

LEARNING DISABLED

A number of years ago a 48-year-old career educator divorced her husband of 26 years. From there she relocated to a large metropolitan city about 250 miles from where she had been living, changing jobs to take a position first as an educational consultant and later as an elementary school principal. As she continued to shape her new life she decided to chase a lifelong dream of achieving a doctoral degree in education. Using borrowed money to fund her schooling, she pursued her degree at a well- respected New England university. The curriculum was both highly challenging and highly expensive, but after a time she completed her studies and was awarded her doctoral degree. It seemed that this career educator had achieved ultimate fulfillment professionally. In her mind the possibilities for the future seemed endless.

Fast forward to the present and this career educator is now 62 years of age and has been let go from her position as a school principal. Unable to find work comparable to what she has done throughout her career, she lives with her mother in the medium-sized town where she grew up. She earns income as a substitute teacher in the town school system, the income being a far cry from what she had earned prior. She can only wonder how things could have changed so rapidly and so dramatically for her.

The term “learning disabled” is often used in the educational field to describe a number of perceptual limitations found in children and adolescents. But in this case “learning disabled” could well apply to this highly educated professional woman. Initially, she failed to recognize that her advanced education could actually limit her career options as opposed to increasing them. With significantly less income and a high debt load, she was no longer able to live independently. She had mortgaged her future and by doing so had failed to accurately assess the financial implications for her down the road.

Yet there was a second, less apparent learning disability that came into play. Despite her age and her advanced education, this career educator had never learned how to fully discern the physical and emotional boundaries of others. This was a limitation that undermined her marriage and contributed to its eventual end. It also affected her career in that despite working in the same field throughout her life, she never held any position for more than a few years. Nowhere in the course of her educational study (whether formal or otherwise) had her disability been identified and addressed. Had her limitations been dealt with while she was a young person, life might have turned out fardifferently for her.

Formal education is a necessity in today’s society. Yet all too often we fail to recognize that ultimately it is even more important to develop healthy interpersonal skills. No college or university offers a degree in recognizing the physical and emotional boundaries of others. It is up to us as parents, public school educators, and other involved adults to teach our young people the relationship skills they will need going forward. And those skills are best taught by the example that we model for young and old alike. All the best to each of you in that endeavor.

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