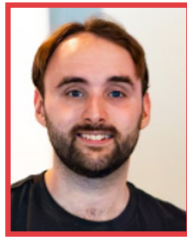


## Our Corner

### A Disclosure Story: Lessons Learned and Kept



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In fifth grade, I couldn't sit still. I understood why I was expected to sit at my desk in math class, but my body just wouldn't allow me to do it. As the teacher demonstrated methods for adding and subtracting fractions on the board, I would pace back and forth at the side of the room. I didn't think anyone would mind—I was doing what I needed to do to stay in the classroom. The teachers knew that I was autistic, so I didn't worry about their finding me strange. I worried more about what my classmates thought, but not too much. They were my friends, after all, and I'd known them since kindergarten. I was sure that they'd understand.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

For the first ten years or so of my life, it seemed that nobody really knew what autism was. People knew the word, and that it was a "disability", but they didn't see it as something that could vary among individuals. Rather, I found that the adults around me tended to make broad generalizations based on media portrayals – As a millennial who was born in the early 1990s, Dustin Hoffman's character in *Rain Man* was the most common comparison. Given that I was a child, my peers didn't even have this questionable way of "understanding" to fall back on, and I felt very alone.

As time went on, more people were being diagnosed with autism, and the limiting generalizations of the past began to fade. However, the idea of autistic people having a deficit of some kind remained. There were conversations

around autistic people struggling with sensorial experiences that many people do not seem to be affected by—bright lights, loud noises, the tastes of various foods. Social communication that did not match nonautistic norms was subject to scrutinization through special education and psychotherapeutic interventions. As I compared my experiences at school and home with those of my peers, I became aware of what was going on, and I felt a sense of shame around being autistic—a shame that I now deeply regret, but that was fueled by societal ableism.

All of this led to what was about to happen in my fifth-grade classroom. I'm not sure when it happened, but one of my classmates stayed behind to talk with my teacher. They asked why I was allowed to walk around in class and they were not, as they had trouble staying still too but didn't get that kind of support. The teacher, who to this day was one of my favorites, felt that this was a fair question. The system did not (and does not) allow for everyone to receive what they needed, which can cause an understandable resentment for those who are left behind. In my current doctoral studies, I have talked at length with classmates and faculty about how the services that are offered through IEPs are reasonable and appropriate for most students, and how the fact that we need a separate process for students with disabilities is indicative of how our educational system isn't designed to meet the needs of students who are marginalized in any way. In other words, although it was about my 'differences', my classmate's question was quite intelligent.

The next day, the teacher asked me to complete an errand for her. I don't remember the exact details, but I do recall that it would take about 15-20 minutes to complete and would take me to various locations around the school. I was accompanied by two classmates who, coincidentally, I considered my two closest friends, and felt quite proud of being trusted with this complex task. I did not think that anything was amiss – I'd been asked to do errands around the school in an attempt to give me the movement breaks that I needed, such as putting fliers in envelopes in the teacher's lounge or giving written messages to the school custodians about the 'gross job of the day'. However, on this day, the teacher saw this technique as the perfect strategy for something else.

As soon as I left the room, the teacher informed the class that there had been questions asked about me and the accommodations that I received. Without hesitation, she immediately stated that "Nathan gets these things because he has something called autism." My teacher then explained how autism can affect communication and social development before pulling out a case of Doug Flutie chocolate bars from underneath her desk and passing them out to the students. To their credit, the students were very mature about the situation and did not laugh or make any inappropriate remarks.

I returned to the classroom as she had a newspaper article about "Asperger's Syndrome" in one hand and chocolate bars that were intended to support autism research in another, but I still did not put two and two together. I knew that there were other autistic students who were placed in a substantially separate classroom and would join my class for specials, and I surmised that perhaps my teacher was talking about them. I even asked if I could have a Doug Flutie bar. It was only when the teacher said, "I'll let you have one if you tell the class that you're autistic." that I started to surmise what was happening. I reluctantly agreed, announced my diagnosis to the class, and returned to my seat shaking and completely discombobulated as the teacher abruptly ended the discussion and began passing out math tests.

*You might be thinking—how did I know the first part of my story happened if I had not been in the room?*

When I returned home, I logged online and chatted with a friend who had been present for the entire class discussion. I told him that I was slightly upset about what had happened and asked him what had occurred beforehand, not expecting that my suspicions would be confirmed. I told my mother about what had happened, and she immediately called the school. She hadn't even been told about what had happened.

The next day, my teacher called me aside and apologized

profusely to me. She appeared to be genuinely upset that I had been affected by the situation and told me about the question that my classmate had asked her. I began to understand after learning that my peers wanted to know more about the supports that I received, but I was still feeling hurt that I had not been a part of the process.

The lesson that I wish to impart from this story is simple. Issues around disclosure can be quite stressful for those who identify as having any kind of disability, but this is especially true for young children who may not have the emotional resources to handle these scenarios. Looking back, I acknowledge that it was important that my class knew that I was autistic, as I had already experienced ableist bullying and exclusion on the playground. However, I feel that students need to 'own' the process of disclosure and to do so when they feel ready. If it is forced, or if the initiative is taken without consulting the student, it can potentially affect their trust in the school faculty or create more stigma around disability in the classroom, as a teacher giving this explanation can inadvertently 'other' the student due to their being excluded from the conversation. If I had been given more of an active part in this process, I feel that I would not have been as singled out and would have potentially embraced the role of student-educator (I was always big into drama and acting in school!).

With this said, I have always admired this teacher for having the courage to admit her mistake and explain her good intentions to me. There had been other teachers in previous years who would have lied about the situation or even dismissed my feelings. The strongest educators in my eyes are the ones who do not pretend to be perfect, and who acknowledge that they are learning alongside the students. As such, I have long looked to this teacher as a role model for the kind of educator that I would like to be.

If you have a student who is interested in discussing autism with their classmates, there are a variety of resources that you can consult. There are several lesson plans online that discuss the meanings of both autism and the larger concept of neurodiversity (acceptance of neurological differences between people) and have many different activities that can be used to engage students – one especially detailed website that I found for elementary school teachers can be found here: <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/suggested-activities>. If a student is interested in sharing their own story as part of the lesson, think about how the student is most comfortable sharing this. Would this student prefer a video, a PowerPoint, or even a classroom activity? There are a wide range of options, but respecting the wishes of a student is paramount.

Best of luck!