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My Journey as a Parent with My Learning Disabled Child

A Celebration of Embodied Knowledge

Meeting the needs of students that learn differently than the majority is a challenge in our current educational environment. In actuality, none of us learn exactly the same. The children whose methods of learning differ greatest from the majority and are unable to conform to the traditional methods of learning are labelled with learning disabilities. Through a narrative approach, the author explores her experiences as a mother accompanying her son on his journey of learning. As he did not fit into the current educational model, with its strong emphasis on reading and writing, he was labelled with a learning disability. Drawing on the expertise of Sharon Abbey, Rachael Kessler, Parker Palmer and Celeste Snowber, how lived experiences develop embodied knowledge is explored. Sewing (Ball 17), connecting with nature (Snowber 217), and drawing (Yoshida 133) are examples of ways to develop embodied knowledge. These are not activities often connected with formal learning. Embodied knowledge is often not appreciated in a school system that places a high value on the ability to read and write. The worth of embodied knowledge has been underestimated. Embodied knowledge recognizes the rich knowledge base that arises from diversity. Much of a child's valuable knowledge is imparted at home with the mother playing an important teaching role. Understanding and acknowledging how embodied knowledge enriches our lives can be a source of strength to mothers struggling to help children who do not fit into traditional social structures in society such as the educational system.

The current school curriculum has been developed to meet the needs of the conventional majority of students. This is understandable as there is only one teacher for a class and the most effective use must be made of their time. As in society in general, processes are designed to meet the needs of the majority. But,

what about those minds who do not function the same as the majority? Accommodations exist for these people. However, they are just that, accommodations to the norm. In actuality, due to differences biologically and in environment, no one is the same as everyone else. The problems arise for those that are on the extreme periphery from the norm. These are the children who are labelled as “learning disabled.” As I reviewed my journey as a mother with my son as he struggled to succeed in an educational environment that did not meet his needs, I developed an awareness and appreciation of embodied knowledge.

I had not given much thought in regards to students whose learning styles lie outside the norm until I was faced with the realization that my son was one of those on the periphery. As he was my first child, I did not realize that he differed from the norm until he entered school.

I put my hand out to receive the handout the kindergarten teacher was giving me. As my son was playing with the toys at the other table, she was explaining to me how I could help him prepare for grade one next year. Patiently, she explained that he needed to practise his alphabet over the summer. She had listed some exercises in the paper. She said we needed to read more with him at home. I tried to explain the hours we had spent doing just that since he was just a baby. She didn't look like she quite believed me. She expressed surprise at how such an articulate child could have such a hard time connecting the sounds to the alphabet. I smiled over at him and he grinned back. He looked all right to me. (Page, Journal notes)

I picture the student's learning style on a bell curve with the majority of common learning styles in the middle of the curve. It is only when you compare an individual learning style with those of the majority that you can see where it lays on the curve. Due to my lack of experience in how different people learn, it took a while for me to realize my son was at the periphery of this curve. I had been as proud of him as any mother on his first day of school. I saw him as my intelligent sweet little boy. I had felt sure that he would fit right in. I had no idea when he started school that he would not learn in the same way as the majority of the students.

We sit outside at the pavilion listening to the naturalist talk. Our son is absorbing every word. He quickly jumps to the front of the group to take part in the hunt for insects. They bring back their finds and talk about them to the naturalist. He is so happy. (Page, Journal notes)

“Embodiment involves the experience of bodies with us in them” (Abbey 2).

Sharon Abbey notes that embodied learning cannot be accurately represented by words because words shift “the focus away from the language of the body” (2). It is learning that we possess because we have experienced it with our bodies through our senses. My son, while holding insects and talking to the naturalist about them, was developing embodied knowledge.

When I was growing up, my parents always emphasized the importance of experiences. I had no idea at the time that I was developing embodied knowing. For me learning by experiences was just a way of life. Coming from a family with Mennonite roots, a huge emphasis was placed on sewing, cooking, and family ties. As a young child I remember playing under quilts that were stretched out on frames across the dining room. Friends and relatives would gather and visit while working on the quilt. Helen K. Ball notes that “in a quilt there are threads, connecting borders, edges that touch, points that connect, and seams that come together in unexpected ways” (17). The connecting fabric pieced and woven together with threads mirror the lives of those working on the quilt, with interconnecting lives woven together by mutual experiences. While the act of quilting is utilitarian in nature, it symbolizes greater social depth. The social nature of quilting in which stories are shared builds knowledge. I learned concurrently, as a child, not only how to sew while working on quilts, but also the stories and experiences of my family. My experiences of being mothered shaped the mother that I would become.

