

Ending Illiteracy in America A Tutoring Story

A Friend of Mine

In February of 2014, a friend of mine asked me to help her fifth grade son with his math homework. I asked, "What kind of math is he studying?" My friend answered, "Fractions." I helped. Coincidentally, three months earlier I had just taught a fractions lesson to a classroom full of children in Idar, India. See the [Unifix Cubes and Patterns Everywhere](#) section of [Chapter 11 - A K-6 Math Curriculum](#).

In September of 2020, I received a second request from my same friend for help with math homework. This time the request was for her seventh grade daughter. In August, my friend had mentioned that her daughter thought she might need tutoring in math this year. Her daughter had not received tutoring in any earlier year, so I was not sure what had prompted her request now.

Text Messages Exchanged

Friend: Would you happen to have any time tonight for tutoring my daughter? She has a math test tomorrow.

Me: Tutoring the night before a test would not work out too well because I would first have to learn what she has been learning. What would the test be covering?

Friend: She wanted the tutoring the night before because she said she would forget if it were sooner. Dividing and subtracting integers. Scoreboard strategy.

Me: I don't even know what scoreboard strategy is. For tutoring to work, I would have to be teaching her all along. When I teach, I teach for understanding. Your daughter doesn't want to understand it. She just wants her head to be crammed for the test. When I helped your son with his fraction lesson back in the fifth grade, the point of my lesson with him was to have him understand fractions and make sense of them.

Friend: Okay that makes sense. So what do you suggest?

Me: When I offered to tutor your daughter back in August my purpose was to have her understand mathematics. I am not the kind of tutor who just helps people cram for a test. Your daughter would only need lessons anytime she does not understand what has been presented in class. If she does not understand every day, then she would need lessons every day.

Friend: Ohhhh got it. When should we start?

Me: Notes on Tutoring.

When I offered to tutor your daughter, I knew her school started on August 18th. When I had heard nothing from you in the weeks that followed, I assumed she had decided she did not need any assistance this year.

When you finally contacted me, your statement that your daughter didn't want help any sooner because she would not remember it for the test, showed me what you and she thought a tutor did. I am an actual teacher and I teach for understanding, not for rote learning.

If I am to tutor your daughter, two things have to happen. First, you (or your daughter) will need to establish a Zoom account for your daughter, and we need to test the connection. Second, your daughter and I will need to have a Zoom conversation so she can learn who I am and so she and I can discuss what we each expect a tutor to do for her.

Friend: Okay that sounds good. I wasn't expecting you to help her cram for a test. Last year when my sister was helping her she pretty much helped her with her homework every night because she didn't understand it well. In these few weeks this year I've asked if she needed help. She said she was fine. And then all of a sudden she says I need tutoring this week I have a test! She didn't do well on her last test so that's why. Sorry for the misunderstanding. I do not want you to help her cram for a test. I would like her to learn math.

The Tutee

I had known my friend's daughter all her life. I was even at her first birthday party. I knew her, but she did not know me. Early in her life, her family had moved to Southern California, so her first birthday party was the only one where she lived close enough for me to attend. Since I do not wish to use her real name here, I will simply call her June.

June is a twin. Her sister, who I will call July, has always been a much better student than June, and was not shy about letting June know it. Although they mostly get along well as sisters, as June struggled in school, July frequently calls June dumb. In return June calls July fat, which is odd, since they look an awful lot like twins to me, and the June I see in my Zoom chats is definitely not fat.

When June and I had our first Zoom meeting I told her she would have to know I thought the textbook she was required to use was terrible. I was

going to teach her the math her textbook required her to know, but I would not teach it to her the same way the book said I should.

The Lessons and The Learner

I set up two Zoom links, one so June could see me and one so June could see my work area. I then sent June sets of the manipulatives (Unifix Cubes, geoboards and so on) she would be using and that I would be showing in my work area. Our lessons were set at twice a week with extra days added whenever needed.

I was surprised at how really bad at math June was. I could not understand how she had reached seventh grade with so little understanding of basic concepts. Yes, June was bad at math, but she was really, really anxious to learn and really, really fun to teach.

The starting time for our twice-a-week lessons was fixed, but the ending times were often way later than I could have imagined. Lessons were often three or four hours in length, not because I insisted that we keep going but because June did. How could such a willing learner ever have fallen so far behind?

The lessons with the materials allowed June to understand mathematics as a whole, which meant understanding the mathematic in her textbook, as well. The focus on the search for patterns in math allowed June to make sense out of her book's nonsense. At one point, I showed June a way of doing something in math that I took directly from *Mathematics Their Way*. June told me she remembered learning the thing I showed her when she was in third grade. I said her third grade teacher must have been using my wife's book for her math lessons then. June said that her third grade year was the only year in school where she had actually done well in math.

As the year progressed, June did better and better in her school's math class. I don't know if she earned an A or a B for her final grade that year. It was one or the other. I do know she no longer felt stupid. She had learned that she was as good at math as anyone in her class and her sister was no longer calling her dumb.

The Ten No's Again

In the [Credibility](#) section of [The Book of IFs](#), it is mentioned that my fifth grade class was used as a control group for measuring the effectiveness of a math program introduced in the other fifth grade classes at my school. It was an accidental testing of the Mary's and my Ten No's, the origins of which are contained in [Chapter 10 - The History of The Ten No's](#). The Ten No's were also the basis for all my lessons with June, especially the Tenth No – No child left behind. With the exception of her

third grade year, June had been left behind every year until now. Even though June was still required to use the school's textbook for her lessons, the textbook had not been what taught her math. The Ten No's had been used instead, and June was no longer left behind.

