

Not Yet, Not Less

Learning Disabilities, Belonging & Dignity

Part 2: What Educators Can Do

Steven

Hello and welcome back to Talk LD Plus.

I'm Steven Reid from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario and I'm continuing my conversation with Michael Regis.

In part one, Michael shared some of his experiences as a student and reflected on how special education, race, belonging, and the messages he received about himself shaped how he came to see himself as a learner.

In the second part, I want to turn more directly to what educators can take from those experiences and the kinds of everyday actions that can make a real difference for students.

Michael, thanks for continuing the conversation with us today.

Michael

It's great to be here.

Thank you.

Steven

So in the article, you describe educators who made you feel capable and seen.

What did they do differently?

Michael

So, I can go back to my high school years.

I had a Grade 11 English teacher and he was a little bit more flexible with his teaching style.

He was a little bit of a hippie somewhat, but pretty academic in certain ways.

He encouraged our class to bring in presentations on things that interests us.

I did a presentation on rally racing, something I'm a big fan of and my twin brother is too.

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And I was able to bring in videos and edit and be creative and bring in my speakers and just present on my experiences at rally races and the history of rally racing.

And I was very passionate about it and the whole class was really engaged and that was something that component of him zoning in on something that of my interest and encouraging me meant the world to me, you know, and it didn't feel like it didn't feel like work.

It didn't feel like a presentation, like I thought I had to present it on something I was passionate about.

So and he just led that way.

There's all the other presentations as well in that class that I did and I appreciated his energy.

It was just very calm.

not controlling and respected my intelligence and what I brought to the classroom.

Steven

Perfect. So there's certainly, you know, what you did not say is that, you know, that educator lowered the expectations on you, right?

And so there was, I would imagine that there was a communication somehow that teacher genuinely believed in you.

Michael

Yeah, yeah.

Steven

Are there certain ways that they showed that or?

Michael

Yeah, just like I mentioned his energy, like he and when I was presenting, he was commenting as

the presentation was going on and saying a few jokes and you could tell he was really engaged and I really appreciated that.

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I think in, you know, I also had a welding class, which is more, you know, I'm very physically active and just having that practice of welding, I took to very quickly and my welding teacher looked at one of my welds arc welds and said, if I can do that, I'd be rich.

And I was just like, you know, just kind of looked at him like he's serious.

That meant everything to me, just getting that compliment.

And he was genuinely serious and, you know, doing his thing.

And then he walked away and just let me do my thing, you know.

So it felt great just having that as a man, having that male presence as well, and that directness at the same time,

respecting my capabilities and having a bit of boundary of my space at the same time, so yeah.

Steven

So thank you.

Just thinking back to part one and you spoke about a mentor.

Now, I know that this person wasn't a mentor, but in many ways teachers can take on that mentoring role.

nurturing, you know, genuine interest within the classroom, being interested in the student, being, you know, if that teacher knew that you loved rally racing, being able to connect with you throughout the year would potentially provide that connection and potentially a sense of belonging and importance.

Michael

Yeah, yeah, I felt a sense of belonging in that class and the students he helped

he helped encourage me, and the students were engaged.

So I felt for the one of the first times that I was academically inclined.

So.

Steven

Perfect. And so that connects to something that runs right through your article.

which is dignity.

And so students may absolutely need support, but how that support is provided really, really matters, right?

And so when you think about that dignity and protecting dignity, what does protecting dignity look like when an educator is providing accommodation or support?

Michael

Yeah, that's an important question.

And my twin brother and I were in special education classes from Grade 2, I think, all the way to Grade 9.

Yeah, all the way to Grade 9.

And what it means is just having a teacher that recognizes that this could be challenging for a kid in terms of their dignity and their sense of self-esteem.

You know, I had special ed teachers that were very kind.

I had some that weren't.

And I remember being, as I mentioned in my article, being taken out for special ed class, a teacher would come and physically ask me to come with her.

And that was super humiliating for me.

And I remember being

Sometimes I would give a little bit of attitude, like just this energy towards her, and she would call my parents for which I'd get in trouble from my father.