My mother as well as many others in my family wrote poetry, painted, drew and played music. We sang for the pleasure of singing. This was encouraged in the children. When I had my own children, this was the only way I knew how to be a parent. Abbey relates that “image making connects our inner selves to something universal, transporting us back and forth between past and present, self and other, personal and archetypal” (6). In parenting my own children, I encouraged creativity and storytelling. Image making in the art forms of painting, drawing, and sculpting was supported and celebrated. I read to my children but did not worry about teaching letters and numbers formally to them. I emphasised the beauty in art, nature and stories about family. As a mother, I was passing on the knowledge that I had learned as a child. I had not considered that the rich knowledge my children were learning about their world and the people in it would not be enough. I never dreamed any of my children would not fit into the scholastic norm. I felt guilt initially when it became evident that my son was struggling to read at school; I felt that I had failed as a mother to provide him with the tools he needed to succeed academically. I had not been inducted into the culture of school at that time and I could only draw on my own past experiences to know how to approach motherhood. I did not understand the expectations of a mother from the school’s standpoint. I had worked hard to expose my son to the beauty of the

world he was living in and the stories of the people around him, but I felt like a failure for not teaching him to read. I had not known it was expected. When I realized it was an expectation, I started to try to teach him to read at home, but without much success.

At the parent teacher interview at the end of grade one, the teacher smiled at me across the desk. She explained that my son couldn't read yet, but I shouldn't be concerned as he was a boy and these things take longer for boys. I hadn't brought him with me to this interview as I thought it would be better to discuss his struggles without him there. I tried to explain the amount of time we had taken with him. We had spent a lot of time and money on flash cards, early reading books, and jolly phonics reading program, anything that might help. We played games with magnetic letters. Nothing really helped. I felt a huge sense of frustration. Reading between the lines, I sensed the school didn't feel we were doing enough at home. I agreed with her that we would try harder. (Page, Journal notes)

To understand my approach to parenting I first had to understand who I am. Parker Palmer (13) explains that good teachers teach from an undivided self. Being an undivided self includes understanding my identity, knowing myself, having integrity, and being true to myself (Palmer 16). This is important, not just for formal teachers in the educational system, but also for informal teachers like mothers. Parker Palmer (11) stresses that connectedness comes from understanding ourselves and being true to ourselves. I believe this is true for life in general, not just for teaching. If we live as divided selves, we cannot be truly happy. In order to effectively live true to ourselves, we need to understand ourselves. Abbey echoes this sentiment when she relates that we should model holistic ideals and “teach children how to be happy, fulfilled and at peace within themselves” (6).

I am sitting at the campfire as my son approaches me along with his brother. Both had been wading in the reeds by the lake with the dog in tow. With grinning mouths, they both talk at once. They have caught a couple of frogs and they want to know all about them. How do they breathe? Where do they live? I go and get my books to help them. But, first, I get the salt to remove the bloodsuckers that have attached to their toes from the muddy water. They want to know all about those, too. (Page, Journal notes)

Celeste Snowber describes how we learn from many sources, stating “The

teacher may also take the shape of an elderly woman, an artwork, a budding child, a dance, or a crinkled leaf on the ground” (217). Snowber (218) recounts how nature was often her teacher when she was a child. Nature surrounds us all. My son has always related strongly to nature. He relished our frequent camping trips, walks in the woods, or visits to the creek. He was accumulating knowledge from nature. Snowber eloquently notes the role of nature as a teacher when relating, “The land, stars, air, and water all hold a holy place as a teacher, if we can let ourselves be receptive to their invitation to the Eros of the everyday” (218). In exposing my son to nature, I had introduced him to a powerful teacher.

Grade two arrives and he still struggles with reading. The problem now is that it is starting to affect his other subjects as he can’t read the assignments. I had met with his teacher earlier this year and I heard a lot of praise for his personality, but she insinuated that he may just be a little slow. I agreed to have a Woodcock-Johnson Test of Achievement III done to measure his cognitive ability. Not surprisingly, his oral language skills were low average and he had low performance in broad reading. As I met with her to discuss the plan for him, she explained that he would meet and read with an instructor outside regular class. I could feel my frustration mounting again. It felt like everyone just thought if he practised enough, it would come. No one seemed to understand or believe the amount of time we were devoting to this at home (Page, Journal notes).

