

Raven Jordan

Power Autobiography

Growing up in the rural south I was taught from childhood, not necessarily by my single mother but rather at school and from church and community leaders, to believe that the people with power were my elders and that children were meant to be seen not heard unless outside, at a playground, or directly spoken to by an adult. I always assumed that adults had all the power and that kids had none and should be obedient. While there may be a time or place for that sentiment, I can now say with certainty that when I think and look back on my youth, I wholeheartedly disagree with that teaching. Being taught to respect my elders and listen closely is one thing, but being told to be quiet and only speak when spoken to is another because it led me to believe from a very early age that I had no power and either didn't have a voice or wasn't smart enough to say anything worth being heard. Both are wrong, but thankfully it didn't keep me from advocating for myself when the time eventually came for me to step into my power.

I can distinctly remember the first time I felt something was wrong with my education and naturally the first thing I did was go to my mom. There was no one I trusted more than my mother and no one else I truly believed would listen intently to my troubles and worries. Allow me to set the scene before I get ahead of myself. I was in the second grade and I couldn't stand my math teacher. I felt she had something against me, though at the time I couldn't name what; I just felt that something was off. I was one of the only Black or Brown kids in my second grade math class with this particular teacher and to say her and I had some issues is quite the understatement. She, a white woman, made comments about my hair beads being too distracting for my classmates, that I wore too much jewelry and needed to be less girly, and most importantly that I wasn't smart enough to be in the Gifted and Talented group of second and third graders at my school, of which she was in charge. I knew I was bright and I always received good grades. I did my homework, had my mother check it, and made sure it was turned in on time. I had stellar, though admittedly not perfect, attendance and I had a deeply ingrained passion for learning. My home room teacher, Ms. Hastings, had referred me to my math teacher and told her that she believed I would be an excellent fit for the Gifted and Talented Math group. She even went as far as to send a note home to my mom about her recommendation. I was so proud bringing that note home and was on cloud nine just thinking about being in the group. I knew that the smartest kids in the school got to be a part of that group and that they had special assignments and got to go on educational field trips that the

rest of us didn't and at that point in my life, there wasn't anything I wanted more. Nevermind the fact that there was not a single student of color in the Gifted and Talented Math group despite there being about a quarter of the population in the second and third grades, which I now recognize was a huge red flag.

Fast forward a few weeks and my math teacher still hadn't said or done anything to admit me into the Gifted and Talented Math group at my school. I mentioned this to my mom who told me repeatedly to be patient. But weeks turned to months and still neither my mom nor I heard anything. At this point the school year was more than half-way over, so I urged my mom to reach out to Ms. Hastings to see what the next steps were in getting me in the group, to which she obliged. Ms. Hastings followed through and told us that my math teacher would soon be reaching out. Some more time had passed and she eventually called my mom in for a meeting. I remember my mother and I got dressed all nice to make a good impression and went up to the school expecting to receive the great news that I would be steadfastly admitted into this group and for my mom to maybe have to sign some field trip papers. Unfortunately, none of that happened. Instead, we went to this meeting with my math teacher who told us that though I was certainly bright and had a lot of potential, that I wasn't a good fit for the group. My mother pushed back and said she didn't understand why considering I had great grades, especially in math, and a recommendation from my homeroom teacher. My math teacher had some sort of shallow rebuttal about how I couldn't pick up the math concepts the kids in the group I so desperately wanted to be part of were working on and that I would likely struggle with the material. I knew that wasn't true. I knew that I would work so hard every day to understand everything that was put in front of me and more. I knew that being part of the group would only push me further to succeed. I knew exactly what I wanted to say, but I wasn't sure if it was worth making this teacher like me even less. So I stayed silent. My mom didn't know what to say or what she could do in this situation, after all we were expecting good news, so we went home that evening totally defeated. My math teacher held all the power. It could have ended there, but luckily it didn't.

A few mornings after our meeting with the math teacher and subsequent head of the Gifted and Talented Math group, we began to see things a bit more clearly. My mother started asking me questions about the types of kids who were in the group, white kids all with parents who were well off financially - a stark contrast to our low-income, mixed raced one - and reviewed all of my math homework, tests, and grades to see what she already knew to be true, that I was in fact very good at, some may even say talented at math. I watched my mom as she stepped into

her power and led the path forward thus encouraging me to step into mine, too. We went down to my school and had conversations with the Dean, the Assistant Principal, and my other teachers all who confirmed that I was without a doubt one of the smartest in my grade and performed exceptionally in all subjects, math included. We went back and forth with my math teacher all year and I learned that I did have a voice and, just as importantly, that I had something important to say that was worth being heard. The end of the school year came and I never did make it into that Gifted and Talented Math group, but I learned something more than what that would have taught me anyway. I learned that my voice was my power and that I had to use it when I saw or experienced something that wasn't right. My math teacher excluding me, and maybe other kids who came from a background or race different from her own, showed me that staying silent and allowing things to just happen to me without my consent wasn't something I had to stand back and watch happen. My first real experience witnessing unequal power dynamics was an invaluable lesson that I still draw from today to encourage myself and others.

Thankfully, my story does have a bit of a good ending. I got my just desserts years later in the seventh grade where, if you can even believe it, I was put into the highest level math class, excelled, and went on to be tied for valedictorian of my high school's graduating class. So I thank my second grade math teacher for teaching me something she hadn't even intended to teach me, that I had power all along, and with some hard work and the determination to keep pushing forward, that I can make things better for myself and hopefully for others along the way.