# The *Illusion* of School Accommodations

By Emma Chaaban

Oh, how I loathe the first day of school, not because summer is over or because of the upcoming course load. As other students shop for latest back to school trends while lathering their sunburns with pounds of aloe vera; I get ready to, once again, tell my

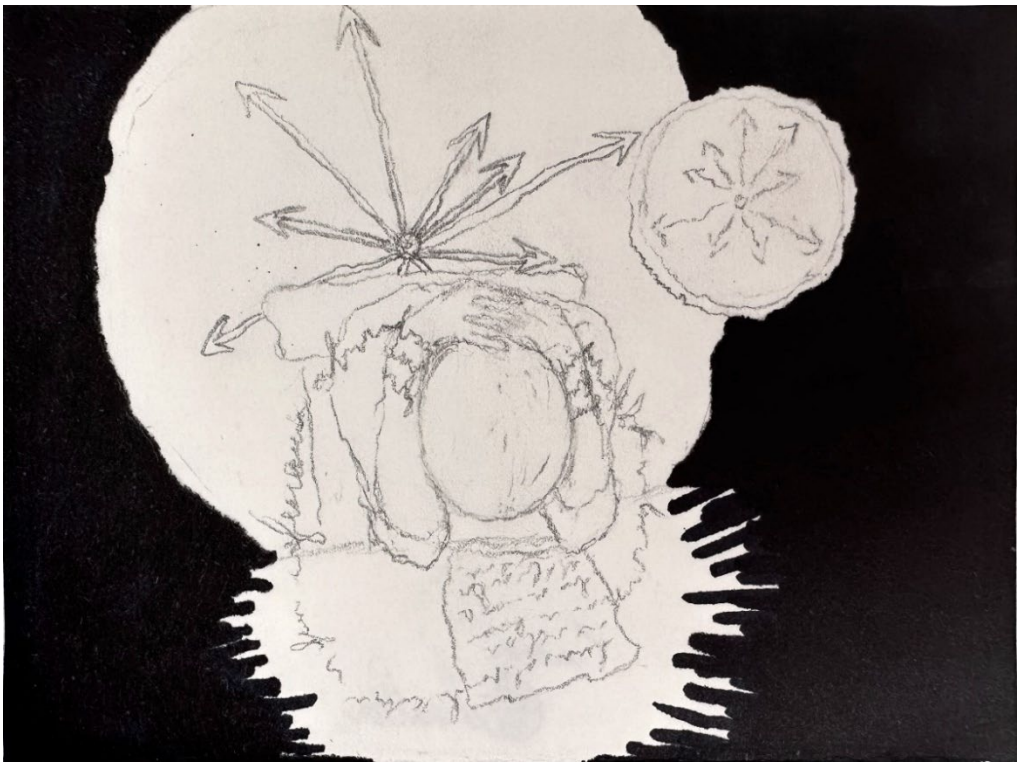
life story and explain my disabilities to a new bunch of teachers, educators, counselors, technicians etc., who will, in most cases, invalidate my challenges and re-explain to me what they think I can do to help myself. It doesn't occur to them that I have been facing this, received multiple therapies and have heard the same advice for the past 15 years. Additionally, it doesn't seem to occur to them that I know myself better than they do, and if they simply listened to me, we would save ourselves a lot of energy and saliva. Therefore, every August, I face the frustration of being invalidated by those who are supposedly meant to help me, just because they think they know me better than I know myself and my disabilities. Welcome to the circus, AKA getting the proper accommodations in order to pursue my education.

My first evaluation dates back to second grade. The neuropsychologist, charged with my evaluation, informed my mother and me that he would not be able to give a decisive diagnosis so early into my educational journey. According to his initial statement, it would have to wait to grade 3. Fast forward 2 weeks, he stated without a doubt in his mind that I was dyslexic and suffered from ADHD, so blatant was my disability. Furthermore, I was reevaluated last year and was granted the dubious 'award' of being the strongest case of dyslexia my evaluator had ever come across. Because my dyslexia was paired with a processing speed under the 1st percentile, my evaluator said she was surprised I was so intelligent and capable of critical thought. Add to this, my ADHD and the Autism Spectrum diagnosis handed to me at the same time, I can confidently say I have won the lottery when it comes to disabilities.

According to Statistics Canada, in the population aged "15 to 24, 4.4% reported at least one type of disability, and nearly half of them (2.0%) reported a learning disability."
The same study reports that "96.3% of respondents who reported a learning disability also reported at least one other type of disability… Mental health-related disabilities had the highest rate of co-occurrence for adults aged 15 to 24 with a learning disability…" and it switched to co-occurrence with physical disability later in life.

My reaction to reading these statistics was: "No shit!"