As my child struggled with his schoolwork, I strived to make home a good refuge for him. I dwelt on the positives. He was intelligent in my eyes. He was articulate and had a vast knowledge of the world around him. He was observant of nature and creative. He could problem solve. I found it disappointing that my idea of success in learning did not match with that of the school he attended. Reading and writing was their entire focus. He failed at this and they couldn’t see beyond that.

My son yells for me to come and see. He has dug up rocks in the backyard and assembled them in the form of a dinosaur. He excitedly explains he is digging for dinosaur bones and has made a discovery. He looks at the pictures in his dinosaur book to try to find the type. (Page, Journal notes)

Marni Binder notes that “telling stories has been socially and culturally embedded around the world” (138). Stories help us to relate and connect

to one another. Stories also help us to understand ourselves and our roots. I grew up hearing stories about my family history. As a mother, I continued this same tradition with my own children. We eat our evening meal as a family every night and discuss how our day has been. My husband is especially apt at storytelling and my son learned this skill at an early age. He developed a love of both hearing and telling stories. The act of storytelling helps us to connect with one another because it helps us identify similarities between ourselves and the storyteller. My son in making up a story about finding dinosaur bones was exploring and expanding his knowledge about dinosaurs. Stories help us share information, make connections, and seek deeper knowledge. As Booth and Barton note, “The drive to story is basic in all people and in all cultures. Stories shape our lives and our culture—we cannot live without them” (qtd. in Binder 138).

Grade three arrived and there is still no change. He is far behind his classmates in reading and is embarrassed by it. I watch him at the kitchen table struggling to do his homework. It is almost eight o'clock and time for bed. He had been working since he came home from school. I have helped him all I can, reading his assignments to him and letting him do the answers. If it's not English, I write out the words he gives me and then he copies what they look like. His school work is not just eating up his time, its taking vast volumes of mine, my husband and his grandmother's time as well as we all struggle to help him. Strangely, although he cannot read well at all, he wrote a story this year and recited it to the class for the speech competition at school. He won in his class then in his school and went on to present at the Legion. I decided I needed to do something. I took him to my family doctor and explained he couldn't read but seemed alright otherwise. My instincts told me something was wrong. He sent my son to a specialist who spent a long time testing my son. He talked to us both after running the tests. I sat in the small examining room as he explained that my son was very dyslexic. He told me he thinks in pictures and would never be able to read phonically. I felt a weight lift off as he went on, telling me that was why he was only reading at a grade one level in grade three. He reassured me that my son had a high degree of intelligence and could accommodate for his dyslexia if he learned to read by sight rather than phonically. He needed to connect the words with thoughts. In other words, he could connect the whole word as a symbol to its meaning. I felt relieved that we now knew he just thought differently than the general population. As schools are set up for the average person, that process just didn't

work for him. I thought it would be easy now. Just take the letter to the school and everything would be all right. (Page, Journal notes)

I realized that my son just did not think like everyone else; he thinks in pictures. For someone who thinks in pictures, words do not have very much meaning unless they are attached to a visual image. In a society driven by words and language, this is a serious problem. How can you teach and evaluate a student who does not process information in this manner? The student may know facts and be able to problem solve but if this knowledge cannot be transformed into written tests and assignments, how can this knowledge be measured? Often, this unmeasured knowledge is negated leaving failure as the only option. For this reason, my son was not deemed successful in school in his early grades.

We carefully walk down the steps into the dark cavern. The air becomes cooler. As the trail guide into the caverns turns on the lights, we see all the formations in the cave. My son listens eagerly. He is excited as he sees a cave cricket on the wall. By the time we head back home he can recite a wealth of information about the geography, the history, and the biology of caves and cave life (Page, Journal notes).

Rachael Kessler (xvi) relates three things that she has found her students identify as satisfying their souls: the beauty of nature, being accepted and respected, and creating artwork. I think that nature inspires us when we become more aware of our senses. Experiences with nature in the physical world, such as exploring a cave, were often a catalyst for my son to further his knowledge on a subject. I attempted to expose my son to experiences with nature as often as possible. As we become more aware of our bodies we must become more aware of the world that that body exists in. I believe this to be a cross-cultural trait. Different cultures all celebrate nature in their own way through dance, poems, literature, and artwork. But, they all celebrate it. It is universal. Inner peace is easier to achieve sitting quietly in nature listening to its sound than in a noisy city. We connect with nature. We are a part of it.

