we teach music reading. And so I've kind of gone away now from my background, but that was my inspiration and I was so excited by the idea that I began working with it. I began developing some materials. I went to teachers in the Arlington area, Dallas Fort Worth area, and said, do you have any students that are struggling that are in the classroom with all the other kids? And they're getting the same information, having the same experience, and yet they're not absorbing? And sure enough, every teacher I talked to had someone. So it was a question of whose parents had the time to bring them to my studio for me to work with them, or I also went into several schools and worked teachers let me take the kids out of their orchestra class for that purpose of teaching them to read.

So over the course of three years, I worked with a number of students, and they weren't all young. They were also, I had an adult student that came in and worked with me and he was struggling with note reading and then, oh, I don't know, probably 10 lessons he's in. He said, well, I am dyslexic. And I said, oh, okay, let's reverse this and start over again. Because again, I'm used to teaching sort of a traditional, we're learning this little line of music, so we need to know these notes, that kind of thing. And then so you're learning it through the process of playing. So let me just sidetrack a little bit. I just want to talk about what we know from dyslexia research that informs this type of teaching, if I may.

Christine Goodner:

Yes, please. That would be super helpful.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

So what I learned is that first of all, brains are not the same. And I come from a generation that just began acknowledging left-handedness as something unique and normal, right? Because before that left-handedness wasn't even considered normal and everything was done to try to correct it.

And that concerns about 10% of our human population. I mean, that's a huge number of people. So brains are not all wired the same. And our reading and writing system was developed about 5,000 years ago originally, and it was developed by human beings that had these neural pathways in place to be able to process written language to be able to create and process and interpret written language. It wasn't until literacy became an international imperative, and this was around the end of the industrial revolution, and if I get my dates wrong, I apologize. But around the 1880s, there's this push for public education, for public literacy, for societal literacy. It was seen as beneficial and all developed countries were beginning to require this sending kids to school. And this is when it became apparent that there was a certain portion of the population that couldn't do it, that they weren't able to do it.

So it began to be researched, identified in research in the 1880s in Germany, actually in the 1930s, a couple Samuel Horton and Anna Gillingham developed a system of how to teach people and children and adults in a way that develops the wiring system so that they can become fluent readers and writers as well. So this was 1930s, this was the 1930s. So research in this area and the development of the system that we use now for dyslexic students has been in the making for a long time. And there's so much research behind it. I just was reading, watching a video from a conference, and there are 700 papers published every year about reading literacy. There's so much research going on around the world and in the main journals that are producing this stuff. But a lot of this information isn't getting past the journals into the educational system, into the teaching music education system, all education system, but music education as well.

So in the 1990s, Sally Schitz at Yale University started doing functional MRI imaging of dyslexic readers versus fluent readers, and they could actually visually see a network or a lack of network that was facilitating reading or hindering reading. And what they also observed, they could take a student who was shown to be dyslexic through the imaging where there wasn't a network that was facilitating. That means absorbing symbols and understanding meaning of symbols, processing that, understanding how symbols function into words, phonemes and how they function and create words. And then actually storing that information so that one can be aff fluent reader. So all of that, that whole network has to be in place in order for someone to be able to read. So what 85% of the population already have that network. So they took imaging of young people who didn't have that network, and then they work with them for a year in this Orton-Gillingham system of instruction.

And what they saw was it was building that network. So this style of instruction is what builds, builds the ability for different parts of the brain to communicate with one another. And reading is a learned activity. There is no reading center in the brain. There is no one place like there is for language, for example. People learn to speak without being taught how to learn to speak. Babies start babbling, they imitate. They don't have to be taught to speak essentially. But that's not true with reading. So I believe, and I am not a scientist, and I haven't done the MRI imaging on music reading, but that we're probably looking at a similar type of situation where there's an incomplete network and if there's an incomplete network, there's no way to store information or process information in a way that you can bring it back up and use it again. So you can tell a dyslexic student one thing one day and talk to them the next day, and it's like they never heard it before because they didn't have a way to hold on to it, and they have to relearn it every time they sit down. And so one last example, you see someone a reading off a page and very, very slowly.

