

The Invisible Difference: How Schools Ignore Children with Learning Differences

By Katie Carr

This comic is mostly stemming from my personal experience and story that was a highly complex and uphill battle for my parents and me during elementary school at the public charter school I went to.

Even after I left that school, I still had to fight later on at my new private school over the same issues, which caused me to have to change schools once again, so this event was not a one-time thing for my family.

This story is also only told from my and my parent's perspective, as I do not have any information on how the administration side of things handled this from their perspective. I would love to take a deeper look into how schools as a whole handle this from their point of view at a later point however if given the chance.

That all being said, I hope you enjoy and can take a bit of insight from my story as to how difficult getting help with learning differences can be in the public school system, even when having multiple diagnoses from multiple different experts in the field.

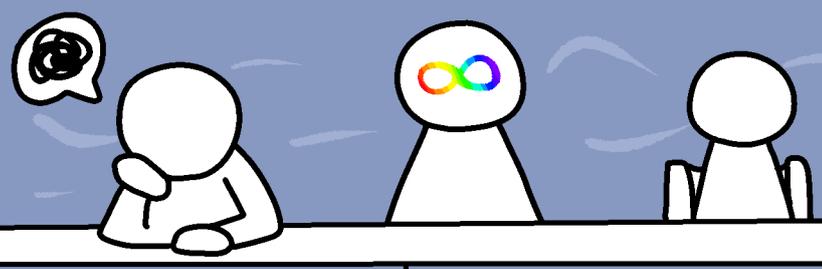


What does being disabled even mean?

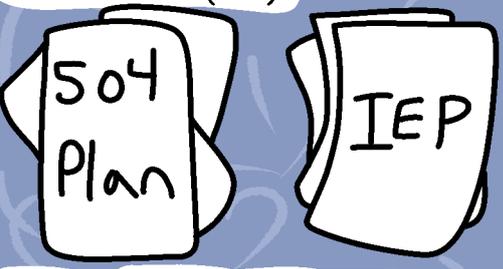


Well, normally being disabled in mainstream American society is associated with being unable to work due to an issue, typically a mental or physical one.

When it comes to school this means any issue that impacts school work ranging to problems focusing (ADHD), learning disorders (LDs), autism, or any physical issue like a mobility impairment, deafness, blindness, etc.

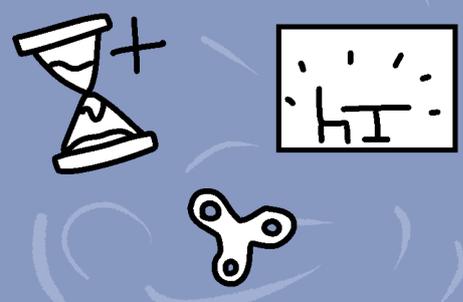


In theory two separate laws protect students with learning differences. Each has different criteria for qualifying for a plan and benefits. These are The Americans with Disability Act (504 Plan) and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IEP).

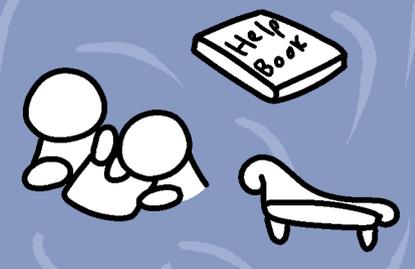


In practice however, these two laws are loose and make it easy for schools to find loopholes to not spend extra money on children with special needs.

A 504 plan is all about removing barriers to learning that cost the school no extra money (leaving class a few minutes early for transition time, being allowed to use a fidget, and testing separately are all examples of this).



An IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is more of a contract with the school saying that the school will provide a student certain services at no charge to the parent like tutoring or therapy so that the child may have an equal education to other children.



While anyone with a disability can, in theory, qualify for a 504, to qualify for an IEP you need to have a "substantial impact on the student's learning or behavior".



What defines a "substantial impact on the student's learning or behavior" is never stated, so it is up to each school to determine what this means for them.