The Eighth Grade Year

I let June know that I would be her math tutor for as many years in school as she felt she needed one. At the beginning of her eighth grade year, June and I had one tutoring session. During that session I was quite impressed with how much of what June had learned the year before she still remembered. She had not forgotten anything. Before our second session June texted me an apology. She apologized to me because she said she didn't think she needed a tutor any more. I responded, saying that not needing a tutor is NOT something you have to apologize for.



Selected Term: Current	
Teacher's Aide	
✓ Delfosse - Room Office Period 1	
Math 8	A
✓ Slaughter - Room D320 Period 2	96.8%
English 8	A
✓ Kamp-Taylor - Room D305 Period 3	92.8%
Animation	A
✓ Lisko - Room D215 Period 4	96.2%
History 8 Spring 2022	A
✓ Siskin - Room D307 Period 5	91.8%
Science 8	A
✓ Elitzur - Room D207 Period 6	92.1%
Phys.Ed. 8 Sprg	A
✓ Kurnik - Room FIELD Period 7	100.0%

As I said, I did not know if June earned an A or a B in her seventh grade year. I do know how her eighth grade year turned out. The picture above contains June's end-of-year grades for math and for every other subject, as well. It also includes June and July's eighth grade graduation photo. The white cords around their necks represent each year that student had made the Principal's Honor List for high academic achievement. July has four white cords, since she made the Honor's List all four of her years of Middle School. June has only one, the one for her

eighth grade year. However, one was all she needed to keep from ever being called dumb again.

The Tutoring Story's Message

June was never dumb, no student ever is. School just made her feel that way. June was a classic example of a child left behind because she didn't learn the way the textbook said she should or at the pace the textbook said she should. Had June been allowed from the start to use a curriculum that taught for understanding and never left any child behind, she would have learned just as well through all her grades in school as she was allowed to learn in seventh grade. The student she finally became in her eighth grade year would have been the student she would have been every year before.

Requiring teachers to teach to the textbook's test robs children of their ability to learn naturally without their even knowing they have been robbed. There will be children who learn the textbook way just like July did and like I did when I was in school. But just because July and I were good at learning nonsense, does not mean nonsense should be taught.

The last paragraph of the [Consequences](#) section had the heading: **The Victims Who Did Not Even Know They Had Been Robbed.** The robbery victims in that case were the teachers all across the country who were no longer allowed to use the Center's curriculum in their classrooms, because they were forced to prepare their students for the standardized tests that measured how much of the textbook's lessons they had retained and not their understanding of mathematics.

The robbery victims in this case are all the children who were robbed of the opportunity to understand what they were learning when the people in power chose to replace a curriculum that teachers loved and that taught every child, with textbooks that had never in their history even aimed at teaching understanding or at teaching every child.

Footnote

When I finished writing [A Tutoring Story](#) I sent a copy to June and June's mother. I also sent copies to other friends of mine, as I had been doing all along with the other stories I had been writing. The suggestion made that I put my stories in a book is what had prompted me to write [The Book of IFs](#). Below is one response to [A Tutoring Story](#) that I found particularly enlightening.

From (Person's Name): I just finished [The Tutoring Story](#). Heartfelt and compelling at the same time. Math was always traumatic for me and still is. I had the worst teachers. I still panic in work situation when it's anything to do with numbers, and that's something I can't run away

from. What I am trying to get at is I wasn't as lucky as June to have you in my life as a student to tell me that I was a learner that needed help in understanding math. So now I am an adult crippled with math anxiety thanks to bad books and horrid teachers. I am so excited for your book.

I Feel Fortunate

My desire to become a teacher was rooted in my wanting to change how children felt about themselves. The reasons that caused me to end up so depressed at the beginning of my Sophomore year in college (see the [Sophomore Year](#) sub-section of the [College](#) section of [Chapter 2 - My Path to Becoming a Teacher](#)) had nothing to do with academics. As miserable as I was in school, until that Sophomore year my grades never suffered. I began my focus on curriculum only because there was no way I could change how my inner-city students felt about themselves if they were academic failures.

My friend's response to [A Tutoring Story](#) reminded me how fortunate I was to have ended up as an inner-city teacher. In that role, it was obvious to me that how children were taught was key to how they felt about themselves both in and out of school. That same problem of the curriculum leading children to feel bad about themselves had been happening all around me when I was a student, but it never occurred to me then that it was the fault of the curriculum and not of my "slow-learning" classmates.

In the [Teachers](#) sub-section of the [One Question – Three Answers](#) section of this chapter, I said the most common remark from teachers written on their Mathematics Their Way end-of-workshop evaluation forms was, "I wish I had been taught this way when I was in school." This statement will be repeated in the last section of this chapter, as well. I am quoting it again here because my friend's reaction to [A Tutoring Story](#) reinforced its meaning for me. The thousands of teachers who have made that statement on their evaluation forms have all experienced the same poor learning environment that my friend experienced at sometime in their school lives. That learning environment was something that June's sister July and I never experienced, even though it was happening all around us to so many of our classmates. I am thankful that my inner-city teaching experience made me aware of the effect curriculum has on so many student's feelings about themselves. I am thankful, too, that Mary and I were able to show so effectively it doesn't have to be that way.