So they're using this very, very basic sound symbol association to come up with the word. That word doesn't go anywhere because you don't have, so every time this reader is sitting down to read, that's how they're reading. They're having to go through at that very, very basic level and they never develop as readers. And what they see in the imaging is that the frontal part of the brain where that processing happens, that initial sound symbol association is way, and then the other parts of the brain that are necessary for processing and storing are not active at all. So that is a slow reader right there. Right. Alright. So if we translate that into music reading, I don't necessarily, or it hasn't been my observation,

let me put it that way, that there's a one-to-one relationship between dyslexia and music note reading. There can be all sorts of reasons why someone is struggling to read music.

One of the students I worked with had short-term memory deficit, I think they called it. She had a diagnosis of that, and yet she was very successful in this program. I took her through, she wasn't dyslexic necessarily. Right. I've now begun working with some dyscalculic students, or I had actually from the very beginning, now I'm working with one specifically and kind of monitoring her progress and taking notes about it to track Dyscalculia is a math disability and the inability to process and understand relationships of numbers. And so we're talking about relationships of fractions, we're talking about music reading. It's a huge part of reading music. And these are kids that it's baffling. When you see a kid struggle with something like this, you don't understand it. When I was teaching my son, well before we knew he was dyslexic and he was reading something from first grade, I mean barely reading, he was trying to read, I was asking him to read for me and he'd read the word and then the next line down, he'd try to sound it out.

And I said, well, wait a minute. You just saw that word. So context becomes important. Or having heard someone read that and then just being able to mimic it. But to actually again, retain and apply that information is where the breakdown occurs. And so when you see that and note reading and you're working with a student, they seem to get it and they get it that day and then the next day it's like it was never there. The kid feels stupid, the parent feels frustrated, the teacher feels frustrated. One of the students I worked with when I was research researching this and sort of developing a system was dyslexic. And her mother was an academic language therapist, and that's how I actually got to know this student. And she was in eighth grade, she was a top violinist. She was the first chair in her orchestra, and she would come out of her lesson every week in tears because her teacher was so frustrated with her for not being able to read music, and she was getting ready to quit.

She was going into high school preparing for high school, and she said, I just can't do this anymore. And I worked with her that summer, and it changed everything for her to be taught in a much more structured, codified way. And this might be a good time to begin to talk about what that actually looks like in note reading. I just wanted to give this background, but there are things that I did with her that I said, well, what is helping you? And she said, well, this is helping me and this is helping me, and this is helping me. This approach was never given to her as an option before. And it allowed her to organize this information in her brain in a way that it could be processed and stored. I mean, that's the way I would describe it. That's the result that I see. And then it's there and can be brought forth when necessary that learned information.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, I think I'll say before we start talking about how this helps students, this made a lot of light bulbs go off in my brain when you were talking about this in your talk, because I have worked with students like this where I swear they understood what I was saying, and it was, we were really connecting on understanding the concept. And it is very baffling as a teacher then the next week for it to feel like we've never talked about. There's nothing there that reminds the student that they've heard this before. And it

really, I think helps a lot to understand, oh, there's some wiring that would help the student store this information missing. To me, that helps me so much. And hopefully those listening, if you experience something similar with your child or your students to realize what's going on, nobody's doing anything wrong. There's something support that's needed. It makes a lot of sense. It helps connect some dots. I think maybe other people listening will feel the same after having, had you heard you talk about that, so I appreciate you explaining that. I hadn't heard that before I put in that way. So

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Absolutely. It sounds so simple to say, well, this child can learn, but they have to be taught in this particular way. And it almost sounds like really, really, they're just not trying. It's so easy to dismiss. But this research in dyslexia has shown it. I mean, this has been scientifically proven. You could say that it's necessary and that it works. So what does that look like in music reading? And let me just say, first of all, the problem that we have with music reading is that generally, and I'm not going to speak for every person on the planet, but generally in our music pedagogy, we're teaching music reading as an attachment to playing the instrument. So learning to play an instrument, and I think Suzuki is an excellent example of this because it is so structured, it's step by step, and you start with the very, very simplest standing and then getting used to holding, and I'm not a Suzuki teacher, so I'm skipping probably skipping steps, but holding the violin under your arm and how to pick up the violin and all posture and step by step by step, and it's repeated until the student doesn't have to memorize what they're doing.