In my case, and other cases I have heard, it means that because I was doing well in every other subject except for writing (in which I was many levels behind), because I was not "two grades behind overall"



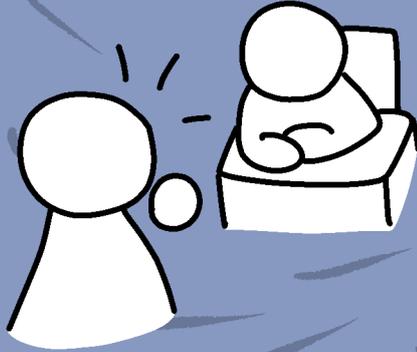
I did not qualify in their eyes.

My story and experience with my disabilities being overlooked lasted all of elementary school and my retelling it here is a combination of my fuzzy memories and emotions over it, coupled with my parent's more concrete details of the story, and is highly simplified.

My parents were concerned with my learning long before I was diagnosed with dyslexia in 3rd grade,



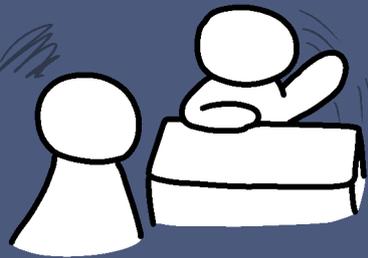
and constantly asked my teachers about ways they could help my learning,



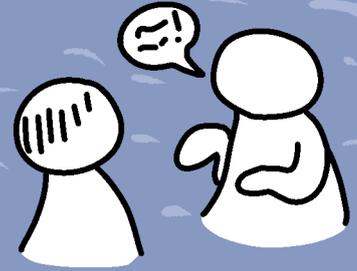
but strangely every time the teachers suggested something, the administration would quickly dismiss that any idea had even been mentioned.



The consensus was, because I was doing well in most areas and never acted out, everything was fine and nothing needed to be looked into any deeper.

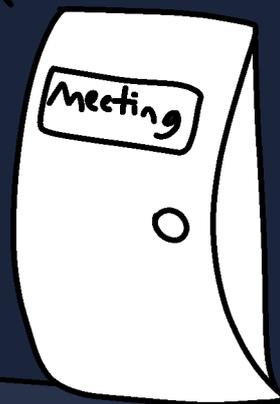


It was only because my parents had several relatives on both sides who were teachers that when asked, revealed secret processes my parents could use to get me tested and help that the door was opened, without these connections I do not know if my parents would have even been aware of the options they had by law.

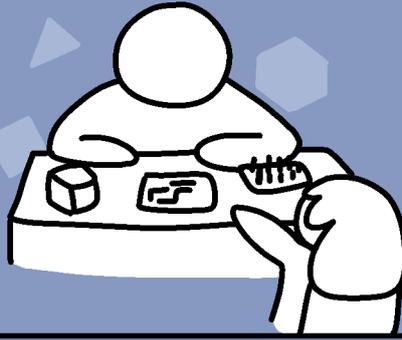
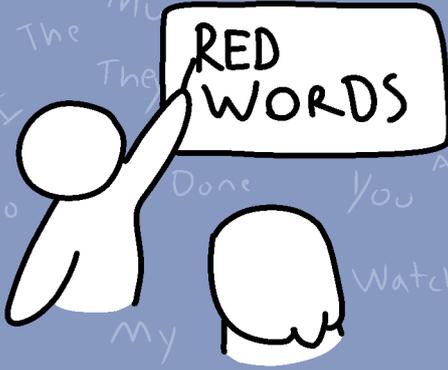


By 3rd grade I was diagnosed through the school with dyslexia and various other things like executive functioning issues and an LD in written expression. A 504 allowed me to test separately but did not provide tutoring.

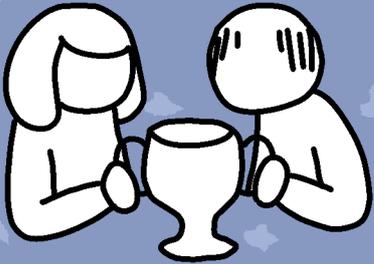
My parents asked the school why I did not have an IEP and the school said that I was doing too well to have an IEP. This fight would ramp, up leading to my parents suing the school and winning via a settlement, and my leaving of the public school system altogether.



