

Letter to the Editor

Dual Challenges

Tylar Matsuo*

Student at Maryland School for the Deaf, USA

DEAR EDITOR,

As a profoundly gifted 13-year-old child, I have from a young age experienced many challenges, including harassment and depression.

Furthermore, I was born hard of hearing, causing an increased amount of stress and a lack of confidence. These two special needs greatly impacted me, and caused social discrimination at school. I do not believe that the struggles I faced are unique to me, but instead the challenges faced by many gifted and hard of hearing children.

Despite all of the usual pediatric visits and an additional neurological exam, my deafness was not diagnosed until I was five years old; by contrast, my unusual intelligence was noted by every physician that I encountered from infancy. I began to have challenges with teachers in preschool. Not knowing of my lack of hearing, I was harshly criticized for interrupting and failing to follow directions. Such happened because I either did not know the teacher was talking or could not hear them give directions. I had trouble making friends, in part because there was no one in school that I could relate to, or hear. Furthermore, teachers repeatedly complained about my poor listening skills, a direct result of my deafness, which manifested itself in a multitude of behaviors that caused them to doubt my intellectual skills. After being diagnosed with a bilateral hearing loss in kindergarten, I wore hearing aids, and from third grade my teachers wore a linked microphone. My audiogram was provided to my teachers, along with instructions from audiologists advocating on my behalf. Unfortunately, my hearing aids did not increase the clarity of sounds, and my teachers had trouble accepting how hard it was for me to hear classroom discussions, especially since I grasped concepts taught in school so easily. By second grade, I suffered from stress headaches so severe that I had difficulties walking without stumbling at times. By fifth grade, self-motivated learning had caused me to advance to a level where I frequently noticed mistakes made by my teachers. Frustrated, I would correct my fifth grade teacher, who would in turn sharply criticize me in front of the class. All through that year, I learned nothing in the classroom, as my teacher claimed that I was no smarter than anyone else and needed no additional learning enhancement. I became a bit of an outcast to the other children, largely because of my complex choices for conversation topics. These struggles set up cycles of stress and harassment that eventually led to depression.

In sixth grade, my life changed dramatically. Upon receiving an IQ test score, along with recommendations from a Johns Hopkins

*Corresponding author

Tylar Matsuo, Student at Maryland School for the Deaf, USA, Email: tylar.matsuo@icloud.com

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University educational psychologist for me to be moved to the eighth grade advanced math class, no longer was my intelligence doubted. Instead, teachers embraced my enthusiasm to learn and accelerate academically, allowing me to advance to the fastest paced mathematics class available to the seventh grade. My peers were kinder and more accepting than in elementary school, but I still did not fully integrate into school social life, as I was unable to join conversations due to my lack of hearing. My deafness made it very hard for other children to effectively communicate with me; they would have had to tolerate me asking them for clarification or repetition of every other spoken sentence. By the end of the next year in seventh grade, students became competitive with each other academically and many were jealous of my effortless ability to excel in our classes. The school system had encouraged us to think that we are all equal in intellectual abilities, partly to inspire more effort on the part of the students. As a result, my every mistake, even in pronunciation, which was a struggle due to my deafness, was mocked. The stress of being under scrutiny eventually became a major contributing factor to my loss of self-confidence, and eventually, depression.

During the summer of seventh grade, I went to a Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth three-week sleep away academic camp. This camp was one of the best experiences I have had over the past few years, largely because of my interactions with other profoundly gifted children. The ability to occasionally meet and have in-depth conversations with other children functioning at my level was an experience rivaled by no other. It was so enjoyable that my depression was virtually eliminated during those three weeks. After this camp, and much thought, I transferred schools from the public middle school I had been attending to Maryland School for the Deaf, which turned out to be the best school that I have ever been in.

I have been in Maryland School for the Deaf for a few months now, and have become part of an accepting community. The teachers and my peers fully integrate me, despite my unusual interests and intensity towards academic topics. I skipped the last year of middle school, moving directly from seventh to ninth grade. I joined the school's Academic Bowl team and started learning new languages; something that I had decided was hopeless years ago when I tried to learn Japanese orally. I am now optimistic for my future.

It is not just me who struggles with these problems. Many hard of hearing children have told me that they suffered from

bullying in public schools, and one who is also gifted confided that she suffers from problems almost identical to my own. Although some get lucky and avoid the harsh torment of society, our minorities, including the hard of hearing, gifted, and many other groups, deserve more attention and respect in our education system. The deaf community would benefit greatly from a nationwide state funded network of schools for the deaf as I do from Maryland School for the Deaf. Such specialized schools prevent discrimination during the school day and allow for adaptive education and learning. Our nation's profoundly gifted similarly need their own state-funded special education schools, as the current public school curriculum and mandated requirements do not address their needs. Moreover, the social experience of meeting other children functioning at their level would help gifted children avoid pitfalls such as depression and isolation, and better enable this population to excel. Lack of accommodations to any minority group has severe consequences from the local to the national level. Requiring profoundly gifted

children to follow a standard public school curriculum, rather than providing special education that allows them to thrive, prevents bright minds from achieving their full potential. Similarly, many members of the deaf community still cannot access the services they need, and encounter bullying and disrespect while trying to learn. From my experience, we need improved training for educators to recognize uniqueness at both ends of the spectrum, from giftedness to physical disabilities, as well as improved infrastructure within the US education system for non-majority populations. Such a system would prevent discrimination during the school day, and enable learning for children at all levels. America needs its minorities, as everyone has something to offer, and the denial of services to children in need will not help our nation, but rather stymies innovation.

With regards,

Tylar Matsuo

Student at Maryland School for the Deaf, USA

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