

What is Math Literacy?

By Ansley Wong

We often hear people say “I am not a math person.” However, we rarely hear people say “I am not a reader” or “I am not a writer”. So, why do people constantly say “I am not a math person”? There is a socially constructed idea that only certain types of people can be good at mathematics. This construct very much shapes our lives. However, we should not let it. We must shape our own lives by challenging ourselves when others say that we are not good enough. As teachers, it is important to fuel the passion within our students. One way of doing so is by having students consider themselves literate in mathematics where they can confidently and effectively use math concepts.

When we think about literacy, we typically think about reading and writing within the English Language Arts subject. In fact, Merriam-Webster defines literacy as the ability to read and write. However, literacy is much more than that. It is the way in which we use language to make meaning of the things around us. It does not have to be just a practice we do in our English Language Arts classes. Literacy is everywhere, even in science, technology, and mathematics. So what does math literacy exactly entail?

Math literacy means to have the ability to problem solve, reason, and analyze information. Although it is important for students to understand how to compute mathematics problems, students should also be able to understand the language of mathematics such as “sum”, meaning an answer to an addition problem. Math includes language in other ways as well. Students need to understand how to use numbers and formulas to help them solve real world problems. More importantly, students use language when describing their mathematical thinking in how they solve a problem.

Just like authentic literacy in reading and writing, authentic literacy should be done in mathematics as well. Students need to stop thinking that math is something only used in the classroom. Math is everywhere and it used in each and every day of our lives. We use it when cooking, exercising, landscaping, driving, and even drawing. The lack of motivation and confidence in mathematics comes in the way of achieving math literacy. It is important as teachers to have a positive view on mathematics and allow students to see the value of being math literate.

By understanding math literacy, one can grow to appreciate the use of mathematics in their daily lives. Math is not something we dread doing but a practice that we can utilize every day just like reading and writing. By using language, we can create meaning and formulate our thinking behind the process of completing a mathematics problem. Math literacy brings creativity to a subject we might otherwise consider boring or mundane. We need to move beyond the numbers to make mathematics enjoyable.