

Sheila's World

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Sheila had the best set of defenses I'd ever met in a severely learning-disabled student. She was obviously intelligent; it takes intelligence to figure out how to get a high school diploma and enter even a community college with academic skills as weak as Sheila's.

Sue, the remedial math teacher, referred Sheila to me because she knew Sheila wouldn't be able to complete the work in the remedial math class. She'd already failed it once (and, it turns out, had failed remedial math at a previous college). College math teachers, even remedial teachers at a community college, assume their students know basic arithmetic facts. Sue thought I might be able to help Sheila because I was the reading specialist, and I was used to students who were beginning somewhere around a second-grade level, academically at least, and often in other ways.

Figuring out how to adapt math to the Orton-Gillingham method of teaching reading was challenging but interesting. Figuring out how to get through Sheila's defenses was exhausting.

She was proficient at playing off one person against another. She showed up for the first three tutoring sessions with her math homework from Sue's class. Each time I explained carefully that I was not going to help her with her math course; I was working on basic numeracy. Each time she went back to tell Sue "she won't help me." Fortunately, Sue and I ran into one another frequently enough that, even with five-minute "quick, because I have a class" exchanges we kept ourselves straight. Jane does not help Sheila with her homework. Sue is not teaching basic numeracy in her class. Sheila should stay out of the math lab; another person will

just confuse her. Eventually, Sue persuaded Sheila to withdraw from the remedial math class and concentrate on basic arithmetic.

Sue said to me, “She’s registered for remedial math with me again next spring. Why me? Why do I get this one?” and I said, “Probably because you are the first person in her life who said to her, ‘I can’t teach you, but I will find someone who can teach you,’ and you did.” Sheila, it turned out, had left a swath of confusion, fear, rage, and exhaustion in her path. She had somehow convinced the registrar that she’d passed freshman composition (instead of having failed both remedial reading and remedial writing at the same place she’d failed remedial math), and registered for a second-level composition course. The previous semester, my patient officemate had spent hours with Sheila, untangling her ideas and then telling her to sit down and write out that paragraph for him, then going over how to revise it. He described her as “the most learning disabled student I have taught in my 35 years at the college.” I don’t know whether she really earned the C- or whether he felt they both had to get some return on the investment.

My office mate also has a highly-developed social conscience, and I expect Sheila played on it. Another of her coping skills involved the “rescue me” technique: everyone else has done such a bad job, but you’re such a good teacher that I know I can learn from you. Bill was the white knight who rescued her from the attacks of the ill-willed. I think she hoped to put me up on that horse, too, mourning that I didn’t teach the writing class I recommended she take.

The flip side of “rescue me,” with which she’d thrown most of the Music Department into paroxysms of fury, was “If you weren’t doing such a bad job as a teacher, I wouldn’t be having problems.” It was never her fault that she failed Fundamentals of Music and private piano twice. She used the “bad teacher” technique, too, on the peer tutors in the Center for

Reading and Writing, a fact I didn't find out until the end of the semester, when it was too late to tell them not to work with her.

But Sheila's main strength, and probably the one that got her through high school, was having other people work for her. She would guess at answers—carefully gauging the teacher's body language until she picked up on the right answer. If the right answer didn't come, eventually the teacher would give up and supply it (which is why Linda, a peer tutor, nearly in tears, admitted she'd written half of Sheila's music paper herself. "She would just sit there and say, 'Well, what should I say?' and I sat with her for half an hour and nothing got down. In the end, she stayed for an hour and a half, and I was *exhausted*." That's why peer tutors needed to be kept away from Sheila). Riffs on this technique were, "Oh, didn't I say that?" "That's what I meant to say," "Oh, yes, I knew that; I just forgot," and rushing past the wrong answer, hoping that the teacher wouldn't notice and make her correct the work.

The avoidance and alliance techniques sometimes combined. That, and liberal use of calculators, may have been why apparently no one else had noticed that, when Sheila added and had to carry (or regroup, as my math colleagues now say), she carried to the right. For the first time I realized how confusing math is: sometimes you go right to left and sometimes you go left to right, and there don't seem to be any rules about when you go which way. "It's confusing," I said to her. "When you read"—which, in fact, I'm not sure Sheila can do—"you read from left to right and that's normal. In this case, you're going to right to left, which is confusing."

"Like Hebrew," she said to me.

"Exactly!" I said. "Good for you. It goes from right to left, like Hebrew." (My dyslexic daughter, who has an honors degree in math, pointed out that a great deal of our math comes

from the Arabs, who also go right to left.) Sheila pounced on the fact that I knew Hebrew to elicit the fact that we are both Jewish; from there, she managed to miss half the tutoring sessions for three weeks, first, because she couldn't keep the time straight and second, she said, because of Passover, although, as a Reform Jew, she observed only one day of the holiday and certainly had no reason to miss an entire week. Allied with me in religion, however, she might use discussion of our similarities to avoid the math. I refrained from cementing this alliance, knowing that would be the end of math for the session. I smiled politely and said, "Yes, lovely," and "No, not too many," when she asked enthusiastically if I'd had a nice seder and had I had a lot of guests? and went on to review vocabulary again.

"Difference?"

"Subtraction."

"You're right about the function, Sheila. Good! Now, what part of subtraction is difference?"

"Difference is another word for subtraction."

"Not just another word, Sheila; it's a specific number in a subtraction problem. Which number is it?"

"Can I look at my card?" (We had made up a pack of vocabulary cards for Sheila to use.)

"Absolutely. That's what the cards are for. It's much better to look than just guess."

The definition of progress is contextual. I worked with Sheila for ten weeks. It took her six weeks to settle into a schedule. During the last four weeks, we met regularly, and Sheila began to make progress on the intricacies of math vocabulary, doing basic functions in the ten-base number system, and understanding the use and meaning of a decimal point. This took her

about through the first two weeks of the material for the remedial math class, and I don't know if she will remember much of it during the summer. However, I would say unconditionally that Sheila made tremendous progress. First, she bought—and used regularly—an appointment calendar. At the end of every lesson, she would pull out the calendar and check to be sure she'd written down our next meeting and check with me to be sure I had the same thing. It was with her mastery of the calendar that we finally began a regular three-times-a-week tutoring schedule.

The most important thing Sheila learned, however, was to stop guessing. “I'm confused,” she'd say to me, when, for the third week in a row we would look at a division problem (5980 divided by 65) and she couldn't figure out how many times 65 went into 5 or 59, or when I said, “six AND four-tenths” and she wrote down 64.0 or .64. “Good for you!” I'd respond, enthusiastically, “I'm so glad you realize you're confused and you say so instead of trying to guess. Let me think of a better way to explain it to you,” and I would pull out the chart, the pennies, the dimes, the dollar coins, and wish I myself understood better the conceptual foundations of math.

I worry about what will happen to Sheila if her coping mechanisms are not immediately replaced with methods that lead to success. I wish that someone would take her away and enroll her in Lindamood-Bell for five hours a day, five days a week, for six months. I wonder what makes me think I'm qualified to teach her math. I am appalled at our public education system that dumps a woman in her thirties into college unable to add 45 and 56 correctly.