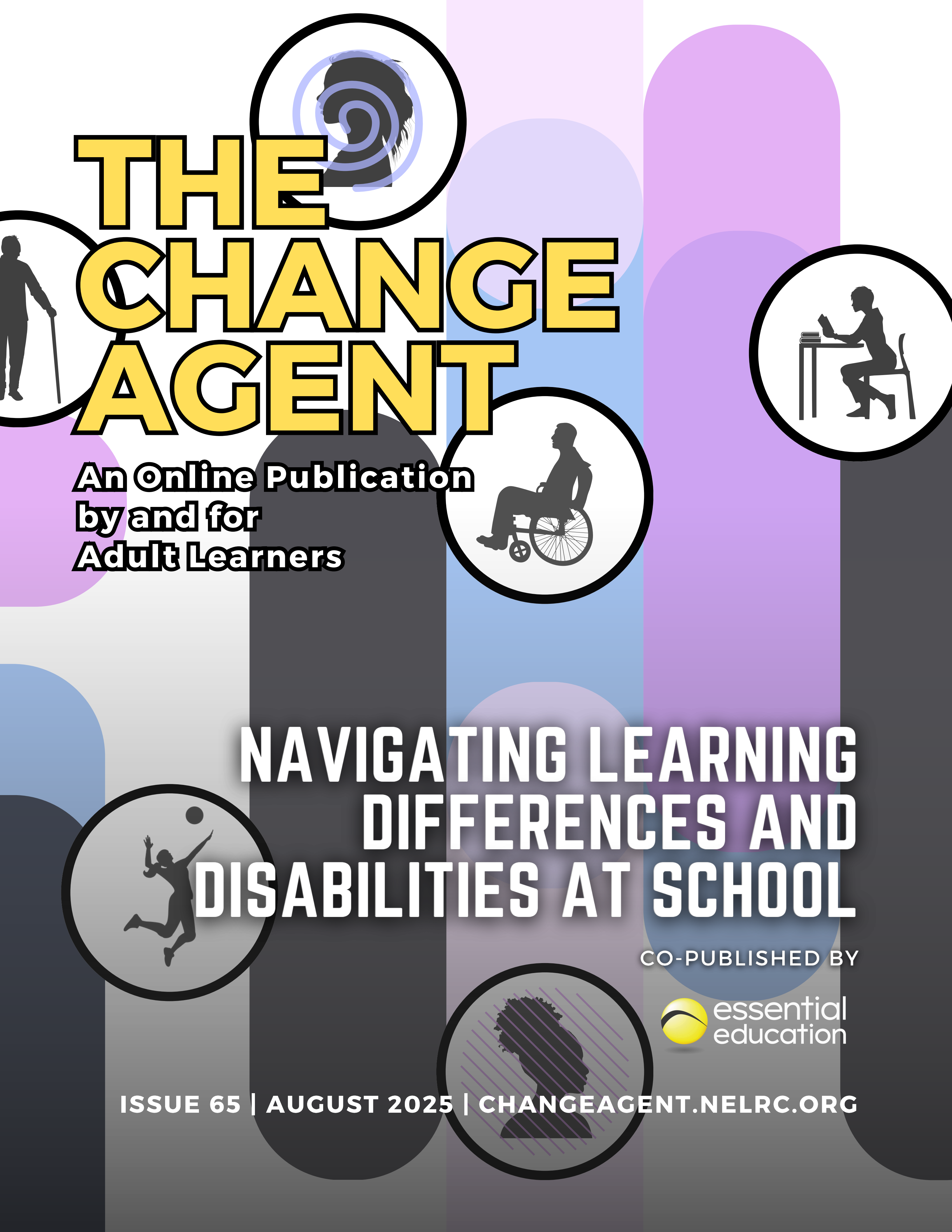

THE CHANGE AGENT

An Online Publication
by and for
Adult Learners

NAVIGATING LEARNING DIFFERENCES AND DISABILITIES AT SCHOOL

CO-PUBLISHED BY
essential
education

ISSUE 65 | AUGUST 2025 | CHANGEAGENT.NELRC.ORG

The Change Agent is a publication of The New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education (a division of JSI), 44 Farnsworth Street, Boston, MA 02210 (617) 482-9485. Coming out three times per year, each issue focuses on a different topic that is relevant to learners' lives. This online magazine is designed for ESOL, ABE, and HSE classes. In New England, access to *The Change Agent* is available free of charge through NELRC's affiliated state literacy resource centers. Contact us to learn how to access the site.

Submissions: A new "Call for Articles" is published in February of every year. Find it here: https://changeagent.nelrc.org/write-for-us/

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NEW ENGLAND Literacy Resource Center
WORLD EDUCATION
A DIVISION OF JSI

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The "Disabilities and Learning Differences" Series

For our 2025-26 series, students write about their experiences with disabilities and learning differences at home, at school, in the workplace, and in the community. Their stories teach us a great deal about the multiple identities people have, and the challenges and gifts that accompany those identities. A note about language: we sometimes use identity-first descriptions (e.g., disabled person) and other times person-first descriptions (e.g., person with a disability).

Issue #65, August 2025: "Navigating Learning Differences and Disabilities at School"

Issue #66, November 2025: "Awareness, Advocacy, and Adaptations"

Issue #67, February 2026: "Seeing the Whole Person"

Thank you, Essential Education!

This issue is co-published with https://www.essentialed.com/educators. We are grateful for their generous funding and expert support on the editorial board.

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Our Editorial Board for Issues 62-64:

From top left to right: Cynthia Peters, *Change Agent*; Ebony Vandross, World Education; Eileen Barry, the Literacy Project, MA; Jen Denton, Essential Education; Andjela Kaur, Disability Studies scholar; Andy Nash, World Education (retired); Rosario Roman, East Hartford Adult Ed., CT; Mikayla Frye, Essential Ed.; Jenna Maxey, Essential Ed.; Deb Coates, the Literacy Project, MA; Nasreen al Oman, Sundeela Amir, and (not pictured) Jaleysha Candelaria, East Hartford Adult Ed., CT; Pam Sordi (not pictured); disability consultant for EdAdvance, CT.

Reading Challenges and...

Many Strategies for Learning to Read

Deb Coates

BEFORE YOU READ: What was it like for you to learn to read? What strategies have you used?

When I was in grammar school, I only learned how to read three- and four-letter words. I had to repeat two grades, but I did graduate 8th grade. I am not sure how. Even then, all I could read was three- and four-letter words. I felt like a failure.

Why didn't I get more help from the teacher? Looking back, I think she taught two grades combined. She had a lot of students with different needs. I wonder if it was too much for the teacher. Maybe she was overwhelmed by too many students.

I didn't get my driver's license until I was 27 because it was so hard to read the manual. On the day that I took the test, my examiner's wife was in the hospital having a baby. Her name was Debra, the same as mine. Well, I got four wrong on my test, and you were only allowed to get three wrong. My examiner passed me anyway. He said it was my lucky day, and he told me why. So, do you think that was lucky or what?!

I got married and my husband tried to teach me how to read better. He did the best he could, but where I really learned was a show called Shepherd's Chapel. This show had closed captions. The pastor read from the Bible, and the words showed up on the bottom of the screen. I followed along with him. That's how I learned to read some new words. Now, closed caption is available for any show to teach you the words.

When I turned 72, a friend showed me how to join a class on Zoom at The Literacy Project. I didn't have to leave my home to learn. I feel safer in my own home than out in public. This helps me focus. When I got onto Zoom, I was nervous until I met my teacher. She made me feel at ease.

She taught me how to break down words and how to pronounce them. I learned about verbs and nouns, so I could write full sentences. And that led to writing short stories. I wish I had a teacher like her when I was a kid. If I had learned to read and write, I could have gone further in my life.

For my whole life I have ***bluffed my way through***, telling people I forgot my glasses so that they would read for me.

I feel like I am in a new world now that I can read. I have a new life. I can read newspapers, books, and lots more. If you are having a hard time reading, I hope my story will help you. Try different strategies until you find something that works for you.

AFTER YOU READ:

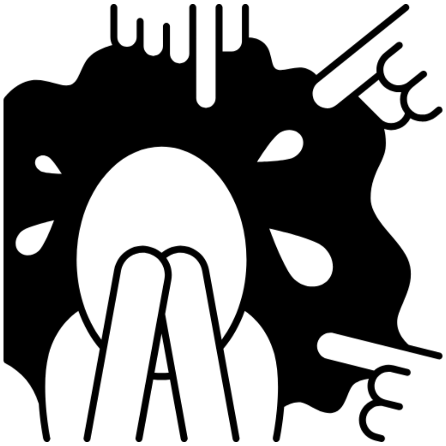
1. What strategies did Deb use to learn to read? What has worked well for her?

2. What does it mean to ***bluff your way through***?

Deb Coates is a student at the Literacy Project in Amherst, Massachusetts. It feels good to be able to read now!

My Learning Disability

Tammy Roya



BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read the subheadings. What do you think the sequence of this story will be?

2. Share what you know about learning disabilities. What are some examples of learning disabilities and differences? What is your experience with them?

As a Child: Pushed Around and Left Behind

I am learning disabled. All my life, it has been more than a long road.

When I was in school, kids treated me badly. They made fun of me and called me names. They also called me "teacher's pet" because I had to have a lot of help. They pushed me around the playground and beat me up. When we did school projects in groups, no one wanted me. The teacher assigned me to a group, and all those kids would be mad to get me. They told the teacher they didn't want me. They said I would slow them down.

When I got to high school, it was no better; it just got worse. I went to special classes, but I wasn't learning anything. The class was for two hours a day, which wasn't long enough to help me with my learning disability and all my schoolwork. The school kept moving me up, and I probably would have graduated, but by 10th grade, I couldn't do it anymore. I was so behind. I was only at a 4th grade reading level.

Paying Bills and Having Kids But Still Can't Read

I was 18 years old, so I got a job and moved out of my foster home. I moved into my own apartment, but I could only work as a dishwasher. I had lots of bad times trying to pay the bills and the rent because I couldn't write checks.

When I was 20 years old, I had my first baby. By the time I was 24, I had 3 kids. When my kids were babies, I had trouble learning how to take care of them. My mind was slower than everyone else's. I couldn't read about how to raise them. I struggled with all the paperwork for doctors' and dentists' appointments. I struggled to read important letters that came in the mail. I had to get on Social Security because I couldn't keep a job.

My Kids Had to Ask Others for Help

When my kids were in grade school, they were getting mad at me because I could not help them with their homework. They were smarter than me. I felt really bad. I cried myself to sleep most nights knowing that I couldn't help them and made their life more difficult. They had to stay after school and ask classmates and teachers for help.

My kids did well in school, and they graduated. Thank goodness for other people who helped them. I wish I could say I helped them get there, but I did not.

Finally Getting Help for Me

When I was 25 years old, I decided to go to Dover Adult Learning Center to continue my education, and I have been attending on and off for many years. I got tired of being so learning disabled and struggling so badly. I struggle with

memory and reading comprehension. I am now 58 years old, and I'm attending classes regularly. I need to keep my brain from losing what I've learned, and I want to try to learn more. I am moving up some grade levels, but I know because my learning is so bad that I will never get my high school diploma.