They're absorbing, physically absorbing what they're doing. So they get to the page, they get to the place where they're, well, let's say they're not reading, but let's just take now traditional beginning students where they get to the point, they know how to hold their instrument and they're looking at the page, they're looking at music that has been written to support the level of playing that they're doing. So let's say their very first songs are going to be open strings. We're going to learn how to pull the bow, and we're going to read that note A, and we're going to read that note D. That is not a logical way to teach reading. That is a logical way to begin playing. So we're taking this entirely different system and putting on top of a system that works very well, which is the teaching how to play system.

So if we extrapolate the music reading and say, if we're going to do something that's structured and logical, that starts from the very simplest place and then expands building on itself. So everything you learn is a step beyond the thing you learned before. So it's very structured, cumulative, sequential, extremely sequential. What does that look like? And it looks totally different from how we teach music reading because we're not going to look at, I have to play this, therefore I have to be able to read that. We're going to look at, I want to understand literacy, which means not just having knowledge, but having understanding there's a difference between knowledge and understanding. And I'll give an example of that in just a minute. I want to go ahead and just talk about what does it look like if we teach from a structured, sequential cumulative approach in music reading?

And the first thing I do is teach what the staff is what a grand staff is, so that there's a structure upon which to build note reading. That is the structure upon which note reading is developed. And yet we

tend to sit kids down and they're looking at a staff and they're looking at a note right away. And what is the staff? It's just these lines. Well, if we look at it in its entirety, we begin to understand, oh, there's an alphabetic sequence here from top to bottom. We can say, and when I started researching this and working with kids, I would do a little assessment and I would say, okay, here's a three octave scale. And these are all students who have been in orchestra probably a year. And so their colleagues are looking at their music and reading, and they're looking around the room trying to figure out what to do by what the person next to them is doing.

So that's sort of the level that generally that I started working with. I would say, okay, so this note on my three octave scale at the bottom, this is a, can you please touch and name the notes on the staff, on the grand staff, three octaves. And not one of them could not them understood that. And I would tell them, then I'd say, okay, well let's go ahead and start with A, and we're going to, let's just say the letters of the alphabet, A through G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G. I said, okay, that's all we have to do. And then we're going to start it over again. We're going to do it again, and then we're going to do it again three times. And so they do that and they can do it immediately because they all know the alphabet and an extraordinary thing happens.

There's an empowerment because all of a sudden they on their own have told me all the names of the notes on the staff, and this was a student who thought they couldn't read. Now, they're not truly reading at this point because they can't do it out of context of that scale, but it's the foundation upon which we build our note reading. We use this concept of the alphabetic principle because they can always rely on it. The notes are always going to be going in with that relationship, even if they had no other reading instruction from that point on, and I said, I want to know where a D is. They could find it, right? They could find it. That is empowerment and that is knowledge. Knowledge is, and that is understanding. So the knowledge is, there's a note D on the staff understanding is that it's part of this bigger structure.

And if I understand the structure, I can do that to any one of these notes. I don't just need to know that one. Note, when we're learning in the more traditional method, we're learning open strings, we're learning D, and we have to memorize, oh, that's D, and then we're learning A, oh, have to memorize. That's A. Okay, that's a, that's D. Okay. Kids with learning differences can't often memorize. They have to understand the bigger picture in order to fit the information in. And that's how we build the network. So first of all, having an understanding of the staff and then also learning the terminology around that so that they can talk about it. We can talk about it with them, giving names to everything that they're looking at. So that's the first thing. There's so much I'm not going to have time to talk about, but I want to run to or veer off to some basic instructional principles.

So the first, I just introduced the alphabetic concept. So when I start teaching pitches, we start with A, and we don't go on to B until they know A right, and that happens fairly quickly, but once they go to B, we don't learn any other notes until they can play A and B fluently. They can go back and forth and they don't have any trouble. They don't have to figure it out, but they've integrated that knowledge. And then we take the next step and we learn C, right? So what we're doing is learning and octave over time in a very structured, cumulative way. And I teach it every new pitch I teach the same way, and I'm going to

hopefully have time to talk about that also, but I'm going to go on to the principle of rhythm because now that's another complication. The most difficult thing about reading music is that every note that we're looking at gives us two pieces of information.

