

STRUGGLING IN MATH: A COMMON CHALLENGE AMONG GRADE 1 LEARNERS

by:

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Mathematics is a foundational subject that helps develop logical reasoning, problem-solving skills, and number sense among learners. Yet, for many Grade 1 pupils, Math becomes a subject of struggle rather than enjoyment. At this early stage in formal education, children are expected to understand concepts like number recognition, basic operations, place value, patterns, and measurements. However, several factors contribute to their difficulties in grasping these fundamental skills. These challenges can be both academic and emotional, often creating a domino effect on the child's confidence and overall academic performance.

Struggles in Math at the Grade 1 level often begin with difficulty in understanding numbers. Many children enter school with different levels of exposure to numerical concepts. While some may have had previous experience with counting, recognizing numbers, or even simple addition, others may have limited exposure at home or in their early childhood settings (Baroody, 2009). This results in a wide gap in readiness and understanding, making it difficult for teachers to address all learners equally.

Children at this stage are introduced to abstract concepts for the first time. For instance, learning that the number "3" represents three apples requires a level of cognitive processing that some six- or seven-year-olds are not developmentally ready for. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children in Grade 1 are in the pre-operational to concrete operational transition stage. This means they are just beginning to understand logical operations but still need concrete objects to fully grasp abstract concepts (Piaget, 1964).

The signs of Math difficulty in Grade 1 can be subtle at first but often become more evident as lessons progress. A child may frequently count on their fingers rather than understanding number facts. They may reverse numbers, confuse symbols such as plus and minus, or be unable to follow simple step-by-step instructions. Another common indicator is avoidance behavior—some children may cry, express fear, or even develop anxiety before Math class. Others may simply withdraw or give up without trying, saying things like “I can’t do this” or “I’m not good at Math.”

Unfortunately, these signs are sometimes misinterpreted as laziness or lack of effort. However, it’s important for educators and parents to understand that these are cries for help. These children are not unwilling to learn; they are struggling to make sense of something that appears confusing or unattainable to them.

Several factors can contribute to a Grade 1 student’s struggle with Math. One major factor is limited number sense, which refers to a child’s intuitive understanding of numbers and how they relate to each other. If a child has not developed strong number sense in preschool or kindergarten, they may find it hard to keep up with the pace of the Grade 1 curriculum (Gersten & Chard, 2001).

Language barriers can also play a role. Math is not only about numbers; it involves words, instructions, and problem-solving statements. Children who are still developing language skills, especially those in multilingual environments, may not fully understand what a word problem is asking them to do.

Additionally, instructional strategies can either support or hinder learning. If Math is taught using only traditional methods, such as rote memorization, some learners may fail to grasp the underlying concepts. Children need hands-on activities, visual aids, manipulatives like blocks or counters, and real-life applications to understand abstract ideas effectively (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000).

Home environment also plays a significant role. A child who does not receive reinforcement of Math concepts at home may easily fall behind. Moreover, a stressful or unstable home situation can interfere with a child's focus and cognitive development, affecting their academic performance across all subjects.

Struggling in Math is not just an academic issue; it is deeply emotional. A Grade 1 child who consistently performs poorly in Math may begin to believe they are not capable of succeeding in school. This self-defeating belief can lead to Math anxiety, low self-esteem, and an overall disinterest in learning (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007). Over time, this can also lead to behavioral problems, as the child acts out in frustration or disengages entirely from classroom activities.

It is important to address the emotional needs of struggling learners as early as possible. Providing a safe and encouraging classroom environment, offering praise for effort, and reinforcing that mistakes are part of learning can significantly improve a child's motivation and confidence.

Helping a Grade 1 learner overcome Math struggles requires a collaborative approach between teachers, parents, and even peers. Differentiated instruction is one of the most effective strategies. This involves tailoring lessons to meet different learning styles—some children learn best by seeing, others by hearing, and others by doing. Using games, songs, drawings, and interactive activities can turn Math lessons into fun and meaningful experiences.

Early intervention is also crucial. Teachers should regularly assess their students' progress using formative assessments and respond immediately when a child is not meeting expected milestones. Small group remediation or one-on-one tutoring can provide the focused attention that struggling students need.

At home, parents can help by incorporating Math into everyday routines. Counting steps, measuring ingredients while cooking, identifying patterns in clothes or

nature, and using Math-based stories can provide practice without pressure. Most importantly, parents must show a positive attitude towards Math, as children often internalize adult attitudes (Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008).

Finally, professional development for teachers is essential. Educators must be trained not only in Math content but also in child development, assessment strategies, and intervention techniques to effectively support their students.

Struggling with Math in Grade 1 is a common but addressable challenge. Recognizing the signs early, understanding the causes, and implementing supportive strategies can make a significant difference in a child's learning journey. Math doesn't have to be a source of fear—it can be a gateway to confidence, critical thinking, and lifelong learning when taught with patience, creativity, and empathy. When children feel supported and understood, even the most difficult subject can become a joy to learn.

References:

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