

LIVING IN A DIFFERENT WORLD

By Trevor Gunn

Growing up with a learning difference (LD) has, like many things in life, its ups and downs. I have found a thriving community of other kids with LDs and parents and administrators looking to help make life easier for us. I hope my experiences, coupled with those of the people around me, will help those “outside” the issue see and understand more.

Living with a learning difference is not an easy task. One of the biggest difficulties I have faced is the way teachers deal with LD kids. Since I was in kindergarten my parents and my school worried I might have a learning issue. When I was formally diagnosed in second grade, I, being only 8, didn't really understand even what an LD was. My teacher sat me down one day after school when the rest of the kids had left and told me to stop pretending. My teacher insisted that I was pretending to have an LD simply so I could get attention. Even today I still have to deal with teachers who have no resources or even a clue of how to handle kids with learning differences. I was infuriated recently when I heard a teacher tell a fellow classmate when he wasn't paying enough attention in class that “there are no jobs for special people.” Simple ignorance from teachers has been the biggest driving force in my struggle to overcome my problems. I want to succeed so that I can go back to these teachers that had no faith and gave up on me so I can show them that I could do it. But dealing with my peers is just as hard.

Telling a friend that I have learning differences is like telling him or her that I have some fatal disease, like cancer. How do you tell your friend a thing like that? For most of my life, my classmates have just called me stupid, told me I was an idiot because every couple days I would leave class for special tutoring. It happened so often that I just would tell people, yea, OK, I'm stupid, whatever, just to take the sting out of their words. When I was older

and was able to explain my LD in more depth, it was still awkward, and I always felt like people thought differently of me afterwards. It is impossible to describe how hard it is to explain my LD to my friends. “You have a learning disability? But I thought you were smart, Trevor.” Things like that have tormented me throughout school, the stigma of LD, the conviction that if you have learning differences, you can't be smart. I get to the point where I want to carry a list in my wallet of famous and successful people that have an LD, so I can say to them, see these people? They also have learning differences and look what they accomplished! But do I really have the right to get mad at other kids for not understanding? In school we are taught tolerance of those who are of different race, gender, or sexual orientation. But no one teaches kids about LDs.

When I try to learn, I run into some areas where I have to work harder than the rest of my class, and parts where I stumble and fall behind very easily. What I like to call my Rain Man skill has always been reading. I like to call it this because, like in the movie, it is the one thing I truly excel at over my peers. Since I entered high school I have been reading at a college level, far surpassing my classmates even my teachers at some points. Most people at school just assumed that since I could read so well and I liked it I must be smart, but since I don't always do well in school, I'm just lazy and don't apply myself.

One of my biggest issues I've dealt with in my high school years is taking notes. As soon as my pen hits the paper, my ears just go deaf. I was constantly falling behind because when I would write notes from the board, the teacher would be explaining them more in-depth and I would miss out on crucial information. So I tried several different strategies from just writing down the notes on the board and ignoring the teacher when they talked, to not taking any notes and losing points for not having the notes. It was basically a lose-lose situation for me. After I was kicked out of my first high school due to low grades, my parents got me a laptop for my new school. Being a nerd, I am able to type without looking and can hear what's being

said and take notes from the board at the same time. This has been a great help in school as having notes and having good note-taking skills are vital. I have noticed more and more that there are kids with learning differences who are using laptops, and they seem to be a wonderful tool that can aid many people.

When I talk to other kids with LDs I hear one subject constantly that torments them. Math. Math is one of the hardest subjects because it doesn't stay the same. In history, it's, "here is a book. Read it, remember it." In math, you have to learn the basic way to tackle a certain kind of problem or equation. It is not just $Ax + By = C$. It then becomes an infinite number of possibilities that are thrown at you. I absolutely cannot simply read a page or two with examples, understand what it is saying, and then apply it. I might as well be reading Chinese. I am, like the majority of people, a kinesthetic learner. I have to not just see something done, I need to do it too. I need to go to the board and do a problem and have someone work through it with me.

We need to find ways to help teachers help kids with LDs, and I think talking with the kids who have made it through school is the best way for teachers to learn. The things that would have helped me and the countless others like me are awareness and knowledge. As children are raised, parents are warned of many possible risks to their children like autism, chicken pox, and even now obesity. I think that parents and teachers need to become educated on the different LDs that are out there. The issues LDs cause vary from person to person, but there are basic problems that can be dealt with regardless of the case at hand. It is important to know different ways that you can help a student with LD. Basic strategies need to be implemented, like laptops for students, more one-on-one time with teachers, and possibly even revisions in basic teaching styles that do not necessarily benefit the majority of students.

The biggest thing that needs to start is communication. The biggest hurdle I have had to jump was getting to know what is "wrong" with me. Up until 5th or 6th grade I practically didn't know what an LD was. It wasn't until I was in high school that I was fully able to understand what my LD was, and that took my rifling through the file cabinet in our basement and scouring through all of the tests that I had taken over the years.

If your son or daughter has an LD, you have to make it clear to them what is going on. When they enter the school system, it is not only the responsibility of the parents to talk with the kids; it becomes even more the responsibility of the teachers. Teachers need to go the extra mile and really pay special attention to kids with LDs. One trend I have noticed with myself and others with LDs, is that we spend so much time being laughed at for constantly asking what are deemed "stupid questions," that we stop asking. We become these silent sufferers who, when the teacher asks if everyone understands the lesson, will simply nod our heads while we know that we don't. I believe that if my teachers had gone the extra mile with me, I would have done much better in school.

My story is only one of many in a vast sea of people with LDs. While my mind is unique to me, there are many others out there that deal with the same issues that I deal with. I hope that my story can inspire. Inspire those with an LD to keep going. Inspire teachers to want to help those who struggle day-by-day. Inspire the parent who might think there is something their child needs to get help with. We are our own community of sorts, and day-by-day, step-by-step, our voices will be heard, and we will prevail.