I'm thankful for being on Social Security because I would have been homeless with my kids long ago. I couldn't keep a job then or now. These days, it would be harder to get a job because you have to fill out job applications online, and I don't know how to work a computer. But I keep trying to learn. I am taking a class in computers for beginners.

I won't give up even though every day is still hard for me. I hope you don't give up either. You can get yourself out of bad stuff if you try. If I can do it, you can too. Just get help if you need it. It is better than living in misery.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to what the author says ***and*** what you can infer, what supports have been available to Tammy and what supports were missing?

2. What do you think about Tammy's advice at the end of the article?

3. Read and discuss the box on the right. What do you think of the two definitions of disability? What do you think of the phrase, "Nothing about us without us"?

Tammy Roya is a student at Dover Adult Learning Center in Dover, New Hampshire. She likes to take long walks and bike rides in the woods. She also enjoys camping and arts and crafts.

What Is a Disability?

Legal definition:

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity.

Another definition:

Disability is a form of human diversity, but it is a type of diversity that is not valued by society. The impairment that a disabled person has may limit them in certain ways, but they are *more* limited by the barriers in the world that do not allow them full access to school, work, and community.

Listen to people with disabilities!

"In education, a focus on inclusive spaces, high expectations for students with disabilities and training for all educators is essential. Listening to the perspectives of those with lived experience is key to understanding that disability is not a problem to solve but part of the human experience to embrace. '*Nothing about us without us*' has real and consequential meaning."

– Keith Jones, disability activist

Source: https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2022/confronting-ableism-on-the-way-to-justice

Education Is the Greatest Thing

Rachester Motley

A Hard Beginning

My mom was born down South. She had to work in the fields and pick cotton day and night. Going to school was not a priority. My mom did not have access to education.

Mom moved our family to Detroit for a better life. I was one of eighteen kids. I was the baby. By the time my mom got to me, she was worn out. Mom had tuberculosis (TB), and she was hospitalized for a long time. It was extremely hard for me to get an education because of Mom's health. My brothers and sisters were grown up. I did not get the support that I needed.

I Did Not Know I Had Dyslexia

I did not graduate from high school. At the time, I did not know that I had dyslexia. I never knew why it was so hard for me to focus on things in school, or why reading was such a challenge. Back then, people like me did not have the support that they needed to learn. I got so discouraged that I left school as soon as I was old enough. I started working.

Rachester Motley with her son.

Pushing My Son to Get an Education

I did not want my son to suffer like me. I pushed him to get an education. Every day, I got him up for school. I told my son that he would graduate. Today he has a college degree. My son has also gone back to school to get more degrees for his career. My grandchildren are all educated.

Pushing Myself to Go Back to School

Three or four years ago, I found Oakland Literacy Council and started taking classes. I wanted to get an education because I wanted to be more independent. I wanted to be able to understand and read my mail. I have a wonderful tutor at Oakland Literary Council named Jill. For the first time, I had the chance to learn with someone one-on-one. Jill realized I had dyslexia. She researched ways to help me.

Jill and I started by breaking words down into small parts and sounding out each part. I never knew how to do that. Now I can understand my mail. I can read a lot better. I can even read words I have never seen before.

Reading Is Amazing!

When I'm walking my dogs, I'm amazed by all the words on the street signs and posters that I can read now. It's exciting to understand the words I see. Sometimes I struggle, but I like the challenge.

My tutor understands me. Sometimes I say, "Jill, did you know what you were getting into when you took me on?"

Jill smiles and says, "I know what I'm doing."

I Have Come a Long Way, and You Can Too

Jill is proud of me. She sees progress in me. I have come a very long way. I always valued education, but I value education even more now. Having your education gives you power. My father always said, "Understanding is the greatest thing in the world." I believe education is the greatest thing in the world.

To other people with dyslexia, I would say this: Learning with dyslexia is a lot of hard work. But there are people out there who are willing to teach you. You will be amazed at all the things you can learn. With the right support, it can happen! It makes you feel really great about yourself.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Tell Rachester's story in your own words—first very briefly (in just a few sentences), and then again with more details.

2. Read the story by Tammy Roya on pp. 4-5. How are their stories similar? How are they different? Be specific.

3. Read and discuss the definitions in the box on the right. The second definition mentions "strong thinking skills." Point to examples of Rachester's strong thinking skills in the text.

Rachester Motley (pictured here with her tutor) has been a student at Oakland Literacy Council in Pontiac, Michigan, since 2020. She loves her studies and is hungry for more knowledge. Rachester is living proof that even with dyslexia, you can learn and be successful.

What Is Dyslexia?

There are several definitions of dyslexia. According to the International Dyslexia Association, "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia/

Here is a different definition written by editorial board member, Andjela Kaur: "Dyslexia affects how people process language. People with dyslexia may find it hard to:

- recognize words quickly,
- spell
- sound out words

For someone with dyslexia, these tasks are challenging because their brains process language sounds differently. People with dyslexia often have strong thinking skills and just need different ways to learn and access information."

They Called Me a Slow Learner

But Now I Have Support to Move Forward

Tony F. Jones

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read the title, subtitle, and headings in the article. What do you think the "arc" of this story will be?

2. Have you ever seen a young person get bullied? Or have you been bullied or been the bully yourself? What happened? What made it possible for the bullying to continue?

In School, I Felt Ashamed

When I was a young person in school, the teachers called me a slow learner. The kids called me other names, like dummy, stupid, and ***dumb as a box of rocks***. When the teacher asked me to come to the blackboard to solve problems, I was ashamed and embarrassed. I felt like a failure. I kept to myself. I was placed in special education classes. I felt more comfortable there.

Now, I Feel I Belong

Now, I am in a class in prison. My teacher supports me. The other men are like me. They have learning disabilities. We learn not to judge, criticize, or make fun of people with learning disabilities. Our teacher asks us to listen to each

other. We work together to reach our goals. This is my first time feeling like I belong in a classroom. I love it!

In this class, I do not have to lie, fake, or pretend to be something I am not. I do not feel ashamed. Why? Because to the left and to the right of me, there are teaching assistants who help me. They do not act like there is anything wrong with me. It is okay to be who I am. It is okay to need help.

My brothers in the class help me with depression and anxiety. They encourage me to face my challenges. They share their challenges with me. There is strength in unity. When I am in my class, it is like being with family and friends on the 4th of July. It's like being given a present on my birthday.

I am with Good Teachers and Supportive Classmates

People with learning disabilities need a way to reach their goals. For me, it helps to be in a room with good teachers and other people who are like me. It helps to feel unity instead of shame.

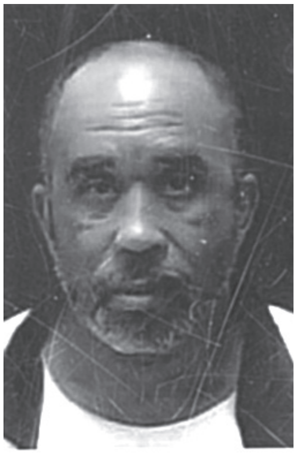
AFTER YOU READ:

1. Now that you have read the article, say again what the "arc" of the story is. What details does the author share to show how he feels?

2. The author uses two similes to describe what it is like being in class with his brothers who encourage him. What are the two similes? Try using a simile to describe how class feels to you.

3. Learn more about similies and metaphors in the box below.

4. Read the stories on pp. 4-5 and 6-7. What do these stories have in common with this one? And how are they different?



Tony F. Jones has frequently written for The Change Agent. *He is in prison in Jackson, Georgia. He is working towards his GED.*

What Is a Simile and What Is a Metaphor?

Read the definitions and example of simile and metaphor below. Then try writing your own.

A simile compares two things, using the words "like" or "as."

"When I am in class, it is like being with family and friends on the 4th of July."

Kids in my school bullied me. They said I was "dumb as a box of rocks."

A metaphor says that two things are the same; it does not use "like" or "as."

My classmates are my brothers.

Being in class is a gift.

My Learning Disability in Five Vignettes

Alan Rambeau

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read about ***vignette*** in the caption below the picture on the right. Share a ***vignette*** from your school days that evokes a strong feeling.

2. ***IEP*** stands for Individualized Education Program; ***ADHD*** stands for Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. To learn more about IEP and ADHD, read the boxes on pp. 10-11. ***JROTC*** stands for Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps.

3. Read about dyslexia in the box on p. 7.

4. Do you know anyone with ADHD and/or dyslexia? What are their gifts and challenges?

Pizza

Mr. Griffin was a great guy. He was my tutor in the fourth grade. That's when they first figured out that I needed an ***IEP***. He bought me Domino's pizza every day. He helped me with my math. They did tests on me, and they figured out that I had ***ADHD***. But they kept missing my dyslexia.

A vignette is like a snapshot of a moment in your life. In this snapshot, a teacher is giving a boy a pizza. What feelings might a moment like this evoke?

What Is ADHD?

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. The National Institute of Mental Health defines it as a developmental disorder that includes one or more of the following symptoms:

- **difficulty paying attention, keeping on task, or staying organized**
- **moving around a lot, feeling restless, or talking excessively**
- **being impulsive, such as interrupting or having trouble waiting one's turn**

Many people with ADHD think of it less as a disorder and more as a form of diversity. They point to the positive traits related to ADHD, such as having more energy and spontaneity, and being creative, curious, insightful, and resilient.

Sources: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd; and "Silver Linings of ADHD": https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10551976/

What Is an IEP?

According to *Education Week*, "An Individualized Education Program, or IEP, is a program tailored to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The program is written in collaboration between a child's school district, their parent or guardian, and sometimes the student. The document outlines the special educational needs based on the student's identified disability. It outlines educational goals, and any specialist services they may need to meet those goals."

Source: https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/what-is-an-iep-individualized-education-programs-explained/2023/07
Note: An IEP is different from a 504 Plan. See the box on p. 31 for more information on 504 Plans.

Music

As a kid, I learned that listening to music on my headphones helped me focus. But the teachers never let me use the headphones. They thought it was distracting because my head was bobbing up and down to the music.

Naps

My algebra teacher noticed that I always fell asleep in his class. I told them the reason why: I was in *JROTC*, and it ***drained my battery***. So, he and I came to an agreement. If I got my work done, he would allow me to put my head down on my desk and go to sleep. There's a twist though. I never really understood algebra. But I still passed the class.

Abbreviations

In English class, I was bad at spelling, so I used abbreviations of words. I trained the computers and my phone to understand my abbreviations. They could auto-correct them to fix the spelling. In this way, people could read my writing better.

Seeing and Doing

I learn in a different way than other students who have no disability with their brain. Visual and hands-on learning are better for me. I don't understand verbal directions. I have to be doing it at the same time I am hearing about it.

Thank you for reading this. I hope it will help you if you have similar disabilities.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What do these ***vignettes*** tell you about the author's experience with his learning disability?

2. What accomodations has Alan developed for himself? What accommodations does his teacher offer him?

3. Alan uses metaphor when he says his participation in JROTC ***drained his battery***. What does it mean? Try using it in your own sentence. (Read more about simile and metaphor on p. 9.)

