

## Math Autobiography

By Jade

*\* all names and identifiers have been masked/changed to retain anonymity*

My experience in teaching and tutoring is only just beginning. Last year, for about 3 months I worked as a paraprofessional in a public elementary school, working 1-on-1 with a first-grade boy, with low verbal communication diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It was his first time in a full-day school program, so we worked together throughout the day on initiating peer relations and learning classroom routines. The extent of “teaching” schoolwork though, was using subject workbooks and finding ways to communicate and understand one another. We worked facing across from each other in a cubicle style setting (with one shared desk and walls separating us from the rest of the classroom). He was a whiz at elementary arithmetic operations if there were numbers and signs (+, -, =), but had difficulty with word problems and using manipulatives such as toy bears, unit sticks/blocks, etc. His mother voiced her concerns that he didn’t understand the concepts but only memorized the numbers. Last we spoke, she told me she has him enrolled in an abacus class to get a better understanding of the concepts.

Currently, I am working as a Special Education Teaching Assistant (SETA) at [masked], with a 3-year old girl also diagnosed with ASD with little verbal communication. Unlike in the previous public school, we learn and teach through play. We’re at the early stages of learning numbers, how to count, using calendar and toys such as dominos and gems, counting steps and anything number related. It’s great to see students learning without feeling like it’s school. Learning and teaching through play has been so much more enjoyable for myself as well,

compared to sitting across from a student doing tedious worksheets. I will be a graduate assistant in this position through [masked] and will start my clinicals in [masked]. I hope to take and learn everything I can so I can provide a safe, fun, active learning environment for the students.

When I think of my own math experience, I don't remember much from elementary and middle school classrooms, but what I vividly remember is crying over thin, repetitive and tedious worksheets stapled together, called Kumon. It felt like every day after school I was in a very chilly, air-conditioned room with other Asian, mostly Korean, students, looking at a white board and doing the worksheets, over and over again. Obviously, I HATED math. My family wasn't wealthy, but I would guess we were similar socio-economic status, considering it's an additional expense, or my parents sacrificed another item for me to get that additional education. I think especially with Asian stereotypes, we're supposed to be "good" at math, and I tried to live up to it as best I could. I think just the belief that I could do it, helped to push me to be better at it. Stereotypes are harmful, but the positive side is that it makes me be conscious of believing that every student at whatever experience can learn and reach their next level, with the right supports and accommodations.

That alone doesn't make my math experience very fulfilling, but I also remember growing up with parents that had a cash business (deli), so there were always numbers around, huge calculators with the receipt paper printing and calculation scribbled everywhere throughout the house. I think this is why I feel comfortable around numbers and math. Math isn't as daunting to me and trying to understand the concepts is kind of fun, as it feels like its figuring out a pattern or some sort of code. Unlike writing, which I do find overwhelming, I find that math always has an answer that can be reached through some sort of operation or equation. What I do have trouble with, is remembering when and which code or pattern I have to use. Granted,

learning the math hasn't always been enjoyable, I realized after last week class how much fun learning math could be! I like the process of figuring out how to get to an answer, and then using the same process to get another answer.

I do hope when I'm a teacher, I can make it fun and relatable, so students don't have a distaste or feel overwhelmed by math. I remember in high school, our math teacher taught us how to 'read' ISBN numbers and I think that was the first time I thought, "Wow, this is something I could use outside of school". (I never do, but I remember feeling that way). I think school math is important and the same skills can be used in being more critical, logical, seeing steps, patterns, and trying multiple modes to get there. But learning the math also has to be relatable and active so students *want* to learn it and apply it in their daily lives.

I've been out of school for almost 14 years now, so studying for the GRE's and PRAXIS exams recently to apply for grad school was a lot of work. I wouldn't say I'm anywhere "good" at math but learning and applying it doesn't feel as difficult, nor do I have disdain for it. I quite enjoy the process now, and I guess I can thank my parents for pushing me to Kumon classes and letting me play on their calculators all the time. Mom, Dad, I know how much you must have sacrificed for my education and well-being. I know how much you worked to provide opportunities for me to learn and "keep up" in school. I also know I could've worked harder, pushed back a little less (a lot less), and did more to make it easier on you. I'm so grateful to you for pushing me and providing for me to get to where I am now. Thank you, forever and always. I hope to make you proud.