

less than

Rick Barlow

A teacher reflects on his own experience with educational tracking.

While I don't remember everything about my first day of fourth grade, I remember the smell. Probably from a cleaning solvent that the janitors used over the summer. It's the same smell I'm greeted by as an adult when I return to my classroom each August to prepare for the new school year. To me, it's the first-day-of-school-smell.

I also remember a feeling of excitement and importance. Fourth grade was the highest grade level at my elementary school, and my classmates and I started the year energized. Though, for some of us, that excitement was soon tempered by new challenges.

For me, that new challenge was math class. In previous grades, we were with the same group of students and the same teacher all day, for all subjects. And this was the same in fourth-grade except for math class. Rather than staying with our homeroom teacher, we would have one of the other fourth-grade teachers for math. But we would not move together as a homeroom class. Hence the excitement. We were going to get to mix with the students from the other fourth-grade classes! I'm from a small town and knew most of the other students anyway. But changing teachers during the school day was something exclusive to fourth grade, and that made it exciting.

At some point on that first day during homeroom, each

kid was given the name of their new math teacher. And then we all moved to our newly assigned math classes, a process that must have been total chaos.



Sitting at my desk in my office, I tell myself 10 more minutes and then I have to get back to lesson planning. I set a timer on my phone and start flipping through headlines. I switch to Twitter—the teachers I follow are tweeting about first-week-of-school highs and lows. I sip strong black coffee and go back to reading news headlines. I move a pile of papers on top of another pile of papers. My attempt at feeling productive. The timer goes off.

I check my bank account. Then check email. My 10 more minutes has become 20. The timer long forgotten.



I don't remember much about the math class I was assigned to. But what I do remember seems so clear. My math teacher was stressed. There was another adult in the room. Maybe a student teacher? I never found out. And the class was very full. I had to share a desk with another student. A lot of students had to share desks. I remember the teacher was tall. I don't remember much else about her. I never really got to know her.

Then there was a quiz. I don't remember what was on the quiz. But I do remember I felt like I was on an elevator during that quiz. My stomach sinking as each question reminded me of what I didn't know.

The day after that quiz, everything started out the same. We went to homeroom and later transitioned to math. My math teacher told us that based on the results of the quiz, some students would be moving to a different fourth-grade math class. I was one of the first students whose name she called. I imagine I stood, conspicuous and embarrassed, at the side of the classroom as she called a few other names. The teacher told us which classroom to go for our new math class. And we went.

The new class was less crowded. We didn't have to share desks. I knew some of the kids from my homeroom and some from the bus ride to school. These were the loud kids. The kids that talked back to the teacher; the kids that got into trouble.

No one told me but I knew. Every kid in that room knew without having to be told. The teacher never said it out loud, but she still said it. We were in the dumb kids' math class. I had been a smart kid. And then I took that quiz and I wasn't smart anymore.



My shoulders are tense as I sit at my office desk. I still haven't gotten to lesson planning. I put down my phone and flip through the stack of cards and read my students' comments. Again.

Foundations class is for the dumb kids.

I'm glad I'm in Foundations because I'm not good at math.

I think that the Foundations class is a good fit for me because I am bad at math.

I had just finished my first day of class with my new group of seventh graders. At the end of class, I gave each student a notecard and asked them to tell me how they felt about being placed in the Foundations math class.



I had been a smart kid. And then I took that quiz and I wasn't smart anymore."

Foundations class is what my school calls the low math track. And a lot of the responses were what you'd expect from a group of rambunctious 7th graders on the first day of school: "it's fine" or "I don't like homework" or "give us more free time." But then there were the other responses.

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At no point during that first lesson did I tell them they were in the low class. I didn't mention the other math tracks. For the lesson, students completed a group task from Jo Boaler on using a graph to represent different emojis. Each group shared their results with the class. There was a productive class discussion about the work. And, as an exit ticket, I asked them what they thought about being placed in the Foundations class.

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Their words reminded me of my own experience in the low math track. Something I hadn't thought about for a long time. Actually, I don't think I've ever really thought about it. But now, sitting at my desk, distracted and anxious, the memory is overpowering. I smell the first-day-of-school smell. I feel the elevator feeling in my stomach. I hear the teacher explaining that some students will have to change math classes. The hot shame of public failure flashes across my face.



Having been placed into the low class in fourth grade put me on a track. In fifth grade I was also in the remedial class. And sixth grade. And seventh and eighth grade. And the track continued into high school where I was placed into a remedial math class that took a year to cover the first semester of freshman algebra. We learned half as much as the other students. In 10th grade, I took the other half of freshman algebra. Every year after the fourth grade seemed to only remind me that I was less than.

Around this time, I developed an interest in science, especially chemistry. I remember wanting to take Chemistry 2, which was considered an advanced class, when I was in 10th grade. But I couldn't because I didn't

have the math prerequisites. No one asked about my interest or what I wanted to learn. I was only told that I couldn't take the class I was most interested in. I was again reminded that I was less than.



Sitting at my desk, reading my own students' comments, thinking about my past and my present, I sigh.

My first fourth-grade math teacher, the one with the over-crowded room, was tasked with an impossible task that most teachers face: teach too many students with a broad range of skills. Her intent wasn't to label me as less than the other students; her intent was to have fewer (but probably still too many) students who were closer together in skill level. There is nothing wrong with a teacher wanting that. As a teacher, I want that! My fourth-grade math teacher didn't give that quiz with the intention of producing a feeling of less than. She wanted to figure out which kids needed more support.

But this is where the good intentions of my fourth-grade teacher, and of many teachers, have a real impact. Instead of learning current, fourth-grade math topics, I spent a large part of my time relearning topics from third-grade math. Which is why the next year, before I was even given the opportunity to learn fifth-grade math, I was already designated as behind. I was never learning the concepts needed to prepare me for the next grade level. For me, and a lot of other students in remedial classes, a consequence of more support is less learning.

Now, as a teacher, I understand that more support shouldn't mean less learning. And this has become my passion. I teach students that have been designated as needing math support. But I believe my students must still be given the opportunity to learn non-routine, challenging math. They must be given complex math problems that they will struggle with—problems they likely won't get correct. They must see that math is more than just problems on worksheets to solve and check. And they must also get support through smaller class size, a focus on essential skills, and (yes) some targeted reteaching of skills from prior math classes.

But the change must be more than structural. In fourth grade, I was labeled as behind in math. A label that followed me into adulthood and shaped my identity. And so, more than just change my lessons, I need to challenge the process used to label students.

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My students are not naive. Just like I knew, they know what being in the "Foundations" math class means. And while I can't change the system, I have the power to see the student behind the label. And to give students opportunities to be more than what that label affords them. An affirmation that, no matter what that quiz told me, no matter how I felt every year after fourth grade, I am no longer less than. I never really was.

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