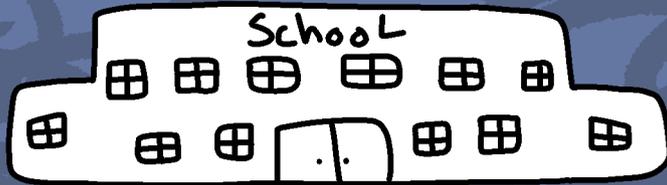
My experience with this was dizzying, after school was meeting with various different tutors over the years (all private), and I can remember being tested time and time again for different things and by different people, and my parents stress around it wearing off on me as well.



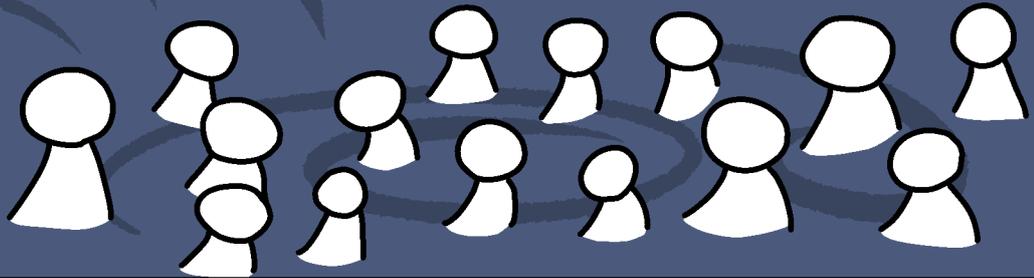
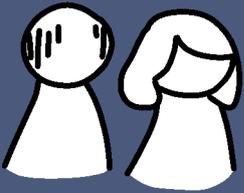
In the end, my parents won, but it was not without loss.



Distrust in school systems would become a common fact of life for me and my parents, and for me. Much of the way I was treated academically at the time has affected my relationship with school and school work.



My parents also lost the friendship of most everyone in the neighborhood for suing the school, even if years later many of them would come up to them asking how to get their children accommodations.



Scars were left as the dust settled, but this shouldn't have had to happen.

So why did it?



Now, why not just spend money and give a single child accommodations, why go through all the fuss of fighting about it?

For this I would like to turn to *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin.

In *The Ones Who Walk Away*, the main premise is that an entire utopia exists but, in order for it to exist one small child must suffer.

It is said in the story that if anyone were to bring the child into the light, to help them be on the same literal level as them

it would be at the cost of the entire utopia's suffering,

so the child stays there, left in the dark so that they are the only one who suffers in the city.

Here, the story is different but the idea is the same, why spend money helping one child stay on level with the others when we can use that money helping the rest of the school instead?

In the numbers game that one child doesn't matter, and can not speak for themselves, so they are simply left to the dust whenever it is most convenient for the people in power around them.



Public schools are not giving children their rights to a free, fair and accessible education. My story is an indicator of this, as well as what happened after I left the elementary school.

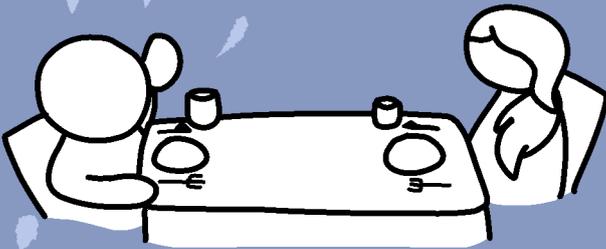


Years later very little has changed administration wise, meaning most of the people who tried to cover up the fact that I was not getting proper accommodations are still there, including the principal.

8+ years



My neighbor who is a year behind me told me and my parents at a diner that she had gotten accommodations after the settlement, but her younger sister who had arguably more visible learning problems never got an IEP.



The effects of the settlement were temporary it seems, and without further action likely will stay that way.



The truth is, I was incredibly lucky to have the privilege of parents who had the time and money to get me the help I needed, something that many children don't have. My parents also had family who could point them in the right direction to get accommodations, another thing not everyone will have.



More visibility is needed on the issue of children not getting the accommodations they need in school, and laws should be revamped and parents should be informed of their options in regards to this.