Alan Rambeau is a student at Ellsworth Adult and Community Education in Ellsworth, Maine. He is working on his high school equivalency.

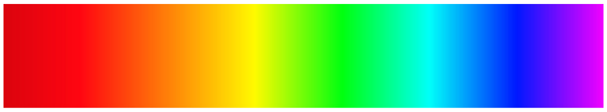
Learning My Own Way

Adonay Kubrom

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. In what ways do you like to learn? How would you describe your learning style?

2. What do you know about autism? Read the boxes on pp. 12-13. Think about the word ***spectrum***. What does it mean? What does it mean to have a condition on a ***spectrum***?



My Disability Is Autism

Autism is an intellectual disability. It takes me a long time to learn about everything old and new. I have difficulty navigating daily life. It is difficult to make friends with average people because of my lack of communication. It is also difficult to pass the driving test because of my limited English. I don't have my freedom. I am dependent on my family to drive me around.

With all of these challenges, I am able to have a normal life by memorizing anything I need to learn until it is finally in my head. It is very difficult to listen to verbal instruction. It helps if I make recordings of the instructions. Then I can listen again on my own time. It also helps if I have a hands-on or visual opportunity to learn. For example, I can learn better by watching videos on YouTube.

My school is very supportive. I am in the College to Career (C2C) Program, a three-year program designed to help people like me get a college education and find employment. The program is funded by the Department of Rehabilitation, a California state agency that helps people with disabilities find employment, independence, and equality. This program is threatened by the Trump Administration, because he is trying to eliminate programs that aim to be inclusive of all people.[1]

My Most Perfect Plan in School

Mary Schexnaydre, a C2C coach, says, "I have seen magical things happen in this program. In the three years that students are with us, I watch them transform from timid novices to confident professionals who have a strong sense of self. C2C helps students answer the questions: who am I, what I am good at, and what do I care about."[2]

Before I was admitted to the C2C Program, I was going to the Petaluma Transition Program (PTP). PTP is a community-like program provided by Petaluma City Schools for students ages 18-22 who have disabilities and have finished their high school program with a Certificate of Completion. This program prepared me to get into the C2C

What Is Autism?

According to the medical definition, autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, and speech and nonverbal communication. According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects an estimated 1 in 31 children and 1 in 45 adults in the United States today.

Source: https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism

Program. The first time I applied to C2C, I didn't get in. However, with the help of PTP staff, I was able to get in the second time. I really appreciate all the support I receive from them.

In my C2C classes, I am learning how to write a resume, pick out the jobs that I want, and figure out my personal values and what kind of work environment I want. I have only a year and half left before I graduate.

I want to get a job at a library or comic book store due to the fact that I always enjoy reading novels and comic books. My work experience includes working at Casa Grande High School's library as an assistant and working at CVS as a restocking clerk. At the library, I cleaned and organized tables, chairs, and books. At CVS, I organized items on the shelves, checked the expiration dates on food and drinks, and took out the trash.

Everyone Deserves an Opportunity

I have noticed that my learning difference or disability has opened up something new for me. I value and appreciate everyone who understands my condition and tries to be helpful. I like to be in class with others who have learning disabilities or differences. We are all in the same boat. Although our disabilities are different, we all have the same goal to succeed. Everyone deserves the same opportunity I have. With all the limitations of having autism, I am striving successfully.

Sources:

1. https://time.com/7210039/what-is-dei-trump-executive-order-companies-diversity-efforts/

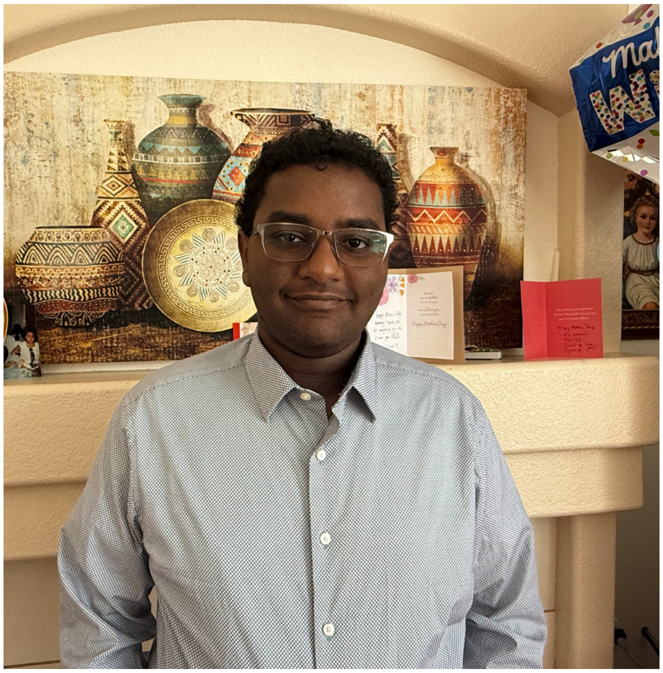
2. https://news.santarosa.edu/srjc-college-career-program-ranked-most-successful-california

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What strategies does Adonay use to navigate his challenges?

2. How is his school supportive? Be specific.

3. What state agency funds Adonay's program? What do you think should be the role of state and federal agencies in supporting this type of programming?



Adonay Kubrom is a student in the C2C Program at Santa Rosa Junior College in Petaluma, California. He is known for his hard work and his eagerness to apply his skills in the workplace. Outside of work, he enjoys doing physical activities, writing explanations, reading books, watching movies, and playing video games. He is particularly interested in performing science experiments.

What Is Autistic Identity?

Autistic identity is about how autistic people understand themselves. Autistic people have distinct neurological profiles that include how they communicate, process sensory information, and interact with the world. Many autistic people view autism as part of their identity rather than something that needs to be fixed. The autistic community values acceptance, accommodation, and recognizing autistic people's unique strengths.

Source: Andjela Kaur, editorial board member

Born with Special Needs

Allen Lovelace

BEFORE YOU READ: What do you think the author means by "special needs"?

My Parents Are Always Here for Me

I have special needs. I was born with autism a long time ago. My parents did all they could for me, their only son. They always loved me; they didn't want anything bad to happen to me.

When the hard times happen, when I am in trouble, they are always there for me. When the boys at school were trying to get me, they took me out of that school. When I need something, they buy it for me.

My parents were there when I graduated from high school. They were there when I was sick. They were there when I got engaged. I called them on the cell phone and told them.

I Don't Miss a Single Day of School

When I finished high school in 2001, I was 20 years old. My math and reading were at third and fourth grade levels. My spelling was at a seventh-grade level. I went to school every day. I didn't miss a single day. Now, thanks to Literacy Chicago, my reading is at a sixth grade level. It keeps getting better. The more I put into school, the more I get from it. I have perfect attendance. I want to get the achievement award to make my family proud of me.

I Want to Share My Ideas

I like to write because I want to share my ideas. I can write a story like this. It is about me, my mother's son, who is autistic. I love to be creative. I keep my notebook on the table, and I am always ready to write. I want to publish my writing. I want to make my family proud.

I Want a Job

I used to go to Ada S. McKinley Community Services. They help people like me find a job. I did piecework. I made Chia Pets. Piecework means you get paid for each piece you make. I earned a good paycheck. I had money in my pocket. I don't go now because they don't have piecework anymore.

I want a job. I want to call the grocery store. I want to get a job as a bagger. My aunt said I should not get a job. She said it would mess up my social security benefits.

AFTER YOU READ: Write a letter to Allen. Share any of your own experiences that relate to his. Mention details from this essay in your letter.

Allen Lovelace is a writer living in Chicago. He is a student at Literacy Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. He has not missed a day in the two years he's been attending the school. He graduated from South Central Community Service High School in Chicago in 2001.

Math Genius

Elwood Green

BEFORE YOU READ: What does it mean to be a ***genius*** at something? Look up the definition of autism spectrum disorder or read the definitions on pp. 12-13.

Good Programs Have Helped Me

I like having autism. I have ***genius*** math skills. If somebody tells me a date years ago, I can tell them what day of the week it was. Even though I am good at math, I have a hard time staying on a budget. I need help for that and other things.

I have attended many good programs that help me. According to the CDC, there are 75 million people in the world with ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder). Many of them have missed out on good programs.

One good program for me is Literacy Chicago. I go to school four days a week. I am learning to read and write. My church supports me to reach my goals. My Pastor told me that the church will give me a free car. I have my license, and I know how to drive. I am waiting for my car.

Communication Is Hard

I have a hard time communicating. Many people with autism do not have good social skills. Bad people will scam people with autism. They will act like jerks and try to take all our money. We need to be careful.

I Like Being with My Family

I was in foster care until I was 18 years old. My foster parent was not nice. We did not get along. She didn't help me. When I was in foster care, I went to my mom and dad's home every weekend. They took me camping, and we went fishing on a boat. I had a negative experience in my foster home. I loved being with my parents on the weekends.

After I turned 18, I started living with my mom and dad every day. I'm so happy that I live with them every day. One day, we went to Six Flags. I went on a rollercoaster. I screamed, but I liked it. My family did a lot of fun things that day. Some people with autism might have a harder time on a rollercoaster.

I have real family memories. Not everyone with autism can be with their families. I am lucky to be able to be with my family.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What are some of the support systems Elwood has in his life? Which ones have worked well and which ones have not worked well for him?

2. According to Elwood, what are the gifts and challenges of having autism?

3. Do the writing activity in the box on p. 17.

Elwood Green is a student at Literacy Chicago in Chicago, Illinois.

Diagnosed with Autism at Age 35

Deborah Allen

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Read about the definitions of autism on pp. 12-13. What do you think the consequences would be of receiving an autism diagnosis at age 35 instead of as a child?

2. Do you have an experience (or does someone in your family have the experience) of it taking a long time to get a diagnosis? Describe what that was like.

I Didn't Fit In

I grew up having autism, but I didn't know it. Looking back, I think that's why I hated going to school. If it had been up to me, I would have dropped out at age seven. School felt like a waste of time, and I felt unhappy there. I didn't fit in with other students. I couldn't communicate. I felt dumb and depressed. In addition to those feelings, my family moved often, and adjusting to new schools, teachers, and classrooms was difficult. At age 15, I stopped going.

Found a Way to Get My GED

When I was 24, I started thinking about going back to school to get my GED. I wanted to gain more confidence. I enrolled at a community college for GED classes when I was 25. Going back to school was difficult. I was still dealing with familiar challenges from childhood—things like poor communication, emotional strain, and the persistent sense that I didn't measure up.

Thankfully, my instructors were very nice and supportive. They helped me in specific ways. For example, they showed me how to sign up for accommodations to get extended time on my exam. I had to study hard for my tests, and I failed several times. It took a lot of hard work and help from my instructors for me to pass my GED. I am a high school graduate, class of 2001.

A Life-Changing Moment

After earning my GED, I decided to continue my education at the community college. My first class was Diversified Career Training, which involved goal-setting, job interviewing, and budgeting. I learned some valuable communication skills through role-playing. Over time, I gained confidence in socializing with people. I learned how to develop a positive mindset. I got to practice conversation, and I learned the importance of putting my thoughts and feelings into the conversation.