So we have to understand both pieces of information in order to be able to decipher what's in a measure. And if someone is decal coolic and struggles with this concept of fractions, relationships, number relationships, they're going to struggle with reading rhythms. So the way we teach reading rhythms is starting with a quarter note, and again, this is based on what's the easiest thing to play. All the little songs that we're going to be playing at the beginning are going to be quarter notes. We don't have to use a lot of bow, you don't have to have a lot of bow control to play a quarter note. So it serves playing to do that. But reading it doesn't. And I like to give this example, if I were to say, I'm going to teach you the alphabet, but we're going to start in the middle and we're going to start with the letter N, and I want you to learn it N through Z, and then we're going to learn M through A going backwards. And then I want you to be able to say the alphabet to me.

Christine Goodner:

My eyes are crossing already. Yeah,

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

We don't teach it that way. No, we teach it in a very structured, sequential way. We start at A and we end with the Z. And if you're lucky, you learn L-M-N-O-P instead of element NOP. That's what we have to teach dyslexic students. They have to learn each letter. They can't just sing the song. They have to understand each letter. So the way we teach music reading is starting in the middle of that structured, logical, sequential way. The way that I developed to begin is we start with the whole note. We start with at the end of the note that contains all other possible values. So we teach the whole note as an entity that contains four parts. So from the very beginning, the kids are learning to read a whole note with four beats, with a metronome, four beats. We don't define what those beats are called yet.

They're not called. They're just called beats. And that is the definition of a whole note. Beats can be fast or slow. Whole notes don't have to be slow. They can be fast. A lot of teachers say, well, I don't want to start with whole notes because they're so slow. Well, not really. Not if you speed up your metro, no. But understanding those four parts. Then when that is understood and mastered, I have a beautiful graphic that I developed that I love a large whole note on a page and then an overlay, that transparency overlay where the two half notes fit into the whole note and they're touching. So there's no space between a bar line and a bar line. The half note takes up half the whole note. Funny thing, we call it a half note, and now we can visually see why we call it a half note because it visually takes up half the space of that whole note, and it takes two of them to fill up the space of the entire whole note.

And the other thing in this graphic that I've designed, the whole note actually touches each end of the measure. So visually students can see a whole note sort of suspended in the middle of a measure. But the idea that this sound has to go from the beginning of the bar line to the end of the bar line isn't

visually reinforced. So this graphic that I've created actually shows us the sound has to go from here to here if it's a whole note. And then at the same time, we learn rests and the rest is the absence of sound from here to here. When I say here to here, I'm showing you because you're seeing me, but I'm talking about from one end of the measure to the other end of the bar line to bar line. And then after half notes have been mastered, guess what?

We can take this quarter note overlay and we see that, oh, there are four quarter notes that are contained within that whole note. And all of a sudden the concept of a quarter means something. Because when you teach a quarter note at the beginning of instruction, it has no meaning a quarter of what quarter. It doesn't make sense. And this is where students that don't have wiring can't put things together. We have to teach in a way that it makes sense so they can put it into a larger structure. And that's the understanding that allows them to integrate the knowledge into their brain. The knowledge itself that this is called a quarter note, means nothing. It's knowledge, but you can't apply it in any way. And then from then on, every other subdivision of rhythm is contained within that information, right? 64th notes, you can understand what a 64th note is now, right?

There's 64 of them in that whole note. And so I wouldn't even teach students about three, four rhythm until they have a full understanding and mastery of how these durations relate to one another and be able to manipulate that. The program I developed stays in four, four. At the end of the program, they're ready to now say, okay, now we can have a measure that only has three beats. Can we use a holdup? No. What can we use? How can we structure a measure that has three beats? So it's the information that has to come first before you can develop those higher level skills. So another thing I don't do is talk about sharps and flats at the beginning of instruction. And all of our pedagogy programs begin with sharps. And in the band instruments, it's flats, right? And this came again when I would assess students and I would show them a picture of a sharp sign, and I'd say, do you know the name of this symbol?

