

Not Yet, Not Less

Learning Disabilities, Belonging & Dignity

Part 1: Michael's Story

Steven

Hello and welcome to Talk LD Plus. I'm Steven Reid, President and CEO of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Michael Regis, an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Advisor with the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board.

Michael recently wrote a deeply personal article for LD@school called Not Yet, Not Less: Learning Disabilities, Belonging, and the Educator's Role in Preserving Dignity. In it, he reflects on his experiences as a student, including being identified with a learning disability, receiving special education services, navigating racism and questions of belonging, and ultimately finding his way back to education as an adult.

Michael, thank you so much for joining me today. I also want to thank you for being willing to share such a personal story. Writing about experiences from childhood, particularly experiences that had such a lasting impact, can take a lot of reflection. I really appreciate your willingness to let us learn from yours.

Michael

Thanks for having me, Steven. I appreciate it. It's good to be here.

Steven

Thanks, Michael. Really looking forward to the conversation. Let's start with your experience as a student. And then in the second part, we'll turn more directly to what educators can take from it. So to begin, as we continue to deepen our understanding of learning disabilities, ADHD and other neurodiverse learning profiles, what do you want people to understand about your experience as a student?

Michael

I say in the title,

Not yet, not less. And the most important takeaway from that is the educator is not responsible to save a student. The educator's responsibility is to do the best that they can

with what they have in the short time that they have their students. So for me, the important thing I would have needed for educators is to not to write me off and to

and to know and just to be present in that moment and know that I'm capable and that I can achieve and just that I'm not a special case that needs to be fixed.

Steven

So in the article, you write, I needed support, but I didn't want to be singled out. What did that feel like for you as a student?

Michael

So I mentioned in the article and I would love to discuss more about my twin brother and I's experience. But his experience and my experience was pretty much the same, very much the same. And we moved from, in the middle kindergarten in Toronto, we moved to Uxbridge, small town. We went to Goodwood Public School, small school. We were the only, my two brothers and I were one of the very few racialized students in the school. And Quinn and I were active like we were, we liked, we were very busy kids and we were the only, you know, Black kids in our class.

And as we got into Grade 1, we were failed. And it was just it was quite at that moment when we're held back and seeing our peers go on to the next grade. I think both him and I kind of tuned out, you know, and at that time we were being called racial slurs, which we didn't know at the time what they meant. And so we had this all these energies from different levels of the school from school grounds to, you know, and within our classrooms.

Steven

At LDAO and LD@school, we've been thinking a lot about the importance of belonging, not just whether students have access to support, but whether they actually feel that they are part of the learning community. And there's another layer to that experience as well. You wrote very openly about the fact that you were one of the very few Black students in your school and that race and disability became difficult to separate.

So how did being identified with a learning disability alongside your experiences of Black and biracial students shape your sense of belonging and how you saw yourself as a learner?

Michael

That's a good question. I think I mentioned in the article the intersections between both. And they're very-- as I'm older, it was very difficult for me to separate the two.

And just that feeling that Quinn and I, my twin brother, failed was deeply traumatic in a sense. And then we have this kind of violent negative component from other kids in terms of racism being called various terms.

And it was just, we didn't really have the level of consciousness to really understand it back then. We didn't have elders there to help us articulate our experience. It wasn't, like I said, it wasn't until much later in my life that I was able to think back and say, gosh, that was unconscious. I was just taking that in my body and just taking it as it comes. But it was deeply humiliating, not only the racism we were experiencing,

but also just being separated and feeling that other students are looking at us as different, just based on our, you know, being labeled as having a learning disability. I can go into much more of what I felt we could have needed, but it's challenging. It's challenging from parents that are very busy. Both my parents were working in the city, commuting an hour a day.

and then getting the support that we need. Being in a school that has literally little understanding what it means to be a Black child and a biracial child and having peers that can support you and having elders to support to help you articulate the environment that you're in and then working through it. To me, it would have been very that simple thing as having an older mentor there with you during that time to put their hand on you and saying, this is challenging, but I'm here with you, and we got to get through this. That would have meant the world to me, just having that leadership and adult presence. And it would have had to have been probably a Black man or a Black woman to help us do that.