At age 35, a ***life-changing*** moment came during a conversation with one of my teachers, who had a PhD in psychology. I told him I was struggling—I felt depressed, emotionally stressed, tired of feeling dumb, and full of anger. He suggested I may be on the autism spectrum, and maybe I should go to counseling to learn how to manage life with this condition. That small moment was like a light switching on in my mind. His advice opened me up to new tools and a different way of seeing and doing things.

Finally Getting Help

The college offered short-term counseling, so I signed up and gave it a try. After 35 years of holding in my feelings and not having a voice, I finally began to face the anger I had carried for so long. Counseling wasn't easy, but with effort and honesty, it helped me work through that pain.

Along the way, my communication and social skills improved, and I started to build self-confidence. From there, my life moved in a more positive direction. I no longer feel defined by my disability. Instead, I'm defined by my strength to overcome challenges, my ability to grow, and my determination to achieve. It felt like leaving an old life behind and starting a new one.

I thank the Lord for these programs and the encouragement from my instructors to continue learning. Now, I'm taking a writing class. It is all part of my plan to write my own happy ending.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. How did it affect Deborah that she grew up having autism but didn't know it?

2. What are the specific ways Deborah got help from adult education programs? Take it further and share this resource with your program: The Basic Disability Screenings for Adult Education Program Use, published by SABES.

3. Deborah describes a ***life-changing*** moment she had when she was talking to one of her teachers. Have you ever had a life-changing moment in your adult education program? Describe it to a partner and then write about it.

Deborah Allen is a sister and caretaker to her special needs brother. She has worked as a cashier and self-checkout monitor at a grocery store for over 28 years. She studied for her GED from 1992 to 2001 at Seminole State College in Sanford, Florida. In 2023, she enrolled in Essential Education's online Job Ready program and earned certificates in the Work Essentials and Computer Essentials courses. She plans to continue her education.

Write Your Own Essay Using these Four Stories about Autism

The stories on pp. 12-17 are all by adult learners with autism. This google doc (https://tinyurl.com/writeaboutautism, also linked via the QR code) is a graphic organizer you can use to collect details from the stories. Use one of the following prompts and write an essay.

1. **According to the authors, what are some gifts and challenges for adult learners with autism?**
2. **What are some key features of adult education classrooms and programs that support adult learners with autism?**

Once you decide on the topic of your essay, follow these steps:

1. **Develop a thesis.**
2. **Gather evidence from the stories to back up your thesis.**
3. **Organize the evidence into paragraphs.**
4. **Use quotation marks for direct quotes.**
5. **Cite your sources.**
6. **Write a draft, get feedback, and re-write.**

ADHD: A Challenge and a Gift

Maria del Carmen Garcia

BEFORE YOU READ: ADHD stands for Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. (Read the box on p. 10 to learn more.) Notice the title of this piece. What do you think might be the challenges and the gifts of ADHD?

A Silent Disorder

Have you ever felt different? I have felt different in many ways. All my life, I tried to understand myself. I experienced my world very differently than other people. I did not fit in anywhere, not even at home. Many things were happening inside of me, and I couldn't understand them. It turns out, I have Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is a silent disorder that has a big effect on daily life.

Isolation

The hardest times were when I stuttered as a child. That was the first time I felt rejected, even by my family. At school, I didn't have any friends, not only because kids laughed at me, but because I distanced myself from them. I thought they would hurt my feelings. Speech therapy helped me improve my stutter, but I was no longer interested in making friends. Even at home, I felt alone. Family is a strong word. Family is supposed to give you support, love, respect, and acceptance, but I didn't have any of that. They always reminded me that I was weird.

A Diagnosis and New Understanding

Finally, as an adult, I was diagnosed with ADHD. Now I understand myself better. I see how this condition shows up in my life. For example, not to brag, but I have been awarded Employee of the Month and Employee of the Year multiple times at my job. You might be impressed by this accomplishment. You might think, "Oh, she must enjoy her work." But it is not all good. I am a "workaholic." Because of my ADHD, I bring many emotions to my work: anxiety, perfectionism, obsessive behavior, hyperactivity, and hyper-responsibility, to name a few.

Most importantly, I feel depressed. The depression comes from feeling like I can never do enough. I put everything I have into being the best for others. But I can't be there for myself. Therefore, I never get a break. Most of the time, I feel overwhelmed and burned out. Sometimes, I cannot get out of bed. I am overcome with emotions. My life is like a roller coaster of intense frustration and sensitivity.

Energetic and Persistent

I do not hate my life. Even though I have bad times and I face many challenges every day, my condition also encourages me to do things that I am proud of. I am energetic and persistent. For example, I sat down to write this essay, and I cannot stop writing. I overflow with creativity. I am finding ways to tell my story. I cannot stop writing, and I can be here at my desk all day. I can watch the sunset and everything is okay. I enjoy it. I know I am a good person, not a weird lady.

Coexisting with My Condition

I have come a long way. For many years, I wondered why others would not accept me. But my therapist taught me that that is not the best question for me. My therapist encouraged me to ask, “What do I have to do to accept myself?” She told me, “Nothing is wrong with you.”

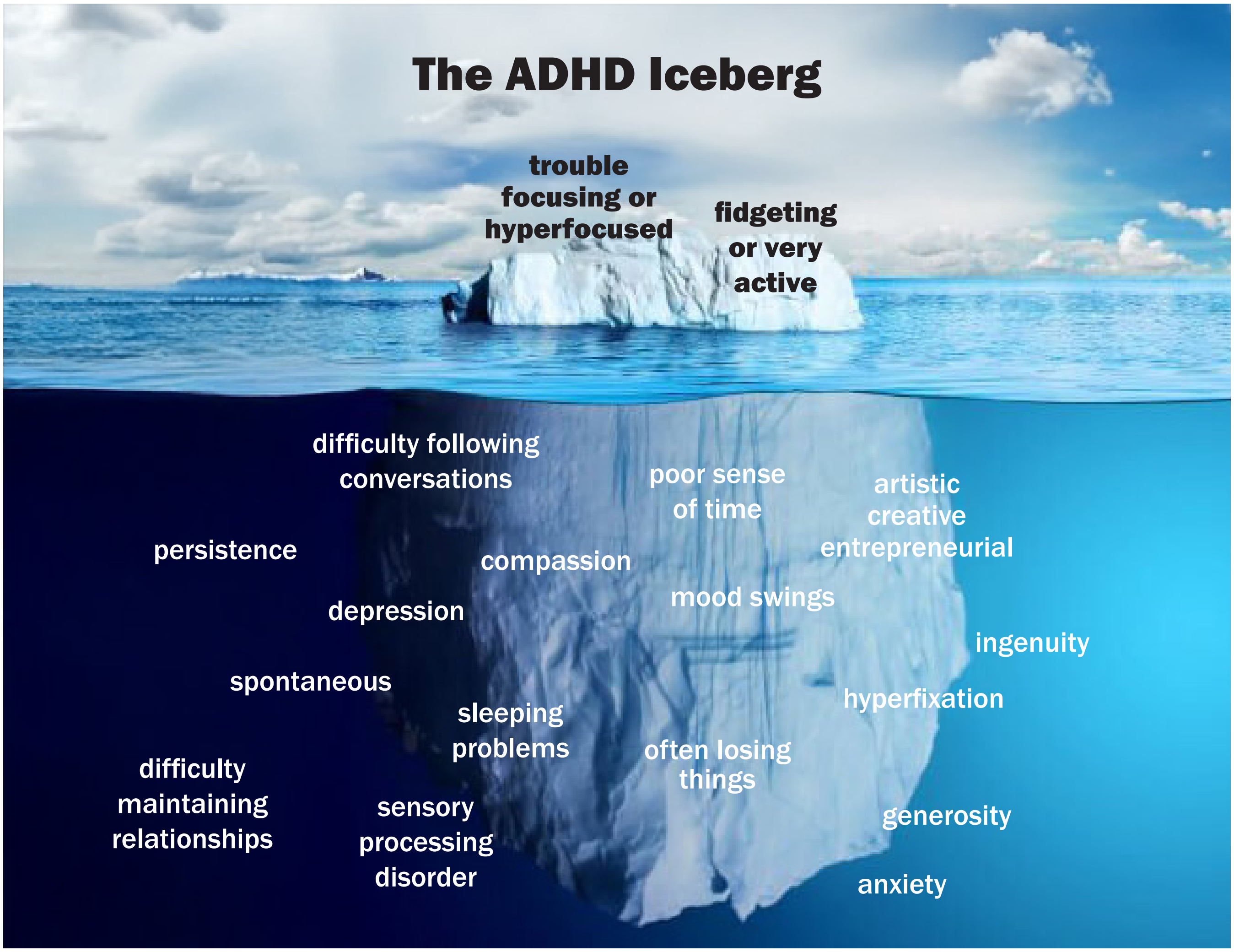
ADHD is an incurable condition, but you can learn to coexist with it. I practice Qi Gong and Tai Chi to try to balance my mind and body. I pray and do special breathing exercises when I have an anxiety attack. These practices help me. Every day, I face a lot of challenges. But I am learning how to change bad moments into good experiences. The most important thing is to trust myself and move forward. Have you ever felt this way?

AFTER YOU READ:

1. The author says that winning Employee of the Month is not necessarily a good thing for her. Why?

2. Study the image below. What does ADHD look like on the surface? And what hides below?

Maria del Carmen Garcia is a student at Ysleta Community Learning Center in El Paso, Texas. She is a hardworking single mother who shows unwavering resilience and perseverance. Her goals in life are to continue chasing her dreams, to inspire her daughter to chase her dreams, and to be a worthy role model in her community.



My Disability is Invisible:

Fibromyalgia and my Educational Journey

Cindy López

BEFORE YOU READ:

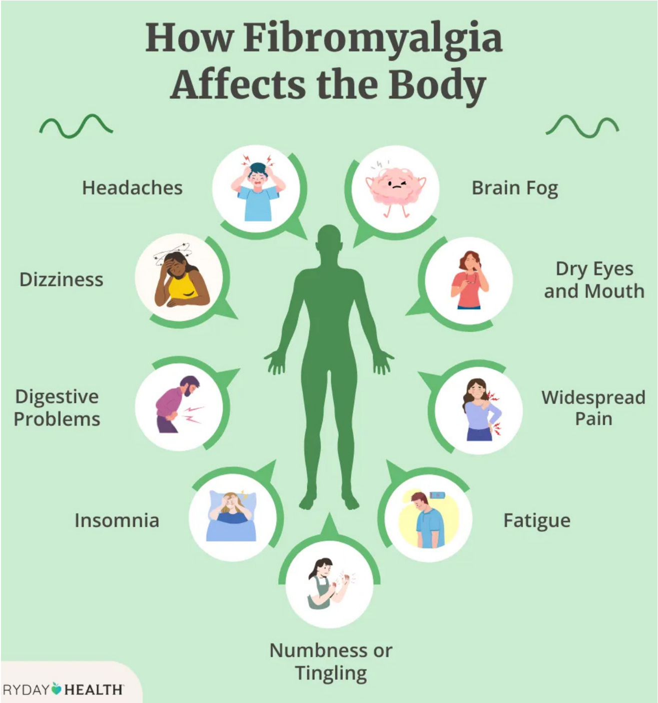
1. What is an invisible disability? What do think are the consequences of having your disability be invisible?

