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### Identity and Positionality

My middle school guidance counselor did not want me to be in honors classes. Even though I had been at the top of my class all throughout elementary school, she was afraid that “I wouldn’t have what it takes.” These were actual words she told me after I was only one point away from meeting the required grade on the science placement test two weeks before school started.

My mom had to push her to even let me take that test after I was denied access at the end of the school year. It took a month of my mom calling their office for them to give in and concede that I could take the test at the end of the summer. We had to prove that my aunt, who was a sixth-grade science teacher at a different elementary school in the district, would tutor me during the summer. For some reason, they were very concerned with not wasting my time or me getting my hopes up.

When I finished the test, my guidance counselor graded the exam and informed me that I had passed, but was one point away from being able to make it into the class. She looked sad and passive-aggressively told me that I could do it, but should I? I remember being really sad and disappointed in myself for being so close, but I told her I really wanted to try. After I made my case, she erased my grade and made it a little higher saying, “Don’t tell anyone that you didn’t really pass.” The only reason that comment didn’t destroy me was that when my aunt had been tutoring me every week throughout the summer, I learned more than I had all year. She introduced me to microscopes and the layers of the earth and so much more. How would I ever have been expected to pass that exam before she tutored me? Short answer: The people deciding who would take the test didn’t think I would pass, so I was never even given the chance to fail.

Once the school year started, I was suddenly in class with strangers. Only two of my classmates from elementary school were in honors with me. My new peers had known how to use a microscope since fifth grade and they mostly all knew each other. I was now an outsider. This was made even more clear because since I was forced to take the science placement exam at the end of the summer, there was no more room in the seventh-grade honors science class. One reason why my guidance counselor was not excited to pass me was I would be in a science class with eighth graders instead. I went into that class knowing the least, but I left with the highest test scores proving all of them wrong because they were scared I would give up and not succeed.

Here are some questions I had as I was going through this challenging process:

Why did my mom have to put so much effort into getting my counselor to allow me to take a thirty-minute exam? Answer: The school was scared that if they let me take it when I wasn't supposed to, more families would push for their kids to be in honors.

Why would this be a bad thing? Answer: The school did not have enough teachers to maintain more than one section of each honors class in middle and high school.

Back then I did not know why my mom was so adamant that I was in honors science and English. She wasn't pushing for me to be in honors math and that did not make sense to me. (I would have hated honors math and she knew that. I think she was picking her battles.) She knew that I would be bored in the other classes. She also knew that I had passed both exams, I just had not passed enough to be considered for the honors classes. She knew I had what it would take to succeed and enjoy myself in the process. She, and my aunt who tutored me, were fortunate enough to have navigational and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). My aunt had worked within the system for the past twenty years and knew the topics on the test because she had administered it to students

in her elementary school that year. (Of course, they had to change it when I took it later in case someone gave me a copy to cheat.) My mom believed in me more than I did at the time. She wanted me to be better and have confidence, which she knew I would gain from being in challenging classes.

Another question:

Why was it so important that I take and pass the science placement test before seventh grade started? Why could I not wait until eighth grade and then go to honors?

Answer: My school used tracking in academics.

If I did not take and passed that test when I did, I would never have been able to get into honors science. I did not understand why this was such a big deal, but now I know that I would have missed out on taking AP Chemistry (one of my favorite classes in high school) because a few people did not think I had what it takes to succeed at a higher academic caliber. Come to find out, my district is not as difficult as the ones nearby.

They also had material hope. They had the resources to teach me the science I needed to take the exam (Duncan, 2009). They knew it would be completely unreasonable for me to take it without studying with the right tools first. Luckily, my aunt had those tools and the time to teach them to me. Without her support, I would have definitely failed like my middle school guidance counselor thought I would. They could not give me the support I needed to succeed, and I think they were hoping that I would not notice I was missing anything.

I hope they (my school administration) were happy that I did academically succeed all throughout middle and high school. I hope they realized their mistakes and were able to help others in similar positions as mine. Knowing my school district, I know my hopes are unfulfilled. They did not learn anything from my experience. They were just hoping I would not tell anyone that they

were bending the rules for me. They are dealing with a severe lack of funding, which partly led to the closure of my elementary school. They could not afford to hire new teachers so they could have more than one section of each honors class. They could not afford to introduce microscopes earlier because they were only awarded to schools with teachers who had the time to apply for grants to pay for those microscopes and other important supplies. The teachers at my school were overworked and could not put any more effort into a school that gave them so little in return. The phrase “We do it for the outcomes, not the incomes” was coined by someone who has never had to live paycheck to paycheck. Expecting teachers to “go the extra mile” for their students when no one is doing that for them is a cruel reality of being a teacher in my elementary school, and I’m sure at the other three in my district, but not to the same degree.

Students should not be forced to rely on the good faith of their teachers to succeed. If my mom had not noticed that I was being left behind because of my comments about my friend taking a science test during gym, I definitely would have slipped through the cracks like the majority of my classmates. It should be built into the system that classes can be flexible, but since the teachers are expected to do so much, this cannot be a reality right now. Students are left to support themselves and if they are lucky enough to have family and/or friends as I did it makes all the difference in successfully advocating for themselves when the school system is stacked against them.

Looking back, I realize that other students were also probably in my position and didn’t even realize it. The only difference between me and them was my mom. They may not have had someone who knew the system as well as she did who could advocate for them to be challenged. I am forever grateful to my mom and aunt for pushing me to succeed and prove that I deserved to be in the more difficult classes. I have used this experience to realize that as a future teacher, I want to learn about all of my students. I want to learn what they want to do after their time in my class is over, so I can help them achieve their goals. If my teachers had known that I wanted to be in the honors classes,

they may have been able to put more of an effort in to make that happen. However, they were too busy and I (at the time) was too shy to ask them for help. From this experience, I learned that asking for help is the first step to getting what you want. If help is never asked for, the people who can support you will never know what you need.

## References

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