

COUNTING EVERYONE IN THE EVERYONE CATEGORY

By Harriet, age 11



My name is Harriet and this year I am going into middle school in a new town. For most of my school life in my old town, I was paying close attention to my classmate, Eleanor. She is labeled with a disability and, to me, the way that most people treat her is not right. I have noticed the teachers, other kids, her aides, the principal, and even the teacher who is supposed to be in charge of inclusive education treat her like she is different from the rest of the students our age. It's hard for me to understand why.

The aides act almost as if they are terrified of her and because they act this way, most of the other kids do, too. A lot of the students who are the same age as Eleanor act as though they are older than she is and that she still wants books like *Frog and Toad* read to her, as if she is a child. I honestly don't think she is still in that stage of life. In so many ways, I see her act just as any other student would act. She says, "No MATH!" like we all say (at least in our minds), and yet, when she does a math problem that is "well done," she is given a piece of a chocolate chip cookie. When my math is "well done," I get a grade, not a piece of a cookie. She is treated and represented and misinterpreted as though she can't learn like any other 5th grader. I think she can, but she is never given the chance.

Eleanor's aide is by her side every second, including recess and lunch. She is like a box around her. This box makes it seem as though Eleanor can't engage in the world and gives the message to all the kids in her class to leave her alone because she is different. *Everyone is different.*

This box is a big barrier to her having real friends and her being a real friend. It is a barrier to her engaging with her classmates. It is a barrier to having someone to count on if she's having a hard day. I can't imagine what it must feel like not to have friends to count on if I am having a bad day. Wherever you are in the world, everyone should feel comfort and belonging knowing that you always have people to hold on to you as you fly your way and they fly theirs. Eleanor isn't given the opportunity to know that she belongs and to feel the freedom to fly.

I remember a day when a notice was delivered to all of our mailboxes inviting us to join a book club. The notice was put in Eleanor's mailbox and when the reading teacher was checking to make sure that everyone received one, she took the notice out of Eleanor's box. The reading teacher wasn't going to give the notice to another kid; she just threw it away and walked out the door. As a child, I see this situation as very messed up. Eleanor isn't even counted enough as a person/student in my class to be included in the "everyone" category. Maybe Eleanor would have loved to join the book club? I think about the many, many times that Eleanor has had similar things happen to her. It must shut down her self-esteem and hope, and crash her dreams of what she might want to do later in life—crashing her hope of maybe succeeding to be a doctor or lawyer or teacher or cook or whatever she wants to be...crashing the opportunity to fly her own way and complete what she would like to complete in her life.

This is just one story of one girl in the world who is in my school, but I know that stuff like this is happening everywhere. From my perspective, inclusion is not just that everyone is in the classroom and treated the same. Inclusion is everyone working together doing the same things; everyone is included in every activity at all times. No one person is treated special, such as being pulled out to bake cookies or bribed with a cookie to do the problem right. If there has to be an aide to help a student, he wouldn't be there for any one person; the aide would help everyone. If any kid was having a hard time, the aide would check-in.

My dream is to work on the challenge of helping kids belong and help change the thinking about how all kids are included in our schools. I tried to talk to my school principal, but I am not sure she really listened. It is hard sometimes as a kid to know how to change things like this, but I know we can do it. To anyone reading this who has this same dream: hopefully one day we will all see the change that we are working together to make happen.