And so not only did it create a further distrust and distance from the education system and my teacher, it created this further separation from my father and the distrust for him.

And she was connecting with him saying, basically your son is giving attitude.

And for me, I was just responding to the humiliation and the lack of dignity.

And I just wanted to be with everybody else, not another reminder that I was any different from everybody.

What could have helped me in that moment is just given me a signal or time for me to come and rather than come direct me.

And it was something my mother requested was to have us integrated in a regular class.

So it was my mother advocating for us, but it didn't really work out as we would have liked in that sense.

So yeah, so just protecting the dignity is just connecting with understanding your students, understanding humiliation, understanding what it'd be like for you if you're in that situation as an educator.

Steven

And so one of the challenges for educators is that we see behavior, educators see behavior

But they don't necessarily know immediately what is underneath the behavior.

And so there's behavior, but why is there that behavior?

So what would you want an educator to consider when a student appears withdrawn, frustrated, or disengaged?

Michael

That's a good question.

Yeah, for me you know I spoke about the um dreams delayed which is the addressing anti-Black racism in schools um it's it me being a Black child it's it's sometimes difficult to see all the levels of of uh bias within our system um other than getting in getting into altercations in school we are being called the n-word and then uh

having no response from my teachers in relation to the impact that was having on me and no connection with my parents.

So I think it's really important for educators to really understand, to do their work and understand their positionality in the classroom and that students are coming in with

all kinds of things external at home and within the classroom and that we're complex individuals and just you know have it's have patience, you know, have patience with your with your kids with the kids that you're educating um listen to them and if you can be as patient and as calm with them as you can

And it's not easy being a teacher.

My mother was a teacher.

And as a child, you just want to be seen for who you are.

And I didn't mention this in the article, but we lived in a very homogeneous town, and I mentioned that part.

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It would have been nice to have other Black students.

And if not, then having an advocacy or support group external that the school had connection with that can help bring me back into the education environment.

In where I currently work, we have that through our graduation coach program for middle school and high school students.

And those connections with schools and the community is really important if the child can't get all their needs met inside the classroom.

So that's one important component.

Steven

So that brings us to another tension that sometimes exists around accommodation.

Supporting a student does not mean expecting less from them.

So how can educators maintain high expectations while changing the pathway for a student who learns differently?

Michael

Yeah, we touched on this before.

When I got into university, which is much later, it was just this, you know, I had supports that when I started, so I had high expectations.

I had to produce exactly what my peers did, except I was able to

for example, to write my history exams in a separate room in a quiet room where I learned to in that moment to regulate myself.

It was a process of not only learning how to be academically proficient, but also healing myself in that moment and regulating being calm.

And I think that's what supports mean in the education environment that you're not.

It's not less.

It's just you're helping

a student navigate these challenges with assistive resources so they can be in a position to operate at the same level of their peers.

So just being flexible in the way that you can to build the confidence back up in the child.

Steven

Thank you for that.

And so you talked a little bit about it, but I just wanted to end off and coming back to the title, which I love.

The article, part of the article is called Not Yet, Not Less.

So what does that phrase mean to you now today?

Michael

I think this is an emotional one for me because when you say Not Yet, a lot of students believe that they're done, they're not.

that they've tuned out, you know.

And so that part, it's the responsibility for the educator really to get underneath that and really reach that student so they can get their mindset into a place where they believe, oh, there is a future, there's possibility for me, little steps they can take.

And through that, Not Less,

is challenging them, challenging them when making them know that they can handle difficult content, and that they are in it with their students.

And that just one thing can really mean a huge difference.

Steven

So, Michael, thank you.

I think that is a wonderful place for us to end.

Steven

For those listening, Michael's article, Not Yet, Not Less, Learning Disabilities, Belonging, and the Educator's Role in Preserving Dignity is available through LD@school, and I encourage you to read the full piece.

Michael, thank you for not only joining us today, but for trusting us with your story and giving educators so much to think about.

Thanks for listening to Talk LD+.

I'm Steven Reid from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.