

listenN: In episode two, I'm going solo. I want to touch base on something that I hinted at in a previous episode introduction, and that's my difficult early education. I had a couple of listeners pick up on that soundbite, reach out and ask me to explain or expand on it, so I thought, hey, no better time than the present. Let me just dive in and let me explain my story and my journey through the education system.

Brian: So I've got a bit of a riddle for you, okay? I started school at the right age and I graduated high school at the right age, but I was never in grade four, and how could that happen? But also I was never in grade four, five, or six math. And how did that happen? Well, my story's a bit unique, and I thought I would share it with you because it hints to some of the things that I talked about in a previous episode introduction where I said I had a very difficult time with the education system of one language, being the language of English. So I was born in Powell River, British Columbia, and Powell River is 170 kilometers sort of straight north up the coast of Vancouver, but that 170 kilometers takes about five hours to travel because you have to take two ferries.

And so there is some road stretch, there's some ferry stretch. So it's basically a remote community on some levels. And back in 1967, it was the perfect type of community where educators, scientists, you name it, you know, they love to do their little experiments. And so when I was in grade one, I ended up in a program that was called I.T.A., and I.T.A. I think stood for Initial Teaching Approach or something like that, and it was this concept that you would learn English in a different way. You'd learn to spell and read differently, and over a three year period of time, they would take you and try and roll you into regular English with the hopes that you would have learned better. I mean, it sounds kind of bizarre just even saying that, but anyways, let's teach you something at those formative years when you're supposed to be learning what everybody else is learning, let's teach it to you differently, and then let's see if you end up smarter, or I don't even know what the studies were planning to find.

I'm sure it's all online, and I'm sure there's people out there that know a lot more about this than I do. I just have my own personal experience with it, because what happened for me was in grade one I was taught I.T.A., which is a 36 some odd letter alphabet where things are spelled and dealt with completely differently than in English. And in grade two and in grade three, you were supposed to transition into regular English. But what happened for me was at the end of grade one, my family got transferred to Vancouver. And so for grade two, I showed up in a North Vancouver classroom with a school system and a teacher and a principal who had no idea what I.T.A. was and had no understanding that this was something that they had to deal with. They just dealt with me as you're a dumb kid when it comes to reading and writing, and we're just going to teach you and hopefully you catch up to the rest of the kids.

And then to add insult to injury, I spent the first seven years, I believe, in elementary school going to a different elementary school every single year. So every single year I was the new kid. Every single year, this explanation had to be told to the teachers by my mother, who herself was a grade one teacher so she understood some of the complexities of what was happening to me, but she would explain it to the teachers and the teachers again would be like, "Okay, well, you know, he's just behind. He's a year behind everybody else." So what ends up happening is I end up in a situation where I'm always behind, and people are making fun of me and people are kind of laughing at the way I spell or how I pronounce things or how I can't read out loud, and this is just my experience and I don't know any differently, so that's just how school becomes for me.

But then at the start of grade four, we moved from Vancouver to St. John, New Brunswick, and there it all turned weird. So what happened there was they decided that I was fully a year behind, not just in reading and writing, but in math and in physical development with everything. They really just labeled me a kid who needed to go back a grade. And so I was taken in about the second week of school, picked up my little desk, had to carry it out of the classroom, and go down the hall. And the irony of all of this was the kids in my class all were whispering to me like, "Are you going to grade five or have you been skipped?" None of them thought I was going back to grade three, but that's where I went, and I didn't just go back to grade three. I went back to a split two and three, so there were kids that were in grade two and learning grade two stuff, and kids in grade three that were learning grade three stuff.

And then this oversized dorky kid from British Columbia who was stuck in this classroom to relearn grade three stuff. And I did it. I went through it, everything was fine. I mean, there was some humiliations along the way, like the spring concert or whatever. We would have to do these really stupid skits that a grade two class would do, not a grade four class would do. And so I was humiliated on that level, but other than that I was fine, and I still had kids my own age in the neighborhood and I played with them and I developed with them, so that's all fine. But then we come back to Vancouver because my family gets transferred back. And so now it's grade five, but I'm in grade four and my mother puts me into grade four, and a few weeks into grade four, the teachers come to my mom and say, "What's this kid doing in grade four?"

And so my mother explains what happened out east and they said, "Well, this is ridiculous. We're putting him into grade five. Oh and by the way, we're also going to put him into grade seven math, because he's really smart at math." And so I go from not being in grade four, not learning what you're supposed to learn in grade four, not learning math of grade four, and I end up skipping over grade four and I end up having to learn all of grade six, seven math in grade seven. So I miss grade four math, grade five math, grade six math, and I get dropped into this kind of math achiever class. And I'm again sinking and swimming and trying to make this all work out for myself.

So one of the most interesting things about this type of challenge is that it's very isolating because you're the only one going through it. I can remember being in high school, I think I was in grade eight, and they were deciding whether or not I should go into French, which everybody was doing in Canada. French was the second language, and they decided to not allow me to go into French because I was struggling so hard with English, and they put me in a sort of tutorial class, and I'll never forget the first day because I guess it was a grade 12 or somebody was tutoring me and he got me to spell a bunch of words and one of the words I spelled was enough, and I spelled it A-N-U-F, and that's how I was taught to spell it.