And some of them did. They knew it was a sharp or they'd call it a hashtag. That's fine. And do you know what that means? Well, it means that you play with your, you're going to have a space between your first and second finger. And I'd say, well, okay, that's one possible interpretation, but that's not really what sharp means. I don't tell them this at the time, but that's what I'm thinking. So they do have this knowledge, but how is that applicable to reading sharps and music? It's not because there's no understanding of what the purpose of a sharp is. So I determined that I don't want to be teaching about sharps and flats until they can read an octave and then be introduced to this concept of half steps and whole steps, the patterns that we use in music reading, and then the necessity for alteration and why we alter pitches.

And then it's not about fingering, it's about literacy. It's about understanding how do you use this knowledge? So I think that covers sort of the main principles of the approach. The last thing that's very, very important, and this is the multisensory aspect, I just want to say this is the thing that confused me at first, because I thought, okay, well, we're reading and we're playing an instrument. Well, that's multisensory. But again, those are two different focuses. Foci, foci. If we just look at the music reading, how are we integrating multisensory instruction in the reading process? So there's expressive learning,

and that's where your writing, we have the reading and the writing components in our learning. And if we're just bringing that information into our brain, that doesn't automatically mean we can produce it. So to really attain mastery is to be able to read it and then to be able to take it from our brain and put it down on paper to write it, to be able to use our body to create this.

So the information we bring in is the reading and the information we put out is the writing. So everything that's learned in this system that I designed incorporates that every process. So first of all, when we're saying the three octave alphabet on the grand staff, the kids are touching each note. They're interacting with the page physically, not with a bow tip of their bow, but they're physically feeling where that note is, this S scale structure, right? Oh, it's step by step, right? They're seeing how it's going from low to high thing, but it becomes a physical action. And they're saying the names of the notes at the same time. So they're touching and they're naming. This is a real basic thing that we do in dyslexia instruction, touching and naming, interacting with the page. So when I introduce a new pitch, we talk about where is this pitch?

We give names to the spaces and lines so they can identify, if I'm showing them an A in base clef, they would say that's on space one. So we have a language which we can talk about where that note lives. And then we go to, I have a beautiful chart that's the grand stab octave chart. So it shows all the octave of the keyboard, and we find where that one note is that we're learning in that chart. We look at the chart and we track across from the beginning of the staff line, and we find where that note is, and then we learn what octave it is, and then we see, oh, we have these repeating octaves, so that note's going to repeat over and over again, but we can also give it a name that's just not a two. It has a very distinctive name that's different from every other note.

There is no other note that's called a two. This dyslexic girl that I was talking about, the eighth grader, she told me that was one of the most helpful things to her. She said, I never understood why there were so many notes that had the same name. She couldn't make sense out of it. And it created a structure for her to begin to hang that information on so that when she needed it, she could retrieve it. It created a structure within which to understand what she was seeing on the page. Then we go to staff paper and we practice writing that A. And by this time they've learned how to draw a note and we write it and we say, A, we write it again and we say, write it again. And we say A. So now we're taking that information that was coming from the page into our brain, and we're taking it out of our brain and putting it on the page.

And that's what reinforces the learning. If we just do it from one direction, which is how most of our teaching is done, it's not giving enough information to our brain and our body to be able to build that wiring. It's all about building the wiring. So every new learning is going to have this style or approach of learning it from a reading perspective. And then from a writing perspective, when you have students that are dysgraphic, it's not important that it look pretty at all. And I've blown up pages so that they don't have to have fine motor skills, can use an iPad where you can draw big things, big circles, and use the larger muscle groups. What we want them to understand is where this belongs and what it's called.

We're just reinforcing that physically. So it's not about looking pretty at all. And I taught handwriting as part of my dyslexia instruction.

And it was interesting because I think I was particularly good at it because I taught cello and holding the bow is very much holding in pencil in many ways and finding balance in the hand and releasing attention. But we always start with those large muscle groups and then gradually develop the fine motor skill. And I had students that were badly dysgraphic that by the end of several years of instruction could write legibly. I mean, well, they could, and they learn cursive. And the advantage of that is they don't have to pick up their pencil. The pencil's always moving one direction. And there's sometimes directionality issues with dyslexic brains. So again, this doesn't necessarily all translate into music reading, but for many students it does. So it's all important information to have in our basket of information that we can pull out of.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. And just to go on what you just said, I think what I see a lot as a violin teacher is the direction of the bow up and down. I see that there is not a connection. My students have a really hard time connecting with that concept who have a dyslexia diagnosis. So that makes sense to me.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Have you found a method or have you found a solution that allows them to begin to retain and track that or,