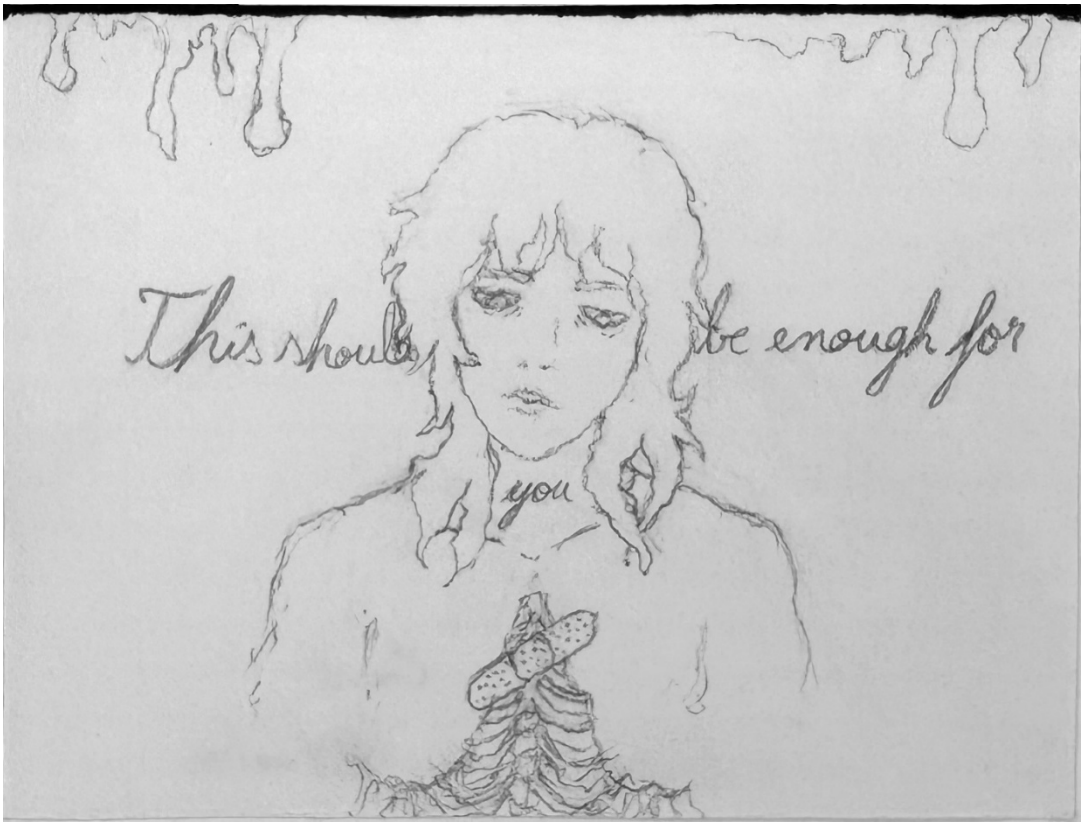
- When the simplest task assigned to us takes monstrous effort or is downright impossible, and yet we are told that we are being accommodated, but in fact the accommodation is a cookie-cutter solution that is offered to anyone with our specific label, regardless of whether it really makes an impact for us or not, we suffer.



- When some teachers and students believe we are unfairly advantaged in receiving token accommodations that help us like a drop in the ocean, we suffer.
- When we are supposed to always have access to electronic versions of text, but most teachers offer us poor scans that have not been appropriately digitized for use with text-recognition software and cannot be re-digitized adequately for this purpose either, we suffer.
- When it takes us 6 hours to write a test, others write in 3, we suffer. When teachers don't understand that extra time is not only needed on examinations, but also for every other work we do and that perhaps we need extended deadlines to make it, we suffer.

- When we have to skip social activities, sleep, and hygiene that neurotypical students can afford to do, in order to make deadlines and fulfill the basic requirements, we suffer.
- When the entire school system is rigged for our failure and yet we are constantly reminded of the importance of our R-score and schooling for our future, we suffer.