2. Learn about fibromyalgia in the diagram below.

You Can't See My Struggle

Sometimes, you can easily see that a person has a physical disability. But what about those of us who have invisible disabilities? People don't realize what we are going through and how we are struggling to manage our disabilities.

Fibromyalgia changed my life in a negative way. Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition with many symptoms. Chronic pain, anxiety, depression, sleeping problems, fatigue, and learning difficulties are the most common symptoms.



Source: https://www.everydayhealth.com/fibromyalgia/guide/symptoms/

I experience all of these symptoms, and so fibromyalgia has affected my education. Having a lot of pain makes me feel like I cannot concentrate when I am in class or doing my assignments. It also affects my short-term memory and makes it difficult to express my thoughts.

Sometimes I feel so tired that I want to give up. But I feel committed to my goals, so I have found alternative ways to continue studying. If I take online classes I try to make sure there are no distractions around me. When I do not remember something that the teacher explained, I go to Canvas and look at the notes. (Canvas

Five Common Accommodations for People with Fibromyalgia

Accommodation	Work Setting	School Setting
Flexible scheduling	Flexible start times, work-from-home options, or adjusted hours to manage energy levels and pain flares	Extended time for assignments, flexible attendance policies, or alternative class times
Physical environment adjustments	Ergonomic chair, adjustable desk height, proper lighting, and temperature control	Comfortable seating, access to quiet spaces, and classroom temperature adjustments
Break modifications	More frequent or longer breaks to rest and manage pain and fatigue	Extended breaks between classes, rest periods during long exams, or quiet break spaces
Task modifications	Reduced physical demands like lifting or standing, or breaking large projects into smaller parts	Note-taking assistance, audio recordings of lectures, or alternative assignment formats
Communication support	Written instructions instead of verbal-only directions, and advance notice of schedule changes	Extended deadlines, email communication with instructors, and clear written expectations

is our online learning system.) I also use apps such as Google calendar that are very helpful to remember school assignments, and other activities. I always make sure to do all my homework carefully and on time. I try to get good grades. On the other hand, I try not to feel stressed about sometimes getting a bad grade. It happens. I just have to keep going.

School systems should do more for students with disabilities. For example, the school should make sure that students know about the resources that the college has to support them. The school should communicate better about all of its health promotion activities. Also, the school could raise awareness that disabilities exist everywhere, even when you can't see them. Although fibromyalgia isn't visible, it is a disability too, and it can definitely change your life. However, it does not have to stop you from achieving your goals.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What do you infer Cindy would like people to know about her?

2. According to Cindy, what should schools do to support students with disabilities?

3. What accommodations do you think schools should provide? Read the chart above and add your own ideas.

Cindy López is a 29-year-old Cuban native currently living in Sonoma County, California. She has been an ESL student Santa Rosa Junior College for over two years. Cindy graduated as a doctor in Medicine from the University of Matanzas in Cuba, and is now completing the required coursework to apply to a nursing program in the U.S. She is dedicated and persistent; she loves learning and inspiring others.

Anxiety Makes It Hard to Learn

Tania Guadalupe García Ruiz

Image in the public domain from: https://itoldya420.getarchive.net/amp/media/understanding-anxiety-d0d8c4

BEFORE YOU READ: Note that feeling ***anxious*** (adjective) is different from having ***anxiety*** (noun). ***Anxiousness*** (noun) is usually a temporary state. For example, you feel ***anxious*** before you take a test. ***Anxiety*** is a deeper and longer-term and more intense experience. Have you ever felt ***anxious*** or had ***anxiety***? If you have, describe it.

Anxiety Is a Real Problem

Sometimes society does not see ***anxiety*** as a real problem, but in my opinion, it is. Since I was a child, I have been very shy and introverted. It looked like I just wanted to be alone. But, in fact, I had ***anxiety***. Having ***anxiety*** has made it hard for me to be a student. But I have been learning how to manage it.

Shy Child

Normally, kids are very active, but in my case, I never moved from my seat. I was a very quiet girl. When the teacher did "roll call," it was hard for me to say, "Here." My classmates did not see me as a "normal" child, so they often did not include me. This made it harder for me to try to talk to them. I developed the habit of not socializing.

Meeting Other Kids Like Me

In middle school, everything was different. There were more classmates. On the first day of school, I felt very alone. But then, I found classmates like me. They started to talk with me. Some of them were shy like me and had social ***anxiety***. Others were extroverts. It helped me a lot to be around different kinds of kids.

In middle school, we needed to do group projects. It was good to work as a team because I began to feel that I was not alone. I felt supported and confident. However, when it was time to share our presentation with the class, I got very nervous.

Pounding Heart and Sweating Hands

I remember one presentation where I felt so much ***anxiety*** that I wanted to cry. I don't know what happened because I was very prepared. I had studied hard, and I knew what to do. But it didn't matter. As my team waited for our turn to present, I got more and more upset. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to say. My heart was pounding, my hands were sweating, and my ears were not working. I couldn't hear anything except a roaring noise in my head.

When it was my turn, I couldn't remember anything, and I wanted to cry. So, I needed to ask the teacher to postpone my presentation. The teacher looked at me and tried to talk to me. She said it was fine. At the end of the class, she asked me what happened, and I told her. She was very understanding. She said she could give me another job to do, so I did not have to present in front of the class.

After class, my friends asked me what happened, and I told them. They were very compassionate with me. They helped me see how important it is to have people who support and help you.

I've Come a Long Way

Now, I still feel a little ***anxious*** when I need to speak in public, but I am doing much better. I learned to manage my ***anxiety*** by trusting myself and knowing I am prepared. If my mind goes blank and my heart races, I take slow breaths and remind myself it will pass. I focus on the present moment so I don't get distracted. Even if I feel nervous, I know others may not notice. I know I will continue to improve. I am proud of my progress. I went from feeling too shy to say "here" when answering roll call, to being able to stand in front of others and give a presentation.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. In what ways has ***anxiety*** shown up in Tania's life? What are some of her strategies for managing it?

2. If you feel ***anxious*** or have ***anxiety***, how do you manage it? Collect your strategies and your classmates' strategies in a Google doc or in a slideshow and share them with others.

Tania Guadalupe García Ruiz was a student at Ysleta Community Learning Center in El Paso, Texas. She graduated and was able to validate her college degree from Mexico. She now works at YCLC. Tania enjoys spending time with her family and her dog, who is part of the family too.

Anxiety Should Not Stop Us

We Can Manage It, And Teachers Can Support Us

Briceida Garcia

BEFORE YOU READ: What does it mean to ***manage*** a health condition? Do you or someone you know have a health condition to manage? How do you (or they) do it?

For me, anxiety is not easy. Sometimes I can't think or I overthink. Sometimes I have the sensation that I am scratching myself. Sometimes I scratch until I hurt myself, leaving scars.

These days, I have been able to ***manage*** my anxiety well. I do breathing exercises to calm myself down a little. Another strategy I use to calm myself is to put a hair tie on my wrist. When I have the urge to scratch, I will pull at the hair tie instead. If I don't have a hair tie, I will try to find a different activity to distract myself (playing with my baby, reading, watching television).

When I manage my anxiety, I can do more things. For example, I can do simple things like ask a teacher for help. I ask for help whenever I don't understand what the teacher is saying. I also ask for the teacher to clarify what they are saying and repeating directions if necessary. I can do more activities with the other students in class. I worked on group projects and had group discussions with the other students.

Anxiety does not have to be a disability. If you have a class where the teachers support you, then you can still learn. If you do the work wrong or the work piles up, you should be able to ask for help. The teachers should be understanding.

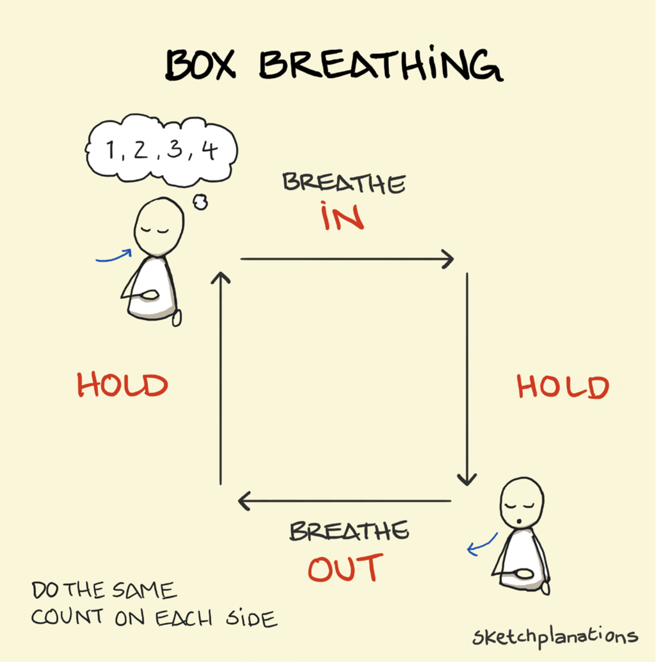


Image: CC BY-NC 4.0 from https://sketchplanations.com/box-breathing

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What specific strategies does Briceida use to manage her anxiety?

2. Read the story, "Anxiety Makes It Hard to Learn," on pp. 22-23. What does Briceida have in common with the author of that story? What is different?

3. According to both authors, what can teachers and schools do to help students manage anxiety? Write a letter to your program director asking what accommodations the program has for students with anxiety.

Briceida Garcia is a student at the Adult High School Credit Diploma Program at Plainville Adult and Continuing Education in Plainville, Connecticut. In her spare time, she enjoys television shows, reading, and participating in school-based community events. When she's not at school, she's raising her beautiful daughter.

A Woman with Bipolar Asks:

Does Anyone Fully Understand?

Jacquelin Bliss

BEFORE YOU READ: ***Manic depression*** is when you have periods of ***mania*** and periods of ***depression***. Look at the chart on the right and discuss.