Getting proper accommodations and an IEP was a years long battle for my parents and me, and by exposing the way this system affected me, I hope I can raise some awareness so that maybe just one less kid gets affected the same way I did. Getting proper accommodations and an IEP was a years long battle for my parents and me, and by exposing the way this system affected me, I hope I can raise some awareness so that maybe just one less kid gets affected the same way I did. Getting proper accommodations and an IEP was a years long battle for my parents and me, and by exposing the way this system affected me, I hope I can raise some awareness so that maybe just one less kid gets affected the same way I did. Getting proper accommodations and an IEP was a years long battle for my parents and me, and by exposing the way this system affected me, I hope I can raise some awareness so that maybe just one less kid gets affected the same way I did.

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ANT 101

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The Invisible Difference: How Schools Ignore Children with Learning Differences

This is my artist statement for my final comic/paper for Ant 101. I will detail the sources I used and why that I could not fully explain in the comic itself, explaining how they relate to the main topic of invisible learning differences being ignored by school systems and thus the state.

I picked *The Ones That Walk Away From Omelas* as a source because I found the parallels between it and my own experiences very interesting. *The Ones That Walk Away*, starts by telling the tale of a fabulous utopia called Omelas, and describing in particular a holiday they were having. It then later shifts to talk about a young child who lives trapped beneath the city, and constantly mocks them and their squallor. It also says that once the children reach a certain age they are taken down to see the little child, and after that some decide to stay in Omelas, and some walk away, thus the title of the story. The interesting part is where they detail and talk about how bad it would be if they brought the child to live on the surface with everyone else. It is said that if someone were to do this, they would be sacrificing the happiness of all the people in Omelas just so that this one child could be a little happy. It is even argued that the little child would be incapable of learning how to live a proper life in Omelas anyways, so what is the point of giving them the chance? I see now in my experience with the public school system, like the child in Omelas, it was thought that if I got an IEP and proper accommodations it would be a nuisance for the people who worked at the school and would take resources away from them and the other children who did not need extra help. Of course it is not nearly as extreme as the child

in Omelas, I was not publicly ostracized for my learning disabilities and had a typical upbringing for the area. But still, like the child all of my problems were assumed to be unfixable and my fault, I was not trying hard enough or my parents were coddling me too much, or as one high school teacher once put it “Katie is a B student, not an A student or a C student, and that’s just the way she is.” (For context this from a discussion of my spanish grades, a subject I have trouble in due to the same brain issues as I do in english, was at a totally different school, and I was an A student besides this one class). Time and time again if my needing extra help inconvenienced someone they would opt to try and ignore the problem or shift the blame onto me, a much more subtle and minor form of the same treatment the child from Omelas was experiencing. Of course, not every teacher was like this, many of my teachers were good people who wanted to help the best they could, but the ones that did act this way made an impact.

In *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea* by Paige West, it mostly discusses how people in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are constantly dispossessed, and how the perception outsiders have of them as “primitive” hurts them in various ways. One way is how PNG people can not get loans, despite already having successful small businesses, without using land as a collateral, because it is assumed that they do not know how to handle money and will simply spend it all and never pay the bank back. This is highly problematic for multiple reasons, but the one relevant to this paper is how outsiders tend to assume that, despite success, PNG people are all corrupt or “primitive” as a default. This is similar to how the child from *The Ones Who Walk Away* was treated, and assumed that he would never be proper because he lived underground for so long. Of course these are two very different subjects, PNG people are not trapped underground for years never learning how to speak, but the same sentiment of assuming that a person is one way and not giving them any further chance to

prove themselves is there. This is relevant as well to this comic in terms of how a child is assumed to be at a certain level of intelligence that is inert, and disregard any nuance to it, like being “smart” in some fields but not in others, or needing help in most fields but good at something else. The assumptions made about people as “lazy” or “smart” in both cases allow the state to take away resources like loans, land or accommodations. Again, the discrimination that PNG people face is very different than those with invisible learning differences, but in both cases the state is trying to dispossess people, maybe so they gain more land, maybe so they have a better control over them, and maybe so they have to spend less resources and money on something, and can transfer that to something that benefits the state more than the person. In public schools by spending less on individual children who need help, they can better give resources to themselves or their benefactors, perhaps they give the money to their top sports team or make the food in the cafeteria better, or maybe even just funnel it back into the classes so that they can have more field trips or better equipment. None of this spending is necessarily bad on its own, but by taking away these resources from kids who need it, a few are hurt, so that the rest can prosper. This is the essence of colonialism, exploiting marginalized people so that the rest can prosper, and the highest authority may gain more wealth and power. Of course, there is a major difference between genocide, slavery, cultural appropriation and more and discrimination in the schooling system, but still, schools are apart of the colonial state and one gear in the system that prepares people to live under it for the rest of their lives.