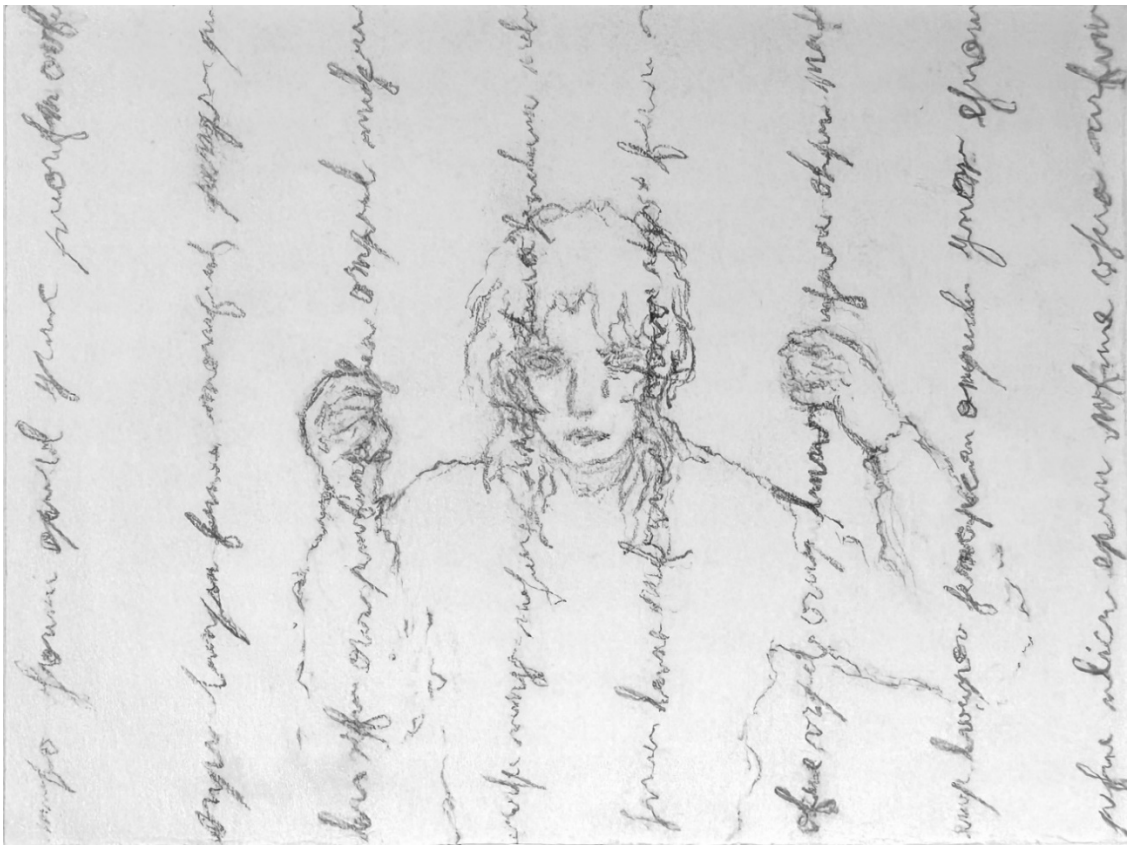
Yet, you wouldn't generalize a leg amputation and offer each amputee a synthetic toe, regardless of how much of their leg was amputated and independently of whether that is a solution for them or not. You would also not offer a bandage to help close an abdominal surgery and expect the patient to come out unscathed and grateful.



Several professionals have agreed that my dyslexia is such that I should be considered blind for the purpose of reading and writing, as I read a letter at a time and cannot be expected to scan through a page. Still, I am expected to conduct research for my projects and then cross-reference the information between the various sources. Why should seeking further knowledge be reserved for neurotypical students? I am quite intelligent and have a thirst for knowledge, and I wish to keep learning. Why should I not be allowed to do so just because research is pretty much impossible for me? I feel it's like forbidding a blind person from joining a book club, just because they cannot see the book, instead of offering them the audiobook or the book in Braille. The sad thing is that refusing the blind person in the book club would not only hurt the blind person, but also the entire book club, as their experience of being blind may offer a very distinctive view on the book to be discussed.

What I've realized over the years is that accommodations, the way they are now, feel like they are just there to make the school and Ministry feel better about themselves because they "did something" or just so they can say on paper or advertisement that they provide accommodations to those in need. They offer cookie-cutter solutions for what is usually the male version of the disability, which often is not in line with what female students experience and the solutions offered are not even implemented correctly, as in the case of the improperly digitized scans. In most cases, it is not tailored to our needs at all: it's whatever is convenient for them or makes them feel like good charitable people without actually trying to really address the problem.

In the meantime, we, students with learning disabilities, feel like we are being gaslit. We are told that with the support offered, we will be able to complete our education like everyone else and are constantly reminded that we already receive unconventional amounts of support.



Furthermore, we are taught that grades are important, even though ours are usually not representative of our knowledge and abilities. My grades have often reflected how much of the exam I managed to finish, rather than my grasp of the knowledge. Additionally, we are often told our issues stem from a lack of self-confidence or a lack of effort and that we should “just get over it”. Therefore, when the accommodations offered are insufficient or ill-adapted to our needs and we fail despite all our efforts, we feel like we are the problem, whereas the real problem is our educational system.