Things were not as easy as I had thought. The principal explained to me that my son would need a full psycho-educational assessment if they were going to help him. I felt dismay as I was told he would be put on a waiting list for the testing but I could pay for it if I wanted it done sooner, just a thousand dollars or so. I couldn't afford this. I begged the principal to just do the accommodations the specialist had requested until the test could be done. He agreed but things did not change too much. (Page, Journal notes)

We stopped trying the jolly phonics after we realized that it was setting my son up for failure. We continued to help him at home but shifted our focus to flash cards that had a word on one side and a picture on the other. We discovered audio books. He wanted to hear stories but we couldn't read for the hours he wished. Unknowingly, we encouraged his love of nature and pursuit of experiential knowledge. We took him to museums, pow-wows, visits to historical places and camping trips. At the time, we were just having fun as a family, doing the things he enjoyed. Now, I realize that this was how he learned best.

He is sitting at a picnic table in Algonquin Park. My son is sitting with a frog in one container and a toad he caught in another. He has his sketchbook out and has drawn a picture of each. Below the pictures he makes note, albeit in misspelled words, of the similarities and differences he has noticed. He is careful to keep the animals in the shade and moist. He carefully releases them where he found them, not touching them. (Page, Journal notes)

Looking back, I can appreciate that the knowledge my son has is embodied. He learnt from experiences with nature, story telling, and through art. I wonder if he would have been so in tune with the world if he had not had a learning disability. Of course that is impossible because he is who he is. You cannot separate the learning disability from the person.

Dene Granger feels that "all of us must contend with the ways we have all been drilled out of our particular cultural and material embodiment, out of our ways of learning and knowing, for the sake of academic rigor." In taking this view, no one really fits the norm. We have all had to conform to fit. It would probably be healthier for us all if we learned to appreciate each other's differences instead of all conforming to meet in the middle somewhere. In essence, no one really fits in the middle. None of us learn in the same ways. Those who think the most different from the norm are labelled with learning disabilities. These are the ones that are unable to conform.

Granger defined learning disability for himself as unable to "memorize facts, learn, write, read or sound like most good normal students." In reality, normal does not exist.

I sat in the meeting to hear the results of my son's psycho-educational assessment. He is in grade four now. It had been a year since I saw the specialist. My happy easygoing son was becoming moody and withdrawn. He was still doing hours of homework but was becom-

ing frustrated. The testing had occurred over a week ago and I was anxious to hear the results. I sat at a table with the principal, my son's teacher, and the learning resource teacher as the psychologist gave her report. As I stared down at my copy she covers the highlights. I am not surprised as she explains that he is in the 8th percentile for reading for his age while his cognitive abilities are in the high average to superior range, the 91st percentile. She goes on to explain that his intelligence has compensated for his severe learning disability to the extent that he had passed his grades. I feel weepy as I think back to him being described as slow. As the others at the meeting express their surprise at this, I feel relieved. They all finally understand! (Page, Journal notes)

After my son had his psycho-educational assessment, I developed a greater understanding of him. I began to realize that he did not really have a disability; he was just different from the majority of the population. He thinks in pictures and most people think in words. In reality, we all think differently from one another; there are similarities but no one is truly the same. My son's way of thinking was just too different for him to be able to conform to the scholastic norm. Someone once tried to sympathize with me by stating it was too bad that he had a learning disability. This surprised me. I countered by explaining that I wouldn't change one thing about him; he is who he is. To wish change or to separate any part of a person negates who they are. Often our personal weaknesses and strengths are intertwined. To wish he didn't have this learning disability would be to wish his mind worked differently, and I could never wish that.

