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Invisible Disability, Visible Implications: Eleanor's Story

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I have what one might call a complicated relationship with public school education. In addition to being the mother and aunt of school-aged children with many friends of similarly aged children, I am a former special education teacher and current instructor of future teachers. My knowledge and experience in the realm of special education sometimes complicate the roles of parent, friend and teacher educator when it comes to the education of children I know because in conversation and practice I wear many education related hats. I hope that by sharing a little bit of the following story, parents of children like the one I will describe will find some comfort in knowing they and their children are not alone. As a teacher educator, my wish is that this story will be taken into consideration as teachers prepare classrooms and routines for the coming year.

Without divulging the identity of my children, family and friends, and with the permission of the family, I would like to share the story of one child in my sphere because I do not think that her story and struggles are unique. In fact, I believe that at the close of this article, many of you will be able to relate in some way; whether it is because you have a child with similar learning needs, a school with the same practices or just a feeling of helplessness that this family felt as they attempt to navigate the school system. I'll call this young child Eleanor. She is very close to my own children. She is a special little seven-year-old girl who is very curious, loving, sensitive, sometimes mischievous, and bright. She likes to play, use tools to measure things in the classroom, organize her desk area, assume the job of light monitor and line leader (if she's lucky!) and help children on the yard who she believes are lonely. From time to time, she also does not pay attention in class, lets naughty words slip and often forgets to bring home her homework folder and important notifications.

I have known for a while that Eleanor has a learning disability, specifically in the area of auditory processing. Due to Eleanor's ability to compensate utilizing her strength in visual processing, her academics are all considered appropriate, or technically, in the "average ranges." Because my professional role is in the area of special education, I also know that based on the assessments we tend to give, when she is assessed at this age, she will likely not qualify for services due to her achievements; at least not for another year or two.

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Eleanor's auditory processing disability falls under the umbrella of "learning disability" and means that someone does not process what they hear efficiently. It does not mean that they have sub-average intelligence. In fact, the opposite is often true. In Eleanor's case, the best way to describe this is through an anecdote. One day when I went to pick up my child from summer camp, the children were playing "Steal the Bacon." When their assigned number was called, players competed to get to the "bacon" first and return to their seat. Eleanor, who was also attending camp, was labeled number four. I watched a few rounds of the game until "Four!" was called. Eleanor was paying close attention as evidenced by her sitting straight, leaning forward to hear the caller, and smiling in anticipation, but when "Four!" was yelled, it was a good couple of seconds before her brain processed it. By the time she processed that she needed to get up and aim for the bacon, the other child already had the item. This was the first time I could *see* her learning disability although I had suspected for quite some time. I could see the delay in her ability to process what she had heard.

Learning disabilities are called "hidden disabilities" because we cannot see them. In younger children, particularly those with mild hidden disabilities, diagnosis is often elusive as the disability does not necessarily grossly affect their academic achievement. Since we cannot see the disability, they often go undiagnosed for quite some time. What happens during that time socially is of concern to me. I know from the literature that children with learning disabilities are often at a social disadvantage when compared to non-learning disabled peers (Estell et al., 2008; Kavale & Mostert, 2004; Nowicki, 2012; Nowicki et al., 2014; Vaughn, Elbaum, & Boardman, 2001). After the "Steal the Bacon" incident, I started to notice that Eleanor was often excluded from group sports. During pick up time, I had to walk through throngs of kids playing sports and observed that, when the coach told the team which way to go or which maneuver to make, it took Eleanor longer to process the directions. As a result, she started to get picked last for teams, and during family and friend gatherings, I could hear her complain that nobody wanted her on their team. Eleanor's auditory processing delay had put her at a disadvantage on the yard.

Eleanor's learning disability also has non-academic implications in the classroom. Almost two years ago, I had the pleasure of volunteering in our children's classroom. I saw that the teacher had a clip chart for behavior. When I asked about the chart, the teacher explained that children tend to move up and down the chart throughout the day; a child clips up when they are good and down when they do something naughty. I heard that Eleanor tended to come home with a naughty report. Knowing that no child is perfect, I was not concerned at first, but the constant negative reports were beginning to wear on Eleanor and her parents. During my volunteer time, I was curious to see what was happening. Kids were indeed moving up and down the chart, but not Eleanor. She was staying in the "naughty" region, unable to clip up the chart in the area where the "good kids" ended their day.

One incident in particular sums up Eleanor's inability to have the same fluidity of movement on the behavioral chart: At the end of a lesson, the children were told to finish their work and put their name at the top, put their pencils away, push in their chairs and come to the rug for story time. The first several children who sat on the rug were told to "clip up" on the behavioral chart. While the first child got to the rug, Eleanor had just processed the complete set of directions and was putting her name on her paper. She did not do anything wrong, nor did she get in trouble for taking a long time, but she also did not have the opportunity to clip up. Eleanor's daily "naughty reports" were not necessarily because she was behaving worse than her peers, she was simply missing opportunities to clip up.

In the cases of the behavioral chart and on the playground, Eleanor was left to feel less than adequate in relation to her peers. The chart was on display in the classroom for children and parents to see just as her athletic skills were on display on the yard. When I attended school events or birthday parties, I often overheard other parents talking about the "behavioral problems" of the classroom—Eleanor being one of those problems.

A few months ago, Eleanor received a diagnosis of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) from the pediatrician and the family had their first IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting shortly thereafter. The family shared the reports with me after the meeting and as predicted, Eleanor's relatively high achievement scores did not qualify her as a student with a learning disability (because it does not "adversely affect her academic performance") although it was clear that she has a large discrepancy between her auditory and visual processing abilities. I contemplated encouraging Eleanor's family to fight the good fight to get her special education services due to the ADHD diagnosis but it was clear that the battle would be uphill and I was not sure that the services she would have been granted would actually be beneficial in the short run. Had Eleanor qualified for an IEP, she would have likely been pulled out of her class for part of the school day for academic support and/or instruction. It was clear from her grades and testing results that she was in fact making academic progress, so that type of support did not seem beneficial. Because of the ADHD diagnosis, she did, however, qualify for a 504 plan which granted her the ability to take tests in a small group setting with extra time; an accommodation that an IEP would have also afforded. For the moment, the 504 plan suffices and the family will have the opportunity to revisit the IEP if needed in the future.

Luckily, this year Eleanor is in a class with a strong, compassionate teacher and is happily making academic progress. I do know that it is probable that as she gets older and school becomes more challenging her social and behavioral challenges are likely to increase. I suppose we will have to wait and see. I have learned that as a mother and friend, I am not good at waiting especially because in this case I feel like we are waiting for Eleanor to fail academically and socially.

Watching Eleanor and her family go through this process has been difficult, partly because I know that we do not always have systems and structures in place for children who match Eleanor's profile. Eleanor and children like her are smart, interested in learning and desire to be accepted by peers. I encourage readers to reconsider some commonly found classroom and school practices such as public displays of behavior and academic progress. In Eleanor's case, the "clip chart" was a no-win situation ultimately resulting in public shaming; I can assure you, she is not alone. I am confident that in every school, a number of "Eleanors" are affected by hidden disabilities. Watching Eleanor's story unfold has changed the way I view teaching, learning, and parenting. I hope that as a result of sharing this story teachers and parents will gain perspective and a new understanding of potential implications of some more routine classroom practices.

About the Author

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