Christine Goodner:

I have found if we play together, they can follow what I'm doing and so we can get that going. And I think with a lot of time we just start calling it a lot of different things, like up and down seems to mean not much at all, but it started the frog or move towards the frog, move towards some other things have helped. I feel like I'm just throwing spaghetti at a wall, like experimenting, but I can see it's a real, it does take care of itself over time, I find. But at first when I'm like, what's going on? Yeah, maybe we're just building that wiring over time in the lesson.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the repetition is essential. And I'm thinking, I'm already thinking, oh, let's see, what would I do?

Christine Goodner:

Yes, I would love to hear,

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Well, it might be something as simple as place the bow, pull down and push up,

Pull down and three minutes of exercise doing that at the beginning of every lesson, just pull down, push up. If push and pull makes sense. I mean finding the connections that make sense to them that they can recreate and then repetition. So when I am teaching the students about how to where put the stems on the note heads, we start with upright. So I think we sit upright, right? We know that word upright, so we're going to say upright. So we're going to find the right side and go up. And if students have problems with right and left, well, we see that in dyslexia instruction. We do this, putting our thumb out from our left hand and seeing the letter L and that's left. There are tricks for that as well. And the interesting thing is that it's even within dyslexia or within note reading, the differences are so diverse. There is no one model of what a brain looks like. And so we have to be so receptive to what that student's weaknesses is our and what their particular need is. Well, it worked for the last student, but oh no, I got to start from scratch here. And sometimes we do, and that's where we become better teachers.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

I think. And obviously you're an example, someone who's really what you're looking for those solutions. Absolutely. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Right. I think for anybody listening is I think your message of repetition and every time you start repeating that thing and finding a language that does connect with that particular child, but then repeat, repeat. And just knowing, okay, that wiring to store that wasn't there, but we're starting with it today again, and we're building it over time maybe,

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

And starting making it finding its simplest starting point. I think that when I was looking at how to redesign music reading, and that was the big question, where do we start? Where do we start? And that was the fun for me. I like puzzles and figuring out, I like crossword. I look for solutions and my brain loves working on that stuff. And once I started thinking of it differently, once I was willing to turn it on its head, it became so apparent what was necessary and what worked. And I saw it work over and over and over again. It works at different speeds because different students process at different rates, and so we have to work within that processing speed. But it works. Ultimately it works,

Christine Goodner:

Which is exciting.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. That's exciting. Yeah. Well, I wish we had saw all day to talk, but I do want to say just for those listening as we're wrapping up, if somebody's listening and they feel like, oh, I need more resources about this for my child, for my students that I work with, what would you suggest to somebody who feels very excited or intrigued by this conversation and wants to educate themselves or help someone in their life that needs this support?

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Well, I think being willing to rethink what that child needs. If they can't read a measure that has two half notes and two quarter, I mean a half note and two quarter notes, just work on half notes, break it down, go back to what's simpler and give the child time to master one thing at a time. The way that we teach note reading, they're confronted with so much information at once. There are many brains, a certain percentage of brains that just can't process that information in that way. So being willing to step back, say, not you should be able to do this, but how can I help this student do this? And I am happy to talk to anybody about it that's interested. I'm happy to talk with teaching groups. I've done a number of Zoom presentations in the last several years. I am going to be donating this system that I've created to the string project at Texas Tech University, Elizabeth Chapel there.

And with the support of Lori Scott from University of Texas in Austin are very interested in researching this further in a more formal way and really gathering this data and then hopefully being able to present it in a way that really affects our music teaching population, where they begin to understand the problems that some students are faced with and why we don't have solutions for those students. What's missing and what can we add to our pedagogy that brings these students into the fold? And one last thing is that anybody can learn to read music if we teach it in this structured, cumulative, sequential way anybody can. It's just that it also includes the students that can't read through memorization or who don't have the wiring because it also builds the wiring. It does that as well. So it's like if we took the science of reading and put it in the classrooms, really taking the research that we have and applying it directly, reading our reading literacy in this country, I think would be much better, much higher than it is. There's a lot. There's still controversy, but I think it's changing. I think this reading research is getting so strong that it's beginning to really filter down in good ways. So that's exciting.

