

Story by Elijah Tigullaraq...Why language is important to me...

I had a speech delay when I was a child. I remember clearly when the medical ship C.D. Howe, came to Clyde River (Where I grew up) for its annual visit, my parents were told that I would never learn to speak. The doctors recommended to my parents that I should not attend school, as I would never learn to speak. My parents, being humble and all, (At that time and age, people from the South were superior, it was scary and almost taboo not to follow the directions of the doctors...in fact all Southerners...) followed the recommendation.

During my childhood, I had problems pronouncing everyday words but I could understand every thing that was said or that was directed towards me. Therefore, I had my own way of saying things, words, or phrases. I still have many of the words today that I made up when I was a child. My immediate family could understand exactly what I was saying but other people could not. Because they could not understand me, I used to get teased. They called me names. I was not accepted like the other children. I was different, I could not speak properly. However, I did not stay out of school for too long, because I got into school by sneaking in.

When a new teacher arrived in the settlement, (Who knew nothing about me...so I thought...) I sneaked into the classroom mixed in with my age group, on the first day of the school year. The teacher sort of left me alone because I could not communicate like the others. I was able to participate quite well with hands on activities, or when it involved physical activity. In time, I was able to speak quite well. I learned to speak through imitation, through envy, and plain hard work to be able to speak, and be understood up to par with other people. I achieved that, and more. I was able to become a classroom assistant, teacher, vice-principal and after that a principal in both elementary and in high school. Now I'm working for Qikiqtani School Operations as a Bilingual Language Consultant representing over 9000 students, and assisting 21 schools. I'd say that's pretty good for "someone who could not speak". I'm the only one in my family with a degree. I have eight other siblings. None of them had speech impairment like I did.

My message to you today is to tell you that ALL students are capable of learning. They may be disabled, mentally challenged, or like me when I was a child, have a speech delay. All students are capable of learning something. Their potential to learn may be limited, but they all have capacity to learn something. For a child with speech delay, the best thing an educator can do is to give them time and room to learn things at their own pace. When I was forced to say something, I would get frustrated and even angry at times. I'm positive it was frustrating for the teachers as well. Children learn at different stages, and as educators, we should know and respect that.

In the Inuit world, each and every child/person is believed to be capable of contributing something to their society, as limited as they may be, mentally or physically. We have to respect them for what they can do, and not concentrate on what they can't do. We should not cheat them for what they could become, or what they may be capable of. Every child deserves to be educated, regardless of their mental or physical condition. I'm a living proof.

Taima.

Elijah Tigullaraq, Pond Inlet

