

Stop the torture: End forced algebra

Colman McCarthy | Sep. 13, 2012

It has taken me decades to reveal this publicly, but as a lad of 14 at St. Dominic High School, Oyster Bay, N.Y., I was a victim of child abuse. The merciless torture, which heaved me into a miasma of pain, went on for nine months, five days a week in dispiriting 50 minute sessions. It began in September, this time of year. Up against the might of my abuser, I was helpless.

The abuse? Being forced to take algebra.

Class period after class period, binomial theorems, quadratic equations, logarithmic functions and exponentials were among the mysteries I was ordered to understand. Worse, I was told to appreciate them. The St. Dominic nun was Sr. Mary Jekyll. Outside the classroom, she was a model of Irish sweetness. Inside, she was Sr. Mary Hyde, telling us students that algebra was not only necessary for worldly success but making an A in the course would please Jesus -- plus the admissions office at some fine Catholic college like her beloved Notre Dame.

As an abuse survivor still recovering from PTASD (post-traumatic algebra stress disorder), I had a panic attack the other day on learning that legislatures in 20 states have decreed that high school graduation requirements include not only Algebra I but Algebra II. One year of abuse is not enough. Suffer some more, kids. Algebra will teach you to think.

The country is going through another periodic national groan in which politicians call for more academic rigor in the math classrooms. Achieve, a Washington group started in 1996 by governors and corporate CEOs, is leading the push for Algebra II. President Barack Obama is with them. In his 2011 State of the Union speech, he called for greater academic rigor in math and science. He said nothing about creating better courses in music, art, social studies, civics or, God forbid, peace studies. The math lobby, including the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Mathematics Advisory Panel, routinely trots out studies that test scores in algebra are getting lower. American students are now behind the smarties in places like Slovenia, Cyprus or Italy. Don't even think of Japan or China.

I've been accused of being mathophobic. Not guilty. I'm not opposed to algebra, whether it's I, II, III, IV or Algebra MCMXCIX. I'm opposed to compulsory algebra. As handed to the world in 825 by Arab mathematician ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi, *al-jebr*, as he properly called it, can be tons of fun. For a few. It think it's weird that some students actually like algebra, but it does help to have a few weird people around. It assures diversity.

Every high school has a few whizzes who are algebraically gifted. They're the ones in the front row predestined to get full rides to MIT or Cal Tech and go on to build rockets to scoop dirt on Mars. When the teacher asks, "What are the values of k for which the equation $2x^2 + kx + 8 = 0$ will have real and equal roots?", their hands shoot up. They go still higher on the next little mind-stretcher: "If $f(x) = ax^2 + bx + c$ passes through the points $(-1, 12)$, $(0, 5)$ and $(2, -3)$, find the value of $a + b + c$."

For those few students whose craniums get a rush of dopamine from such exercises, good for them. Excuse

them from gym classes. Let them skip lunch period to take more algebra classes. Let them stay after school for the thrills of the algebra club. But for everyone else -- whether they are math dummies or whose intellectual bents lie elsewhere -- stop the torment.

After eighth grade, most people will have learned 98 percent of all the math they will ever need to navigate life. For the remaining 2 percent, accountants are on call. Instead of forcibly teaching high school students how to solve what they see as useless algebra equations, educate them on practical mathematics that will help them avoid being duped by predatory banks, credit card companies, loan hustlers and assorted manipulators of numbers. Does mastering algebra help anyone balance a checkbook or see through the cons of deceitful stock brokers? Does it help a divorcing couple deal with their personal finances as they split?

Instead of tormenting high school students with compulsory algebra, educate the young on the math that truly matters: Add love when you can. Subtract hate when you must. Divide grief when you see it. Multiply peace when it's needed.

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