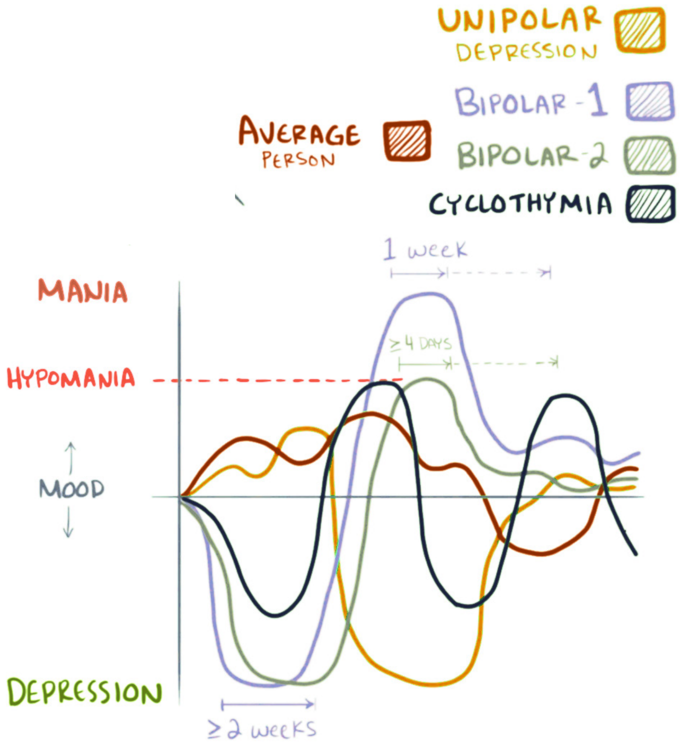
Growing up was tough. I could never figure out why I wasn't like other kids. I wasn't diagnosed until 10 years ago when I was in my early twenties. I have Bipolar type 1, which is sometimes known as ***manic depression***. Mental illness can be very traumatic for a person and their family.

In school, I had trouble remembering what my teachers taught me. I got frustrated and this led to "flip-out episodes" and even self-harm. Then I felt mad at myself for not being able to control myself. I would talk down to myself and blame myself. Math was very hard for me. It got to the point where I would think about not living because I couldn't understand math like other students could. It was really sad because all I ever wanted was to be "normal" like everybody else.

No one knew what was wrong with me. My parents thought I was just acting out. I went to numerous counselors. Doctors put me on and off medication. Some medication made me feel more depressed to the point where I stopped talking. Other medications made me feel hyper.

Finally, they found the right medications for me. Thank God! Today, if I miss taking my medication or I miss a session with my therapist, I am pretty much a ***train wreck***. I can't focus. I get distracted. My anxiety gets worse. My depression makes me feel like I cannot get out of bed.

Now, as an adult, I can pretty much handle my episodes or outbursts. Of course, I need to be on my medication. Some days are worse than others, but I get through them now just fine because I know my own red flags and triggers. Help and good support keeps me grounded.



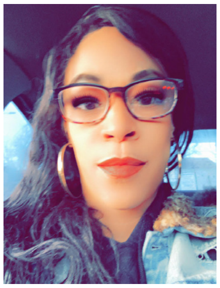
Describe what you see in the chart above. Source: https://www.togrowanotherday.com/general-overview

However, to this day, I don't think my family fully understands what it's like to have a mental illness. But they do try and they do support me, and that's what counts the most.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what helps her manage her mental health today?

2. What does the author mean when she says she is a train wreck? (See p. 9 for more information on metaphors and similes.)



Jacquelin Bliss is a student at Westbay Community Action Adult Education Academy in Warwick, RI. She loves to inspire people and be outgoing. She is a talented illustrator, and she would love to work as a clothing designer.

Children Who Get Suspended

Race, Gender, and Disability are Significant Factors

Andjela Kaur

Looking at the Data

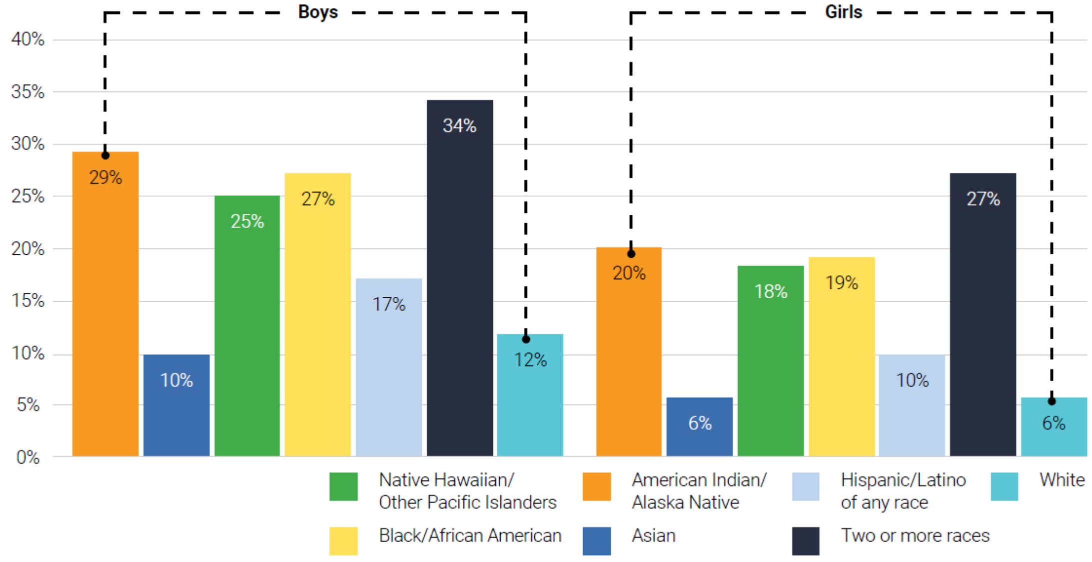
Social scientists sometimes use statistics to document and explain the world around us. Look at the graph below and think about what it shows. Here are some questions that may guide your thinking:

1. What do the bars represent? What is being measured?
2. Which group has the highest suspension rate and which has the lowest?
3. Which are the tallest and shortest bars in each section and what do they represent?
4. What's the difference between the left side and right side of the graph?

When I look at the graph, I notice that boys get suspended way more than girls in every racial group. I see that Black boys have the highest rate at 34%, American Indian boys are next at 29%, and white boys have the lowest rate at 12%. I also see that girls follow a similar pattern but with lower numbers overall. Black girls still have the highest rate at 27%, while white girls have the lowest at 6%.

When I read these numbers, I wonder why this is happening. Why are Black boys and girls more often suspended than white boys and girls? Why are boys overall suspended more often than girls?

Students with disabilities receiving out-of-school suspensions by race/ethnicity and gender



Source: Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities. (2020). Significant disproportionality in special education: Current trends and actions for impact. https://ncld.org

But then, when I pay even closer attention to how these numbers connect, I see that Black girls with disabilities (27%) get suspended more often than white boys with disabilities (12%). Think about that: even though boys usually get in trouble more than girls, race seems to matter more than gender here. Why is that?

Historical Context

In my work, I read a lot about history. So, when I try to understand why Black girls get suspended more than white boys, I think about a long and ugly history in the United States when Black people were without any good reason thought of as less capable and more disobedient. For over 100 years, some people used fake science called "eugenics" to claim that certain races were naturally more violent or less intelligent. They also said people with disabilities were "defective." These ideas were used to justify terrible treatment of people of color and people with disabilities. Because of eugenic thinking, many people have lost their basic rights.

Even though we know eugenics was wrong, those old ideas might still influence how people think today. When teachers and principals see certain students as "more likely to cause trouble," they might be unconsciously following those old, harmful stereotypes. Sometimes, even researchers who create research by dividing people into demographic groups could be using this old eugenic thinking.

Current Factors

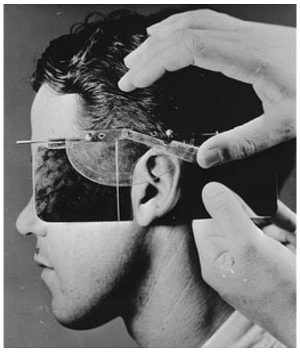
Although it is important to look back at history and seek explanations, I am also careful to note that discrepancies like these exist in our world today. Health scientists say that these suspension patterns might also reflect what they call "social determinants of health."

Social determinants of health are the conditions where people live, work, and go to school that affect their wellbeing. Students

What Is Eugenics?

Eugenics is the belief that you can breed for certain qualities. If you do this, you can "improve" future generations. It is a discredited theory that is rooted in racist and ableist ideas about who is "fit."

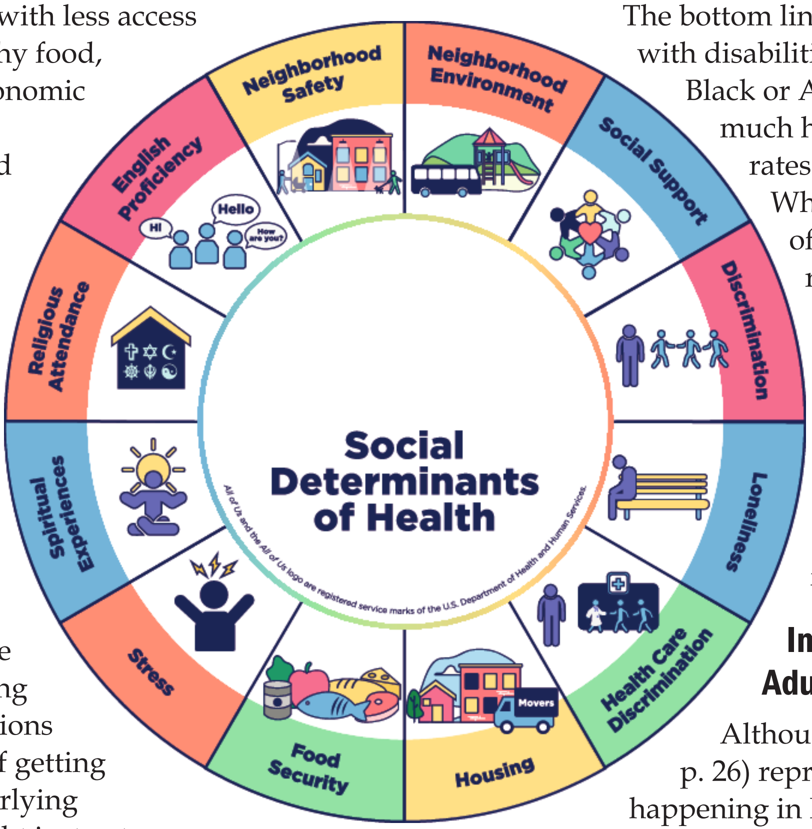
In the U.S., eugenics led authorities to forcibly sterilize people with disabilities, people in prison, people of color, and poor white people. Carrie Buck (above left) was sterilized in 1924 because authorities said she was "feebleminded."



In Germany in the 1930s and 40s, Nazis promoted the idea that Jews were an inferior race. They measured body parts to identify traits of a "superior" race of humans. This kind of racist thinking, was the "science" behind the Holocaust. It was based, in part, on the practices promoted by racist scientists in the U.S.

Sources: https://www.genome.gov/genetics-glossary/Eugenics; https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/; https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/buck-carrie-1906-1983/; https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism from communities with less access to healthcare, healthy food, safe housing, or economic opportunities may face more stress and trauma. This stress can affect behavior and learning in ways that might lead to more school discipline.

For example, a student dealing with housing instability, food insecurity, or community violence might have trouble concentrating or controlling emotions at school. Instead of getting help for these underlying problems, they might just get suspended. This creates a cycle where the students who need the most support get pushed out of school the most.



Using Data to Inform Decisions?

Finally, statistics like these should help us reflect on our policies and perhaps change them. For example, schools could make new rules that aim to lessen the racial discrepancy in their punishments.

