

EDUCATING THE UNDERDIAGNOSED

Lived Experience as an Autistic Female

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(Additional Notes)

When I was in the younger grades of elementary school I had more of a hard time communicating what was going on inside my head at any given time. It caused a lot of blocks for me, where I was unable to speak, and when I did I wasn't able to articulate very clearly.

This was mostly because I myself didn't understand what was causing me to be upset or uncomfortable, and the truth was, in my early years I was uncomfortable or frustrated a lot without knowing the reason.

I think this is a huge part of being female on the spectrum, or perhaps just being on the spectrum at all. Being in a state where you don't fully understand the reasons behind the way that you feel something. You do get used to it, but it's not an enjoyable feeling, not understanding something, and so you just get used to being in a "not great" place.

Therefore, whenever someone you know helps you to understand yourself, or understands you it's such an amazing feeling. Not only I suppose there are the initial feelings of acknowledgement and validation, but there is such a relief to be free from being uncomfortable or frustrated for a moment. It's like a pressure is relieved, a weight is lifted, or a cloud is parted.

I had teachers who were able to reach me this way, and it was a marvelous experience for me. These teachers were able to see my atypical behaviour as the communication it closely was intended to be, or were able to notice how I came to the assumption or thought process that I had. Sometimes it wasn't about being "fully understood" so much as it was about not being "grossly misunderstood", and the more unique or quirky my teachers seemed to be, the less that these misunderstandings would happen.

One teacher in particular noticed that I was reading only a certain author, and helped me to find more books from that author. It seems like a small thing, or like nothing at all perhaps. But to myself, reading these books was a specialized interest, and I was being heard.

Another teacher noticed that I was persistently being bullied and excluded during a particular class, and made a decision to stop the class. He brought me into a quiet room with a couch and some books

and said I could hang out there. Meanwhile he met with the class about what had been occurring, and got their input on the situation. From what I understand, the class did end up having a productive conversation about not only myself, and how I was a bit different or difficult, but also what it means to be a student around a person who is different, and do that in an inclusive way. I really ended up respecting that teacher and continue to this day.

I also had teachers who I tried to communicate with where the communication didn't happen well for me. For example, I used to think of inanimate objects fondly as if they had feelings and could be hurt, become happy, be sad, etc. Anthropomorphize, I think it is called perhaps. I'm not sure. Anyways, I had a teacher and everytime she went to sit down on the children's sized chairs I would get so upset and scared for... the chair! Like it was too much for an adult to sit on a child sized chair, because it might really hurt the chair. I would cry out loudly in class feeling really upset about this, and it would end up hurting the teacher's feelings because she didn't understand what I was thinking. She thought that I was insulting her size. While she was a large person, I was myself just really alarmed for the chair, who I was considering in the equation.

I used to think everyone thought what I was thinking, so I would get quite upset or confused when I found out this wasn't the case. Learning that people thought differently, and sometimes contrary to myself was hard for me to take. I did not get it, I wanted things to be easier, and I thought that everything would be easier if people just thought what I thought.

Rigid thinking caused a lot of frustrations in school, and probably deterred a lot of friendships from being truly formed, in the way that my peers were able to make friendships.

Being hung up on the social rules, once I learnt a few of them was a huge thing for me. My peers were breaking social rules often, with seemingly no consequence. But not for me. For example, you are not supposed to hit if you expect to have friends, but people are "play hitting" their friends a lot, and this is okay. So I punched my peer in the arm like I saw it done, and it was totally uncool and no one liked it.

Also for example, you should say nice things to your friends, and not mean things. But I saw people teasing each other by saying mean things to their friends, so I said something mean to my peer, and their face went funny and they did not like it one bit. These things are difficult for someone who is autistic to understand. They cannot be explained properly, because they involve nuance. I am 38, and my friends are still explaining nuance to me.