And he just broke out laughing at me because he thought it was just so insane that I would spell a word like enough A-N-U-F. I'm not sure if that tutorial helped me at all, but it did help me understand that I was really far off. Like, I wasn't even in the ballpark of how spelling worked. And here I was in grade eight in high school and I was already getting special attention focusing on this problem that I'd developed, and it was so simple. It was just programming that happened at an early age, but nobody understood that because nobody understood this whole I.T.A. concept, because it wasn't widely known. One of the key drivers for me was that rebellious, I'll show you kind of attitude that some people can have. So some people, some people get this, oh I got to run away and hide, or I'm not going to expose myself, and other people kind of get a I'll show you kind of attitude.

And what happened for me is when I was 12, the year before I entered high school, I was in grade seven and my father passed away quite abruptly from a heart attack, and at the family sort of get together on the day that he had passed away where all the family comes over and they bring food and condolences, and the kids just kind of, you walk around kind of stunned because you're not really sure what's happening and why all these grownups are taking this, you know, so much attention on you and your family when you're just kind of wanting to be alone. And I had an uncle at that time who said to me in, sorry, said to my brother in front of me, my older brother, "You better watch out for this one. He's going to turn out bad." And the meaning of that was, he doesn't have a father. He's 12 years old, he has no father.

And at that time, back in the early 70s, there wasn't a lot of divorce going on. There wasn't a lot of fatherless boys running around the neighborhoods. And so I was just labeled as you're going to be bad. And what that did for me was actually a huge gift, because it made me go, no I'm not, and I'll prove to you, I'll show you, and that I'm going to show you kind of attitude took me a long way. I mean, it took me up against authority figures, which wasn't necessarily a positive thing. There were moments in high school and moments in my life where I've absolutely confronted authority in a I'll show you kind of way, which hasn't worked out necessarily the best for myself. But that kind of attitude really helped me when it came to education, because I wanted to prove to everybody that I wasn't that dumb kid. I wasn't a year behind.

And so by the time I got out of high school, I decided that I wanted to go to university, and in order to get in, I had to go to college and get better grades to be able to get into the university program that I wanted. So I went to a community college and I buckled down and I read everything three or four times, and I studied my brains out and I ended up getting straight As. And what I realized was, I had been given a license to coast. I'd been given a license to have an excuse on why I wasn't a good student. And this whole I.T.A. thing, it actually gave me this get out of jail free card that you don't have to be an academic, you don't have to be smart. And what I did is by challenging myself in college, which I had never done in high school because I was coasting, I realized holy crap, I can do this, I can get good grades.

And with that came the confidence of, well if I can figure this out, I can also figure out how to spell and how to read properly. And that's what kind of got me to dive into it, as I say, to run into it and go what can I do? How can I show people that I'm smart? So what this did for me is it gave me the confidence to just dive in and start to learn new things. And at the same time, I was noticing how all these kids that were in high school that were straight A students in high school were starting to have really difficult times in university, and it was because they had applied themselves 100% in high school and they'd already maxed out, and when they got to university they had no more to give. But university was demanding a lot more from them.

And so you know, the big shout out to anybody who is going through a difficult time with an education system would be, you know what, just keep applying yourself, because you know what? You might just find out one day you are smart. You might be smarter than everybody else, or you might be just smart enough to get by. But the point is, you've got the smarts, you've got the ability to do it and not give up and not think okay, because of this life experience or because of this thing that happened to me, I've got a get out of jail free card. I can coast because I'm not smart or my family's not smart. And I think that education is a brilliant, wonderful gift, and it can also be a horrific sort of albatross around your neck if you get labeled as somebody who can't.

And I think that the school system and society in general is great at labeling people or putting people into boxes, but you know what? Don't allow that to happen. Don't allow it to happen to you. Don't allow it to happen to your kids. Don't allow it to happen to your friends and your loved ones, because everybody is capable of learning and everybody is capable of advancing. And I think that the one lesson that I learned in all of that was just apply yourself. You'll know when you're maxed out, you'll know when you have nothing more to give. Don't allow others to tell you when it's time to give up. So that's the sort of interesting aspect of what can happen to you when you are part of a system where the system just goes a bit weird for you.

I mean, it doesn't go horribly wrong. I still graduated high school, I went on to university, I got a commerce degree. So you know, I'm not a product of a broken system that I can point to and say like, look what the education system did to me. But what I did experience was everything that could have so easily pointed me in a direction that didn't involve higher education. I mean, I talk about this from time to time with other people about the concept of running into something as opposed to running away from it, and in this case with myself with education, I chose to prove to other people that I wasn't that dumb kid. And I taught myself how to spell, and I taught myself how to read and how to love reading, and I taught myself how to get good grades in university, and I ended up pulling it all together by choosing to run into the problem as opposed to away from the problem.

What I'd love to do with this podcast is I'd love to reach out and ask if there's anybody out there listening who went through the I.T.A. process or who knows somebody who went through the I.T.A. process. I'd love to hear their story, learn if they went through the three year transition period and how that worked out. Did they integrate fully into the education system, were they always labeled as behind like I was, or did they actually have a unique advantage and do extremely well? I'd love to hear your story. Reach out to me at listennpod.com. That's listen with two Ns, pod.com, and I'd love to hear your story.

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