However, we should be careful about what statistics can and can't tell us. Numbers can hide important details, like what actually happened before each suspension, or whether schools tried to help these students in other ways first. Statistics can also reflect the biases of the people collecting the data or making the decisions that create the numbers. Just because we can measure something doesn't always mean we understand why it happens, but it does often confirm or show that something is happening.

The bottom line is that students with disabilities who are also Black or American Indian face much higher suspension rates than white students. Whether this is because of unfair treatment rooted in historical prejudices or other factors, it means these kids are missing more school time, which could hurt their education and their futures.

Implications for Adult Education

Although the graph (on p. 26) represents what is happening in K-12 schools, we can see how this connects to adult education. Many adults who come to adult education programs are there because they were pushed out of regular school as kids, often through the same unfair discipline patterns we see in this graph. Black and American Indian adults with disabilities might be more likely to need adult education not because they chose it, but because they got suspended so much as kids that they never finished school properly.

For some students, walking into an adult education classroom can bring back painful memories. A Black man with a learning disability might remember being labeled as a "troublemaker" in middle school and getting suspended for behaviors that were really just signs he needed help. A woman might recall feeling like teachers never believed in her abilities and always expected her to fail. These students often carry shame about not finishing school, even though the system failed them, not the other way around. They might feel nervous about speaking

An adult education classroom at workplace-based program in Boston. In your opinion, what makes a classroom welcoming to adults returning to school?

up in class, worry that they're "not smart enough," or expect to be treated unfairly again.

Many of these students might have bad memories of school and might not trust teachers or feel confident about learning. The same old biases that led to unfair suspensions can still show up in adult classrooms too. Teachers might expect less from certain students or make assumptions about what adults with disabilities can do.

Many people in adult education programs are there because they were pushed out of school as children through these same unfair discipline practices. We need to recognize that when students struggle, it's often because the system has failed them, not because they have failed. Only by addressing these deep-rooted issues can we give every student a real chance to succeed.

Source: Image on the previous page is from: https://aahd.us/2022/05/all-about-the-social-determinants-of-health/

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, why is data about race, disability, and childhood suspension rates relevant to adult education?

2. Study and discuss the Social Determinants of Health chart. How do you think these social issues affect health?

3. If you were an adult student who got suspended a lot as a kid, how would you feel walking into your first adult education class?

4. How can teachers help adult students who have bad memories from school feel supported?

Andjela Kaur is a disability studies scholar currently working as an Assistant Teaching Professor at Penn State. Previously, she worked in adult education and community mental health settings as a teacher, vocational counselor, program manager, and ADA coordinator.

New Experience With My Daughter's Diagnosis

Magdalena Reyes

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. ***Diagnosis*** (noun) is when you or a doctor figure out the name of the condition or disease you have. For example: *I was tired all the time, and I didn't know why. The doctor finally gave me a* ***diagnosis****. She said I have Lyme disease.*

2. Were you ever surprised or scared by a ***diagnosis*** in your family? Try using ***diagnosis*** and the verb form (***to diagnose***) in sentences.

At First, I Was Scared

How would you feel if you got a note from your child's teacher saying that your daughter had something wrong with her?

When my daughter was nine years old, the school met with me to talk about why my daughter was having problems in school. She was bored during some activities but full of energy for other activities. Then the teacher told me that my daughter might have ADHD and needed to go to a specialist. At first, this scared me because I didn't know what it was. I had a lot to learn.

Meeting with a psychologist was new for me. I was nervous because in my culture, I had never heard of ADHD. And I had never visited a psychologist. I thought that it was for people who were crazy, and I felt sad about the diagnosis. I have a friend who explained to me that many children have this problem and that medications can help. But I was still scared.

In my country, we did not think a child like this is a problem. The elders said this child is smart and creative and a hard worker. My grandmother told me that children like my daughter were allowed to do what they wanted to do. They would do very well in what they set out to do. That was years ago—a different time and place.

Looking for Ways to Help My Daughter

In the U.S., ADHD is treated as a problem. After some studies the doctor diagnosed her with ADHD. So, I started to look for ways I can help my daughter. I did not feel comfortable giving her medication. The doctor prescribed it, and I picked it up. But then I decided not to give it to her. I

What Is a 504 Plan?

A 504 plan removes barriers to learning. It provides accommodations that don't change what kids learn, just how they learn it. It's a common school support for kids with ADHD and other kinds of disabilities.

https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-a-504-plan.
Note: A 504 Plan is different from an IEP. See the box on p. 11 for more information about IEPs.

decided to change her routines. I made sure she exercised, slept well, and had only healthy food. However, I was very frustrated because I didn't see any change.

So, I talked with her. I said we needed to try the medication. I was afraid of how the medication would affect her, so I asked her to tell me how she was feeling. The first day was okay, but on the third day she had no energy. On the fifth day she was like a zombie. When I asked how she felt, she said, "Good." But that was not normal for my daughter. She was just "good"? Normally, she was full of energy and joy.

I thought, "Oh, no. This is not my daughter. I need my daughter back." So we started looking for other alternatives to medication. I found an organization in Santa Rosa that helps families and children. I attended the weekly meetings. They helped me with strategies to help my daughter. We worked together. We signed up for swimming class, Mexican folkloric dancing, and martial arts.

Many Strategies

In the house, I put notes for everything to remind her what she needs to do. For example, on the bathroom mirror, one note said, "Don't forget to brush your teeth." On the door, I put a note that said, "Did you wash your hands?" I put a bracelet on her wrist that said, "This is for you to help you remember to bring your jacket home from school."

We developed other strategies. For example, I made a little bag for her that she could carry on her shoulder. The bag contained all the important items she needed to remember to bring to school. When it was time to do her reading homework, I set the timer for 10 minutes. When the timer went off, she could move around or do something else. Then she would read again for 10 minutes. Even though she does not like to read, she understands why it is important in reading.

When my daughter started middle school, she got a 504 Plan. This plan is for children with learning differences. With this plan, she could get more time to finish her assignments. In high school she had problems because the 504 Plan ended. She didn't have enough time to finish her tasks, and her grades went down. Finally, she graduated from high school.

A Parent's Pride

She continued with her education. She went to college. Now she has a job, and she is very organized and smart. Now, she helps me with my education at SRJC. She is like my tutor. Every child is different. As parents, we have an important role to help our child succeed. I love my daughter and I am very proud of her.

Magdalena Reyes is a student at Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) in Santa Rosa, California. She is from Michoacán, Mexico, and she has been living in the U.S. for 27 years. She got her high school equivalency in 2019, and she is staying in school to improve her English.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Based on the text, how does Magdalena's perspective as a parent evolve over time?

2. Share a time your role as a parent or family member evolved over time. Try using presentation software (like Google slides) to tell the story. Use pictures and text.

3. Study how the author uses quotation marks. Write down some rules about how to use them.

4. What do you think of how the elders would have described someone like the author's daughter? (See the 4th paragraph.)

Help for Children

A Mother Finds Help for Her Own Child and, in the Process, Advocates for All Children

Angelica Lagos

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Look at the chart and read the definition of ***bipolar disorder*** on p. 25. Explain it in your own words. Why is it called "bi" + "polar"?

2. The ***state capitol*** is where the state congress meets to make laws (also known as ***bills***). Sometimes community members give ***testimony*** for or against the laws. This is called ***advocacy***.

Something Happened to My Daughter

I immigrated to the United States in 1999 with my oldest daughter Flor. She was three years old. She was a happy, friendly girl who loved animals. I wanted to give her a better education and more opportunities.

Flor grew up quickly. She did well in kindergarten and elementary school. But in high school, Flor started behaving strangely. I thought it was because of her age. I thought it would pass. One day while I was at work, the school counselor called me and told me my daughter was having problems. The next day, I went to my daughter's classroom and sat in the back of the room to watch. I didn't understand why my daughter couldn't stay still. She walked around the classroom and looked at everyone very anxiously. Then she told me that "they" were going to wait for her after school.

I spoke with my daughter's counselor about these threats, and I thought they would do something to keep her safe. The next day, my daughter didn't want to go to school because she knew "they" were going to hit her. She was nervous and anxious, but she went to school anyway. When class ended, two students were waiting for her, and they hit her. When the school called me at work again, I couldn't believe it. I had trusted them to keep her safe, but they let my daughter get hurt.

A member of SKCE Equality gives testimony about how school policies impact children. Photo from https://www.skcequality.org/program/education-advocacy/

Finally, A Diagnosis

My daughter was feeling ill. She didn't sleep well at night and started hearing voices and seeing strange things. The next day, I took her to the emergency room. She was very ill. She didn't sleep, she did not recognize me, and she said everyone was bad and she didn't trust anyone. She was in two different hospitals for five weeks. The doctor diagnosed her with severe ***bipolar disorder***.

It's difficult when you have a child with a mental illness. I didn't understand anything about the education system or where to look for extra help for my daughter. And the teachers did not understand my daughter. They thought she was rebellious and didn't want to study. My daughter ended up hating school, the teachers, and the students. Then the school expelled my daughter. I think they didn't want to deal with her.

Advocating for Our Children

I would like to invite all families with disabled children to join the fight for better support for our children. We should call on our elected representatives to make our schools better. There should be mental health professionals at the schools, so that students with special needs or disabilities can get their needs met.

In March 2023, I went to the ***state capitol*** in Oregon with the Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality (https://www.skcequality.org/). I gave my ***testimony*** so that they would pass a law that would give more funds for mental health. Our ***advocacy*** worked, and the ***bill*** was approved. Now there is more funding to support families with disabilities.

If my daughter had had the proper support from mental health professionals, the school would have detected the symptoms of ***bipolar disorder*** and not expelled her from school. She would have graduated and been able to go to college and achieve her goals.

Our Journey Has Been a Long One

For many years, she took medication and saw a therapist. She took medication to be calm, to sleep, and to wake up. My daughter's mood changed. She was sometimes sad and sometimes happy. She laughed, cried, and screamed. I didn't know when it was okay to talk to her. Everything bothered her. Her character changed. She was always afraid to go out. She couldn't be in the park or in public places. When we went out to a family birthday party, she never wanted to stay very long.

It took a long time for me to understand her illness. I loved her very much, but I was suffering right along with her. It drove me crazy that I couldn't help her. I am so grateful to God and my family who were there for me and my daughter during the most difficult times. I also thank all the health professionals and counselors who supported my daughter.

Today my daughter is doing well. Years of medication and therapy helped her. Now she doesn't take any medication or see a therapist. She is happily married and has three boys. One of the boys has autism, and he will start school in the fall. She has already found an organization to help him succeed. She knows what to do to help her son.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. The author says her journey with her daughter has been a long one. What are some of the key moments in the journey?

2. How did Angelica's desire to help her own child end up benefitting other children? Be specific.

3. Is there a bill or a law that you think would help your child and maybe other children in the community? Is there a community organization fighting for this law? If so, how can you connect with them? Write a letter to your congressperson explaining what you think about a current law. Find the name and address of your congressperson here: https://www.congress.gov/members

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Angelica Lagos is from Tulancingo, Hidalgo, Mexico. She is currently an ESOL student at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon. She likes to spend time with her four beautiful daughters. She volunteers at the daycare at her church and at Hope Station Community Services which helps those in need. She wants to go to college to learn more about how to help women and children.

