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In Defense of Algebra

By *JESSICA LAHEY*

I admit it: I am one of the millions of Americans who suffer from math anxiety, and my math phobia runs deep. I shudder when the check arrives after dinner, then surreptitiously slide it toward my math-proficient husband. I love all aspects of my teaching job save for grading, which requires me to perform addition and division, and worse, assign inflexible numbers to my students' aptitude. I am happy to report that I have never, not once, used algebra in my everyday life.

Given my history with math, Prof. Andrew Hacker's Op-Ed article "[Is Algebra Necessary?](#)" should have prompted cheers and fist-bumps with my teenage son. What I got instead was wisdom from the mouth of babes. "Who says algebra isn't useful?" my son demanded as I slid him the headline. "It's useful - I mean, it's not useful now, but I don't know what I'm going to be. What if I want to be an engineer?"

Professor Hacker's article has clearly hit a nerve. His opinion piece has accumulated hundreds of comments, many from educators, engineers and mathematicians arguing for the merits of algebra. I claim no such expertise; my perspective is personal.

I know precisely where I lost my battle with math, the moment I was informed clearly and unequivocally that I simply wasn't "a math person." My seventh-grade math teacher, an otherwise lovely man, called each of his students up to his desk one by one in order to write a "1" (for the honors track) or "2" (for the standard track) on the school's official math placement forms. As I watched from over his hunched and courduroyed shoulder, he wrote a beautiful, decisive and neat "1" on my form.

There it was, in permanent ink. I was good at math.

"Jess, could you come back up here for a minute?" he asked as I floated back to my seat.

He reclaimed my form, and carefully overlaid that beautiful "1" with a dark, clumsy "2," pressing hard with his black pen in order to make sure the ink obliterated any evidence of his indecision.

And from then on, I wasn't good at math anymore.

From the moment I was relegated to standard math, I knew I was never going to be an engineer. I went through the motions of my math education, but never put any heart into the subject. My teachers didn't push back very hard because the evidence was in: I just wasn't a math person. I'd make it through to the day I could opt out of math forever, and I would never look back.

Except, I did. For years, I have eyed my colleague Alison Gorman's math classroom with wary suspicion. I peek in on her class when I hear laughter, wondering what could possibly inspire mirth in algebra class. I have watched with wonder during recess when her MathCounts students show up with their lunches, willing to spend valuable leisure time challenging each other to think through math problems.

At the same time, my son was beginning to come home with math work I could not understand, let alone help him with, and my math deficits had become a household joke. When Ben started to have trouble with the occasional math problem, I realized he had hit a crucial moment in his education. It was time for me to rewrite my own past in order to set an example and protect his future, whether or not he decides to become an engineer. I took my chance - and "enrolled" in Mrs. Gorman's Algebra I.

Alison Gorman knows about my history with math, but she steadfastly refused to view me as a "2." She has taught me much more than the quadratic formula and the fact that $(x^2 + y^2)^2 = (x^2 - y^2)^2 + (2xy)^2$. I have learned discipline and the importance of linear, organized thinking. I have learned patience, diligence and shockingly, I have learned that I am good at math. Even my teenage son has been impressed by my efforts, and believe me, very little impresses him these days.

Algebra class has made me a better student, but more important, it has made me a better teacher and parent. I will be far less likely to impose fixed values and expectations on children, because you know what I learned in algebra class? Even the simplest equations can contain more than one variable. And for that lesson alone, algebra is necessary.