Yeah, yeah. And these, these, these components of racism were happening. And I remember very young being pulled into the principal's office over a fight with a bunch of other kids. And my parents were never called, you know, over any of these instances. So, I so early on I knew that I was on my own and the only the only people that can support me were my two brothers and that was it. So yeah.

Steven

So you so just that statement says so much because we know that, you know, for students to be successful, they need at least, you know, we look at secondary, we need, you need at least one caring adult.

to be able to say, I believe in you and I'm going to support you and I'm going to help you kind of understand the education system. And so, you know, what you've identified for me is so, so critical because we had a child in Grade 1 and part of their identity was a learning disability.

So with appropriate accommodations,

Michael Regis should have been rocking it in Grade 1, right? And so that would have been part of that conversation. And so that's part of why we continue to provide professional learning and provide that advocacy because that could be a real difference, not only for the student but for the parents.

Michael

Okay, then just the way you framed it there, bringing in my parents at that stage where probably mentoring them would have really helped them as well. Yeah, because I guess in some certain ways they were on their own in a small town and trying to navigate the school system.

Yeah, and just that mentor energy, like what it needed to be a strong presence. And the teachers that have been successful that I remember were the ones that were not trying to fix me, but were there with me, you know. And those were the ones that meant the world.

Steven

Yeah, thank you for that. So that's, you know, just that concept.

For me, there was an aspect in your article, you know, provides educators with here are some things that one can do. And often what we're saying is that there could be some small things that can be done within a classroom that can have a huge impact on students. And so, you know, for a long time in school, you know, when I hear your story, school had reinforced the idea that you weren't capable.

Over and over again, they were reinforcing that. And then there were also some people and some experiences that started to challenge that belief. So at what point did you begin to see yourself differently and recognize that struggling in school did not mean that you were less capable?

Michael

That's a good question. At what point?

I had some good experiences in high school, as I mentioned, with educators. But I think that probably happened a lot later, you know, probably when I discussed that story about when I went back to college to finish that math course, and I had a teacher who I was ready to bounce out of the class. And I had a teacher that was really insistent that we did not leave, that we stayed. And she was calm. You could tell she was dedicated and she was kind, very direct. And I was able to really start getting the work and start doing well and

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slowly and in that I was starting to learn how to regulate myself because I would get really anxious due to early experiences. So that meant the world just having her.

And so that was kind of like a turning point for me. But I also mentioned the article that the turning point for me was 30, realizing that I'm a man and I got to take accountability for my life. And that was the intervention that I needed when I was in manufacturing. And I wanted to have more options. So education was important. And I said, okay, it's either I get down to things or I'm going to be here 20 years from now.

So that was a big intervention. And that was the reason why I decided to try and stay to the end of my courses rather than leave when I got a bad mark. Just stay to the end and see what happens.

Yeah, I mentioned the moments I connected with educators the most is when they were the most no-nonsense and direct with me.

And I appreciate that firmness rather than being kept too careful. And I spoke about that in Grade 11 with my welding teacher and my English teacher. And respecting my intelligence and that I had something to offer. I had to learn how to be really affable and agreeable

And that's part of the thing I didn't mention too much is that part. But I think for me, although, you know, I got a lot of altercations, I remember my friends would often be surprised when I got angry, and I'm going on a different level here, but I had to learn, being a Black student, not to ruffle feathers with my white teachers. And so I learned how to be affable, agreeable.

Steven

I think that this is just a really powerful place for us to pause in this first part of our conversation.

And we've talked about your experience as a student, belonging, race and identity, and the long process of beginning to see yourself differently as a learner.

And so we'll pause here and looking forward to coming back with you for part 2.

Thank you, Michael.

Michael

Thank you.