Invisible Disease

My Daughter, the Type 1 Diabetes Warrior

Blanca Chavez

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Think about the different ways you can use the word ***hit.*** I ***hit*** the ball with a baseball bat. I got ***hit*** with a large bill. I got ***hit*** hard by the flu.

2. What do you think a "Type 1 Diabetes warrior" is? Read the box on p. 35 for more on diabetes.

We Got Hit

In 2020 when the Coronavirus hit the world, another disease hit my daughter.

My daughter Megan was only 11 years old when she was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. She almost died that year because her body collapsed with something called ***diabetic ketoacidosis***. She was in intensive care for a week. It was very painful. We didn't know anything about this disease. We thought it was our fault because we thought "diabetes" was related to a poor diet.

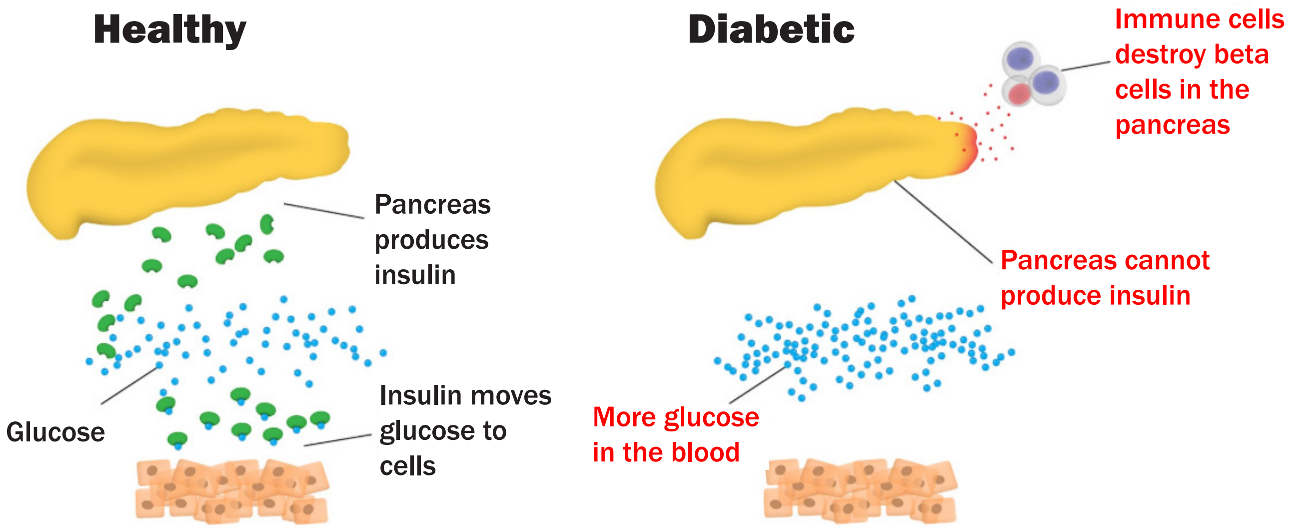
However, Type 1 Diabetes is not related to lifestyle. It is an ***autoimmune disease***. The immune system attacks cells in the pancreas, and then the pancreas doesn't produce enough insulin. The body needs insulin to process sugar. We needed to learn so much information in a short time. We had to learn how to check the sugar level in her blood and then give her the right amount of insulin. We felt overwhelmed and devastated. I wondered how I didn't notice that my daughter was sick. But diabetes can be invisible.

Supporting Our Warrior Daughter in School

To navigate this disease, we didn't just learn about how to manage it with medicine. We also had to learn how to support our daughter in school. We noticed that her teachers didn't know too much about this disease. Fortunately, our doctor told us she could get a ***504 Plan***. This is a document that describes the accommodations and modifications a school should provide to a student with disabilities.

We met with teachers and the nurse to create a plan that fits my daughter's needs. Now they know how to handle any emergency. They know that sugar highs and sugar lows can come in any moment. She needs to go to the nurse to check her sugar, and then she might need a snack or a dose of insulin. If her sugar is too high or too low, she can fall into a diabetic coma and die. She also needs to drink water and go to the bathroom

Type 1 Diabetes



Type 1 Diabetes is an autoimmune disorder. People usually get it when they are children. An autoimmune disorder is when your immune system attacks your body instead of defending it. Your pancreas makes insulin to help you process sugar in your blood. If you don't make enough insulin, the sugar stays in your blood instead of getting absorbed into your body, and you get high blood sugar, or diabetes. Diabetes can be treated with medication and diet and lifestyle changes. Type 2 Diabetes is not an autoimmune disorder. It develops slowly over time. It happens when your body doesn't use insulin properly, so your blood sugar levels go up.

Sources: https://www.myhealthexplained.com/diabetes-information/diabetes-articles/type-1-diabetes-prevention and https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/7104-diabetes

whenever she needs to. This disease is so unreal because in one moment you can see Megan playing around and in the next second, she can die if she doesn't monitor her sugar levels.

Going to school with an invisible disease makes Megan feel vulnerable. She has to deal with the sugar lows and the highs, she needs more time to complete tasks, and she has to deal with bullies. She told me she feels like she is ***walking on a tightrope*** all the time. This struggle has made my daughter Megan into a Type 1 Diabetes warrior. She has overcome all her limitations, and next year she will graduate from high school.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Look up ***diabetic ketoacidosis, autoimmune disease,*** and ***504 Plan*** and learn about them.

2. According to the author, what makes her daughter a warrior?

3. How did the author advocate for her daughter at school?

4. Have you ever had to advocate for your child at school? Describe it.

Blanca Chavez is a student at Ysleta Community Learning Center in El Paso, Texas.

My Big Gift

Gabriela Reyes

BEFORE YOU READ: Describe a time you advocated for your child. What did you do?

Something Was Not Right

This story is about my young son and me. He is my third child. When he was born, he needed to stay in the hospital for a couple of days because he would not eat. That was not a good sign. During his first two years, he learned to eat and crawl the same as his sisters. But I noticed he did not speak. That was the first ***red flag***. I knew something was not right with him.

When he started to walk, he fell a lot and that was the second ***red flag***. His ***development*** wasn't right, and it was time to look for help from a specialist. In Ciudad Juarez, where we lived, there were only two ***pediatric neurologists***, and the waiting list was very long.

A Diagnosis

Finally, we got an appointment with a doctor, and the ***diagnosis*** was ***developmental delay***. My son needed speech therapy and more tests. We didn't have insurance for my son, and we needed to pay for all the tests, appointments, and medicine. That was a very hard time for my family. We also needed to find a school for him. Private school was very expensive, so he started going to a regular kindergarten. I didn't see any progress in my son. I knew that I needed to find help from a different school and teachers.

I prayed to find a better life for him. I asked God, the universe, or anyone for an answer. I needed help to figure out how to move forward. After some time, I found the answer. It was a school called CAM in Mexico City. It is a special school for students with learning ***disabilities***. I met a wonderful teacher. Her name is Maritza. She taught me ***strategies*** and exercises to ***stimulate*** all the senses in my son's body and brain. It was hard work for me because I took him to therapy Monday through Friday, and I continued going to my job every day.

Joy in the Journey

This was the beginning of learning about Special Education. It is wonderful to learn about my son's condition. When I understand what he needs, then I can do more for him. It has been a beautiful journey for me and my family. I walk with other people that are going through the same thing, and we support each other. It is complicated, but there has been a lot of joy in this journey.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the article, how did Gabriela advocate for her son?

2. Note the vocabulary words in ***bold italics***. If you're not sure what they mean, use context clues to figure it out. Try using them in your own sentences.

3. Writing practice: Use this graphic organizer—https://tinyurl.com/parentsadvocate—also linked via the QR code below) to collect details from the stories on pp. 30-37. Write an essay about how parents advocate for their children.

Gabriela Reyes is a student at Ysleta Community Learning Center in El Paso, Texas. This piece was originally published in Issue 59 of The Change Agent.

Too Smart for School

Mari Arbach

BEFORE YOU READ: This story is *apocryphal*. It has been told many times, but the details are not accurate. Still, it is an interesting story. It teaches a lesson. Do you know any stories (or fables) that may or may not be true but that teach a lesson?

The Teacher Said He Could Not Learn

He was ten years old when he was expelled from school. His teacher said he was stupid and unable to learn. He was always distracted in class. He acted like he didn't hear what the teacher was saying. One day, the teacher handed him a letter asked him to deliver it to his mother. The letter was sealed.

The Mother Did Not Believe It

The child gave the letter to his mother. The letter said that the boy could not learn. He was expelled. When she read it, she was shocked and angry. However, the mother stayed calm. She did not show her anger. She told her son a ***white lie***. She said, "The teacher says he is sorry, but you are too smart for the school. You need a special school, so I will be your teacher here at home."

He Became a Famous Inventor

This mother became her son's teacher. She worked with him until he became a young man who filled the world with amazing inventions. He is the scientist Thomas Edison, the inventor of the electric light bulb and many other inventions.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. What is this story trying to teach us? What is a ***white lie***?

2. Read the box below and click on the link to find out more about Thomas Edison's life.

Mari Arbach is an adult education student at Oakton College in Des Plaines, Illinois.

What Really Happened?

Try researching Thomas Edison online and see what you can learn about him. Here is a fact-based version of the story you just read:

Edison was not a "good student." One teacher said he was "addled." This made his mother furious! She took him out of school and taught him at home. Years later, Edison said, "My mother was the making of me. She was so true, so sure of me, and I felt I had someone to live for, someone I must not disappoint." Edison was interested in science from an early age. He was fascinated by mechanical things and chemical experiments.

Source: https://www.loc.gov/collections/edison-company-motion-pictures-and-sound-recordings/articles-and-essays/biography/life-of-thomas-alva-edison/

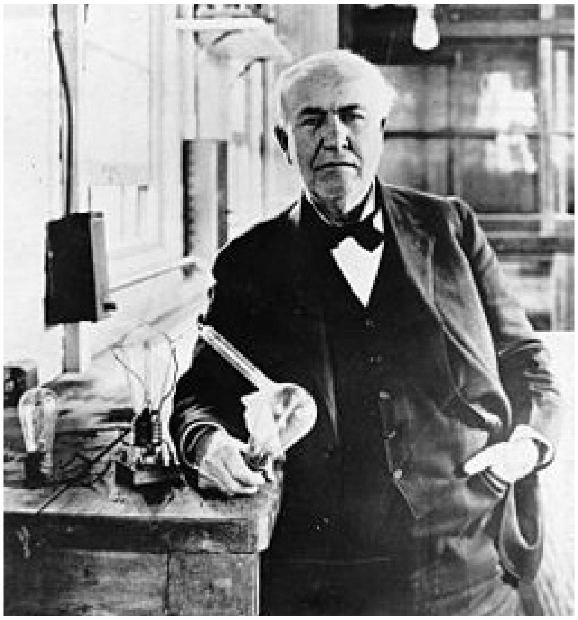


Photo from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/

Write for The Change Agent
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A small selection of the themes we have covered:

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Play

Math

Hair

Indigenous People

Career Pathways

Talking about Race

Pandemic