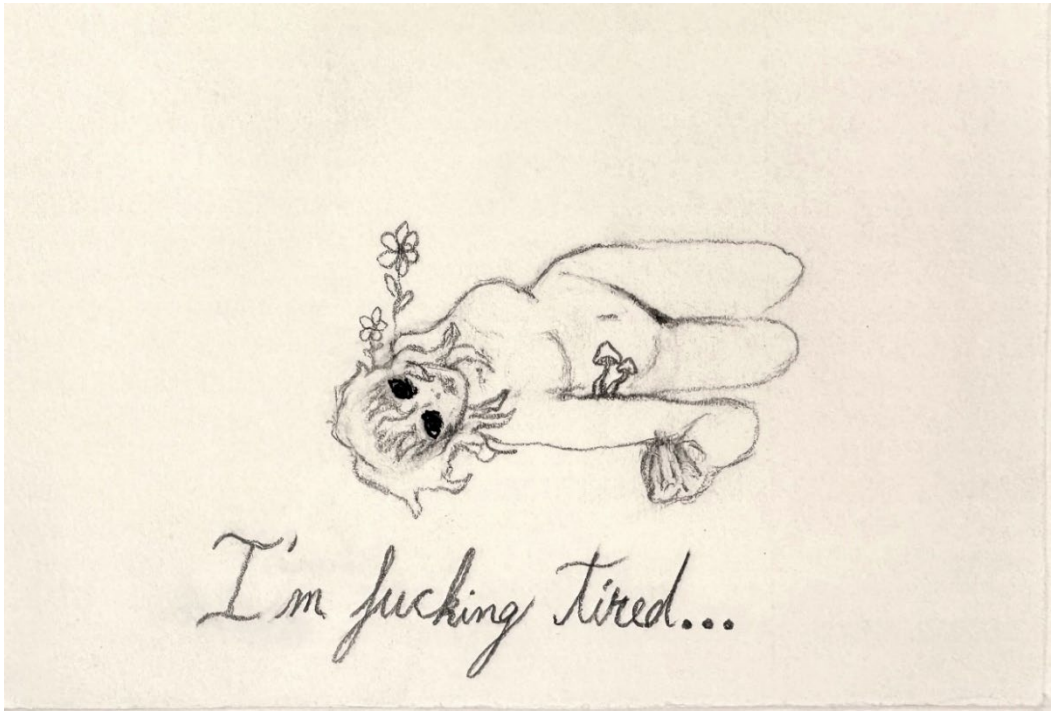
Nonetheless, there is hope. New ideas and approaches are emerging from various organizations and research projects across the globe. For example, Emily Chan, a General member of the Sandbox Project's The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health[1] wrote: "A prominent issue faced by children and youth with disabilities is ableism. The term is defined as a form of discrimination and a way to exclude individuals with disabilities on the basis that typical abilities are superior. Ableism takes many forms and poses significant challenges and barriers for children and youth with disabilities." She elaborates: "Ableism looks like bullying…. Ableism looks like discriminatory hiring practices…. Ableism looks like inaccessible environments…" Although the Sandbox Project focuses primarily on accommodating physical disabilities, the mandate indicates that fresh ideas on how to approach disabilities as a whole have begun to sprout.

[1] The Sandbox Project was created in 2009 as the result of a research project conducted for the Government of Canada. Its aim is "to bring leading individuals and organizations together to ensure that all children in Canada get all the support and care they need to become healthy, active, well-adjusted and contributing adults in our society".

In the meantime, I have struggled through my entire schooling because of my learning disabilities and people's inability to understand and accommodate them. In fact, I suffered from a clinical burnout as early as 4th grade, yet I am still here today.

Thus, I dare to say:

- I'm tired of fighting everyone and the system, just to get the bare minimum.
- I'm tired of having to constantly prove my disabilities to teachers and school boards.
- I'm tired of having to start over every time I get a new teacher or accessibility counsellor, or frequent a new place of learning and be told: "How about we start with [insert most minimal accommodation possible] and then if I see you need more, we will re-discuss" [most of the time a lie], because they always think they know best and know what I need and are worried that it is just me "trying to get extra privileges".
- I would simply be happy to have a serene opportunity to learn and grow.
- I'm fucking tired.



Note from the author:

This hybrid essay is based on one prepared in 2023 for a college English class.
It has been reworked in 2025

Work Cited

Chan, Emily. “Spotlighting Children and Youth with Disabilities and How You Can Be an Ally.” *The Sandbox Project: YCRH Blog*, 19 Apr. 2021, sandboxproject.ca/the-ycrh-blog/2021/4/19/spotlighting-children-and-youth-with-disabilities-and-how-you-can-be-an-ally.

Statistics Canada. “Learning Disabilities among Canadians Aged 15 Years and Older, 2012.” *Statistics Canada*, 30 Nov. 2015, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2014003-eng.htm.