My son sits on his favourite chair with his headphones on, a pencil in hand and sketchbook balanced on his knee. His favourite audio book is playing, *Redwall*. While he listens, he is drawing the characters he sees in his mind. Hours have gone by and I am calling him for supper. He is so engrossed in drawing, he doesn't hear me. (Page, Journal notes)

Atsuhiko Yoshida (133) explored how she did calligraphy while picturing the word she was drawing. She goes on to describe how powerful this experience was. My son experiences every word as a picture. When he listened to audiobooks, he sat and drew the images that formed in his mind as the stories unfolded. Exploring the world in pictures describes my son's way of being; he connects all words with pictures. I think this must be a marvellous way to view the world. It is a wonderful thing that we all think differently. Life would indeed be boring if we were all the same.

The road is still not easy, as he enters grade five. He is placed in enrichment classes when they are offered and he excels in these. They combine a whole day of a subject linking math and English with science. But these are few and far between. His teacher this year does not actively support his use of computer aids, but my husband intervenes and helps him learn to use the technology himself. It is a struggle but my son's mood is better. By knowing that while he thinks differently than his peers, he is still intelligent, motivates and encourages him. (Page, Journal notes)

Different is not necessarily bad. My son has struggles because he thinks differently. However, his strengths come from his way of thinking. He looks at the world and really sees it. He and I did some research and found a lot of famous people were labelled with learning disabilities including artists, scientists, and mathematicians. The list seemed to include people from all walks of life. We wanted him to know that the label of learning disability was just a label for someone who's thought processes are not the same as the bulk of the population. We stressed that it was not good or bad, just different. He needs to accept himself as he is and not be limited by any label. The only reason for the label is so that his school could teach and evaluate him according to his way of thinking. It makes one feel sad for those who don't fit into the established mould yet are not identified and thus not accommodated.

He holds a small bird in his hand, asking the bird-bander its name. His thirst for knowledge is never quenched. Gently he carries the little bird outside, smiling, and releases it. He then runs back into the building to hear more about banding and tracking the birds. (Page, Journal notes)

Thinking in a different way opens your mind to new possibilities. I started to really encourage him just to be true to himself. This journey as a mother has caused me to reflect on how I think and view the world. I thought back to my days in school and my struggles to read. I had never been tested for a learning disability but had many of the same issues as my son faced. I excelled in school only after entering higher grades when the emphasis was off reading and writing skills and more on understanding. Perhaps I was just fortunate to grow up in a household where we were encouraged just to be whom we were. My mother had encouraged the exploration of the world through experiential knowledge without having the vocabulary of embodied learning to explain what she was doing. She taught me through example to be this same type of mother to my children.

Grades six, seven and eight: These years were marked by having a teacher that thoroughly supported him with his accommodations for his learning disability. These teachers challenged him, treating him as an intelligent child, while acknowledging his need for assistance in identified areas. I watch him happily talking about his school project with his friend. He is happy, animated and confident. He is full of plans and goals for the future. His early struggles taught him good study habits. I smile at him and am glad we never lost faith in him when everyone else seemed to (Page, Journal notes)

Kessler notes that “Students of all ages come to school with their souls alive and seeking connection” (ix). I believe that my son experienced this quest for connection when entering school in kindergarten. He was so excited to start school. Neither he, nor we, or even his teachers realized that he was so different. As a mother, my intuition led me to believe something was wrong. My son just did not fit in some way. My son was drawn to the beauty of nature, being accepted, and to creativity. These are the three areas Kessler (xvi) described as dimensions of life that satisfied her student’s souls.

I believe it was fortunate that due to our family traditions and way of being, these areas were embraced by our family. We were able to create an environment at home my son could thrive in. This provided a buffer from the school environment that he just did not fit into. We all think differently; I just think that my son is blessed that we understand better how he relates to the world.

It has been a journey for both him and for me. In the end, I think we both understand ourselves and our place in the world more thoroughly. My son is now in high school. After discussing his goals with him, we enrolled him in the academic stream of study despite resistance from his teachers who were concerned about his ability to succeed in the more advanced and difficult academic stream of study. I received a letter in the mail from my son’s high school inviting us to the junior academic achievement awards night. He had received an award for having an overall academic grade average of over ninety percent for his first year of high school. He had learned how to be successful in the current school system despite not learning in the same manner as the majority of the students. He learned to adapt and to still be himself. He was a stronger person because of the struggles he had faced. Although there are many factors that led to this outcome, the role of motherhood cannot be ignored. I am grateful to have been raised in an environment that stressed experiential knowledge so that I had raised my son in the same manner. The wisdom my son has embodied has enriched us both. “This above all: to thine ownself be true” (Shakespeare 1.3.7880).

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