

Be Kind, and Other Things I Have Learned in School

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## Academically Lopsided

For most of my life in school, which is most of my life, I thought I was “stupid at math.” Nobody told me that I was bad at it, and it was rarely implied. But I knew there was a disconnect, and sometimes it hurt to recognize that myself, and to have it recognized by others. Preschool through 8th grade, I was educated in a Montessori setting which allowed my strengths in things like critical thinking, creativity, writing, persuasiveness, kindness, empathy, and curiosity to flourish. I knew that math was kind of hard for me, but I rarely felt ashamed. In 4th-6th grade, I was in a mixed-age classroom that emphasized community, and how we are all “parts of a whole.” This philosophy of appreciating difference and supporting one-another was deeply instilled in our class, and I am still good friends with several people who I met then. The teachers (a team of 2) knew us, and the thoughtfully grouped, small lessons gave me challenge where I could handle it, and support where I needed it.

As I moved through 7th and 8th grade in the same school, classes became more traditional in format. This helped me transition into high school, but still had that community feel and supportive teachers. I went onto a small-ish private high school, which was more traditional than Montessori, but had caring teachers and small classes that included discussion and critical thinking. My deficits in math-related work continued to be present, but I had supportive teachers and compensated significantly with persistence, extra help-seeking, and language skills.

It wasn't until my Senior year of high school that math became a serious problem. I was in Pre-Calculus, and none of it made sense. Not only did it not make sense, I couldn't find personal purpose in learning any of it. Yes, you learn and grow from challenge. But it was difficult to appreciate that with how I felt at the time. Many of my friends had had issues with

this teacher, and I believe that she was indeed a “bad teacher”... but I prefer to say that her teaching style and my learning style did not mesh well. I observed that her style worked best with students who seemed naturally good at math, and who she also just liked. I was not naturally good at math... not at all... and before I even had the *opportunity* to display my struggles in math, I felt like she hated me. I had always been a kind and hardworking student who was liked by my teachers, so this was a shock. It got to the point where I wondered if maybe I looked like someone who had bullied her in high school or something, and that’s why she was, in simple terms, mean to me.

At first, I rolled with the punches. It was a new area of math for me, so I figured I should give it a chance. Material began to build on itself, and I hadn't even grasped the foundational aspects. I was floundering, and I needed help. Although I asked for it, the teacher was reluctant to offer help, and had the attitude that I “should just know this” and “wasn’t trying hard enough.” I decided that maybe she knew the material so well herself, and that it came to her *so* easily that she couldn't comprehend how someone else could possibly *not* understand it, and therefore did not have the skills or interest needed to help me. I clearly remember going to her office for a scheduled help appointment, and having her remain seated at her desk in front of a laptop, and not offer me a chair while I stood there awkwardly and tried to tell her what I needed help with. I felt like I was bothering her, like she did not have the time to work with me, and that she wanted me to leave her alone. I had a tutor who I saw regularly, but did not connect with them well either. A friend often gave me extra help and I appreciated it, but that made me feel ashamed in a different way because my level of understanding was so far below that of many of my peers.

I felt like I was constantly being singled out. She would call on me when my hand wasn't raised, and I hardly ever knew the answer. My brain was working a few steps behind the rest of the class, or at least a few steps behind her expectations for our comprehension speed. Everyone else seemed to know the answer. The teacher looked at me expectantly. My classmates were bursting at the seams, because they knew it and wanted to say it. This happened often, and I felt humiliated. I never wanted to go to the class, and I felt anxious sitting there with the impending struggle and judgment that came with not knowing any of the answers. I never wanted to start on the homework because I was overwhelmed with anxiety, and feeling like I was stupid. These factors made my performance in the class even worse, and pressure was multiplied as I was also going through the college application process. I knew that I had a hard time with math, but I had never felt this way. It had never been this bad or this impactful to my academics. It had never been this hurtful.

I ended up going through neuropsychological testing, in order to test for Dyscalculia. Dyscalculia is a learning disability in math, with fairly little available information compared to other LDs such as Dyslexia. The objective for the testing was to learn more about myself as a learner, see where things were going “wrong,” and give me access to accommodations and formal support. The short-term hope was that all of this would help me survive this class, and get a decent grade that wouldn't a red flag in my college applications. My family, friends, and other teachers and advisors at my school were so supportive throughout this process, and I really appreciate all they did to help me through that class and its negative impacts on my mental health. The testing showed that I do indeed have Dyscalculia, and according to results, it was shocking that I had gotten as far as precalculus without having huge issues and being diagnosed.

Seeing a more quantitative presentation of my deficits in math was enlightening. There were a few specific test results pertaining to numerical comprehension that would imply that I am “stupid at math,” but I tried not to feel that way about it. It was a lot to take in and I had complex emotions surrounding the whole thing, but I remember feeling empowered. I wasn't just bad at something... I had a real thing with a name. I have Dyscalculia, and that explains a lot of my past experiences in math. I felt less ashamed once I was able to put a label on it, learn about it, and take steps to get help and to help myself. The class was never fun, but things got better from there.

Although that year of pre-calculus was one of the harder things I've done, I learned about myself and got through all of the challenges. From the perspective of an education student, this experience sheds light on how much of a difference a supportive and understanding educational environment can make in a student's learning experience. Before this specific class, I had been supported, understood, and appreciated as a student, even with subjects that didn't come easily to me. My learning disability only impacted my education significantly when I was in an environment that wasn't right for my learning. This experience is one of the reasons I have chosen to study education. I want to help create those positive educational environment for other students so that they can reach their full potential and know that they are intelligent in their own ways.