Speaking of colonial systems, one that is very similar to schools is prisons. *The Echo* By Macario Garcia is a short story about a prisoner in a prison, and uses storytelling to tell us how prisons dehumanize and take the prisoners life over and over again. In it the unnamed prisoner talks about how their life is constantly taken again and again by the echo of the prison doors

slamming shut, and how they are trapped with their guilt being relentlessly tortured by their time in prison. Prisons and schools are both about structure and regimen, everyone in them experiencing the same schedule every day with little room for variation. In schools this is to prepare children to work in a possibly monotonous job, doing the same thing day in and day out without question. In prisons this is to reform someone who has broken the laws of the state, to reshape them into a proper citizen. In both cases, it is to control you and keep people in their place. In prisons, if someone had a different schedule or permissions, perhaps because they have a health condition, it could threaten the regimen and power the prison has over the other prisoners. It's less expensive and time consuming as well to not give differing schedules, the more variation you give the more freedom people have, and the more time and resources spent making sure everything is neat and tidy in each variation of this schedule. It's the same with schools, giving some kids a different set of permissions or schedules may rile up the others and make them question why they don't get the same variation of choice. The more variations you give in each case, the more things needed to be accounted for and people need to spend more time drawing out the plans. It is easier and more efficient to try and minimize variations, so in both cases only the most extreme, most visibly obvious cases will be picked out to gain the things needed for them to live at the same standard as everyone else. Anyone not chosen, either due to being a minor or being incarcerated, has no ability to speak up for themselves, and must have another person with power, often family, speak for them. If they do not have these resources then they are out of luck, and are stuck either learning or living at a subpar level, because it is easier and it is unlikely an outsider will notice or do anything about it.

In chapter 3 of *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*, "The Suicidal Wound and Fieldwork among Canadian Inuit" by Lisa Stevenson, the Inuit suicide

epidemic is described by Stevenson. She tells the reader how Inuits thought differently than westerners who were obsessed with the future, while Inuits think more of the flow of life and the day to day, which for them, death happens to be a natural part of. There is nothing wrong with this line of thinking, but yet it is problematized by many Non-Inuit people especially in suicide prevention, where having a plan for the future is a major tool to stop people from committing suicide. Instead of the reasons why someone may commit suicide being looked into, many of which were likely due to the state or other systems in place, and instead problematize the individual, by saying that their unwillingness to look to the future was the issue, instead of any other reason they might have for wanting to end their own life. Suicide is a major issue, and is very different than seemingly invisible learning differences, but the issue of problematizing the individual is present in both. Many times someone who has learning differences may be categorized as “lazy” or “not working hard enough”, when in reality they are not the issue, the environment they are learning in is. By drawing attention away from the issues from these systems negatively impacting people, and placing blame on the person instead, the state can deflect blame and responsibility from the matter. This happens in both cases, and by flipping the narrative and controlling it, the state also controls how much and what kind of help is allotted to people. The issue might be flipped from being poor being why someone is suicidal to not thinking to the future enough, or a brain encoding and decoding words differently from the norm to being lazy. The problems and causes of suicide and learning differences may be different, but in an overview sense the way they are treated in how both problematize the individual to lighten the state’s and other’s shoulders is the same.

I hope after reading this artist statement my reason for picking each of my sources has become clear, along with their relationship towards the topic of invisible learning differences.

This is a topic I would love to learn more about and dig into if I had more time, and although I do not know how to fix this issue of schools ignoring some children with learning differences, I hope that by dissecting it some and giving it a little more awareness, I have made a step, however small it might be, to figuring out that answer.

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