Christine Goodner:

That is exciting

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

That we just need to do it in music as well.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. I was going to say, you mentioned the left-handedness and how is 10% of the population, but when we're talking about students with a diagnosis of dyslexia, for example, that's even bigger percentage of the population. You were saying before we hit record. And I think it's an important, it's important to realize that statistic and realize we're not serving, there could be a big group of our students who are kind of falling through the cracks of learning to read this music if we do not address or think about how we're teaching it.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Well, the problem that we have in music is that kids don't have to learn to read music. So if they can't do it, they quit. And there's no consequence. And that's why we have all the research in dyslexia, because students do have to learn to read. So there's a mandate around that, and we just don't have that. Sadly, culturally, there's not a mandate for reading music. And it'd be nice if that was different, but that's not who we are as a culture today. So we have to deal with that difficulty as well. And that's how the kids really do fall through the cracks. They just don't have to do it, but they want to. I've never worked with a student that didn't really want this, they just couldn't. And how exciting it was for them to be able to become independent learners.

Christine Goodner:

Right. And in Western music, yes, we're based on reading and music literacy. There's certainly niches of music where people don't read music perhaps and are

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Definitely,

Christine Goodner:

And there's a place, well, yeah, there's many ways to do music that way, but in our Western music, if we want to participate at a certain level, we do want to learn how to read and we don't want to leave people out if they are trying to learn.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Yeah. I mean, it creates independent learning is what I say to, I want you to become an independent learner so you don't need me or someone telling you what that is. That's what we want for them. That's when it really, they begin to own it, and we want that for them. Yeah.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, such a pleasure to speak with you, Elizabeth, and I know you just have so much more information we could have talked about today, but I hope we've given people some things to think about and some new ideas and maybe some places to look if they're looking for some ways to help someone in their life with this.

Dr. Elizabeth Morrow:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's been a real pleasure. Thanks.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah, pleasure to speak to you. Thank you. Before we go today, here are a few of my takeaways from this week's episode. First, I think it's always a good reminder that as Elizabeth Morrow said in this episode, all brains are not the same and all brains are not wired the same. And having solutions and resources that support differently wired brains is so important. And it's part of why I got so excited about Elizabeth's work, and I hope you filled the same. I think what she's done, taking what is known about print and literacy and reading development from outside the music world and applying it to reading music is so needed and something that has not been researched or talked about enough, not that I've been exposed to, and I'm really excited that we got to hear about that today. Second one principle that really stood out to me is that we can all apply is the idea of multisensory instruction, especially presented in a sequential logical way and its importance for learning to read music.

Like most of you listening, when I was taught to read music, it was very much the way Dr. Maura described as typical with quarter notes first and playing the music immediately in front of me on the page and already assuming I had a lot of knowledge. And I can see the benefits to this approach for both myself when I picture how I learned as a child and also for students that I currently work with. I think that's one idea we can all take away with us this week. Another takeaway for me that was a big aha moment during Dr. Murrow's talk that I attended was starting to learn about rhythm with a whole note and her overlays that she made with the concept of the quarter notes and eighth notes and how many fit inside visually makes things instantly so much more clear than the way I would usually describe them or try to teach them.

For example, seeing eight eighth notes take up all the physical space inside a whole note made me really wish I had been introduced to Rhythm in this way at some point as a young person, and to really want to adopt this concept for the students I work with. What can work for a student that needs extra support in their note reading can really work for all students and can be really helpful to adopt because we may have a student we work with that does not have a diagnosis but could use the same kind of support. I'm so grateful for all the work Elizabeth has done to take her expertise as a certified dyslexia instructor and create resources for music educators and students to benefit from. So you can find her materials@notessensemusic.com. This is not an ad. I don't get any benefit from recommending it to you other than hoping the right people find it and can use it and it can benefit them. And you can order those through the end of November, 2025. You could reach out to her by email, also info@notessensemusic.com if you would like more information and talk with her more in depth, or hire

her to give a talk to your organization. I was so glad she agreed to come speak with us today. I hope you found it as helpful and interesting as I did. And with that, I want to wish you a wonderful week of music practice and learning. Take good care, everyone.