OPINION

AS I SEE IT

The New New Math

KAREN A. ZOTT

Math. As a youngster, I never was good at it, and it rarely held any interest for me. My parents, both of whom were wizards at math, tried to pique my interest and improve my skills by playing math games. I hated these.

Memories of my early academic career are filled with unpleasant images of trying to finish math homework. Somewhere between high school and college, the anterior portion of my frontal lobe — the part involved in higher intellectual reasoning — developed. I earned a respectable grade in college algebra and entered a career requiring good math and critical thinking skills. For that reason, my lack of math acumen has not haunted me for some time — until my son's second-grade math class.

When my son came home from his first week of second grade with a folder to hold parent letters, I became suspicious. The note in the folder informed me that reading upcoming letters would assist me greatly in helping my child with his math homework. OK, now I was worried. Kindergarten and first-grade math did not hold any surprises. Those years were spent learning and practicing basic facts, a trend I thought would continue into the second grade. My biggest obstacle at that time was hiding from my son that I still counted on my fingers. But second grade brought "Everyday Math."

At first, "Everyday Math" was just mildly annoying. Basic math facts were taught with "fact triangles." These small triangular flash cards were considered a more effective teaching method because the triangles contained a fact "family." I went to my parent letter and found that a fact family is a collection of addition and subtraction facts that use the same three numbers. I wondered what was wrong with basic flash cards; they fit nicely into a box, and their use did not require a family letter.

As the math became more complicated, I grew thankful that I had a child who was math-friendly. I found myself spending more time with the parent letters, wondering how I ever passed second-grade math. It was not the math that was difficult, but the complex methods of math computation that were being taught. Puzzles with names like "What's my rule?" were used to reinforce addition and subtraction skills. The puzzles took me awhile to understand before I could check my son's homework. Thankfully, most of the time he could explain the rules to me.

My frustration with math peaked when my son began adding and subtracting multidigit numbers. He learned several strategies of addition, none of which I knew. Adding vertically — my grade-school method — was discouraged. When I proceeded to correct a subtraction problem, my son would tell me: "That is not how you do it, Mom. You have to use the trade-first method." Huh?

Pretty soon, I found myself aligned with parents complaining that school was doing less to help kids truly understand and remember basic facts, and focusing more on creative teaching techniques. As I expressed my frustration to another parent, she explained that this was the new math. No, I replied. I learned new math. I know this because my father complained about teaching me new math. Maybe the reason American children are behind in mathematics, compared to other industrialized countries, is because each new generation is being taught different methods of computation.

We are close to the end of the year, and I have a secret: I am actually having fun with math. I find myself making up my own puzzles to solve. Although the hows and whys of this program are requiring me to shift my math paradigm, I find the change rewarding. I realize that this program will give kids an opportunity to interact with math, to understand the relationships of numbers. They have to think rather than just memorize. At the tender age of 7, I memorized operations; I was never expected to actually understand the process. The expectations are higher today. By introducing geometry and basic algebraic concepts early, educators take advantage of nimble young minds. It is the same concept that drives teaching children a foreign language at a young age.

This is the new math, and I hope it is here to stay.

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