



Welcome fellow recovering traditionalist to episode 16 where we are going to get inspiration and information from Lemi-Ola Erinkitola, a parent who became a private tutor.

Welcome to Build Math Minds the podcast, where fidelity to your students is greater than fidelity to your textbook. I'm your host, Christina Tondevoid, the recovering traditionalist and BuildMathMinds.com Founder, where my mission is to change the way we teach elementary math to our kiddos. Are you ready to start building math minds and not just creating calculators? Let's get started.

Christina: Not only is Lemi a learner and member of the Build Math Minds PD site, she will also become a contributor. She is doing a session this year at the Build Math Minds Virtual Summit. If you would like to learn more from her, go get registered for free at BuildMathMinds.com/virtual-math-summit I'll put a link to that as well as all the fabulous resources. Lemi shares on the show notes page which has BuildMathMinds.com/16 again, that's BuildMathMinds.com/16 now onto my interview with Lemi. You guys, I cannot wait for you to meet my guest today. Lemi-Ola Erinkitola is a joy to be around. She is one of my guests who I have met many times in person and it was because she reached out to me at a conference we were out at together. We happened to be at the same, was this a kindergarten conference? Is that the one where we met Lemi?

Lemi-Ola: Yes, the conference in California,

Christina: California. Okay. I think I was thinking correctly. That was it. The conference in California for kindergarten teachers. I was there presenting, Lemi was there and she reached out. We got together and were fast friends and I just love chatting with you and I can't wait for you to share your story with the build math minds audience. So tell us a little bit about your journey in math education.

Lemi-Ola: Thank you Christina. And first let me say thank you for having me here today. And my journey has been one that has had ups and downs, but it really started with me as a parent and trying to find the best school for my child. And that was the starting point of a struggle. Within our district, there are schools that are high quality schools, but they require the students to actually test into those schools. And I as a parent was not familiar with this process because I don't remember doing it when I was in school. So it was totally foreign to me. And there wasn't a lot of information out there. So I've found myself as a working parent with children just really frustrated by the lack of information, the lack of roadmap, if you will. But there was no roadmap, no guide.

Lemi-Ola: and then back then Google was relatively new, so it wasn't like you can search on the Internet and you know, you get all these options that you get today. So if you can imagine my world, and I, you know, my family always pushed education. So if there was something we didn't know we were going to research it. So I started researching and in an effort to just really provide the best educational opportunity for my wonderful children, like many parents do. And it was through that process that I did not realize my whole life was about to change. I thought

I was a parent just looking for a book or looking for a particular video that what's going to solve a problem for that moment in time. And then through the process I realized that this was a life changing experience for me.

Lemi-Ola: And by that I mean I was able to start up a program to help parents who are interested in having their kids excel academically, who want the opportunity for their children to test into some of the gifted programs because they know their child is capable, but they're just getting stuck on certain concepts and they may not test well because it's all foreign and learning isn't all through testing. So through this journey, it started off just one parent looking for a book or solution. And it ended up being a transformation of developing a program called the critical thinking boot camp that really allows both parents and the students to learn and uncover about what it's like to learn, in math and reading, etc.

Christina: Yeah. So tell, because this is an interesting place where a lot of the description I guess I should say of a gifted child, especially in mathematics, is a child who can, you know, like traditionally it's been the child who can get the right answers and it's very fast and they just know, you know, they're really good at procedures and algorithms, but talk about your stance on this.

Lemi-Ola: Yes, when I started helping not just my own children and it really bloomed to the full program, I got the wonderful opportunity of seeing and working with students from all backgrounds. And when I started to notice is something like what you're describing, a lot of the students really just memorize their way through the map. So if you had a parent who, started early and maybe taught their students, you know, addition and subtraction, maybe through counting upstairs or in the car, and then they will quickly move on to, okay, what's after addition and subtraction? Well then we'll move on to the multiplication chart. So we had these bright kids on the surface who could learn a lot of information. They are like sponges, but they were just memorizing the information and they didn't have that, that deeper level. And how that came to light is they would get stuck. They would get stuck in the word problems. They would get stuck on being able to explain their thinking. So for example, they knew 5×5 , it's 25. But if you were to have them sort of draw it out in a picture form or use manipulatives or blocks to kind of describe the evidence within that answer, that's when it became very, very difficult. And, so yeah, so I saw challenges like that

Christina: and so, how, what has helped you along the, along your way? Like my, my stance is like we can, we do the best with the knowledge we have at the time. And just like you, I'm a researcher, so if I feel like what I'm doing isn't working, I go and find someone who can help me learn a better way to do it. So you've taken a lot of your own learning into your own hands and try to figure out how do I help these kids build a better, more deep understanding of the content. So what has helped you along the way? What's the professional development books, resources? What have been the best things that you've found that really changed your understanding and thus helped you be able to work with these kids better?

Lemi-Ola: I think the first sort of light bulb moment that came from me, we had mentioned earlier that you and I met at the conference and I started getting out and going outside of my comfort zone, so to speak, outside of my comfort zone and had to really explore, you know, this was during the time where common core was being released and it was a lot of new standards. A lot of confusion in the education industry. And I knew I had to get out there and learn from the experts who knew more than me. So one of the things I did was I started attending professional development conferences, like one you mentioned in California and then a few others. But I have to say nothing helped me more than the number sense online course. And here's why it was very expensive for me to travel.

Lemi-Ola: You know, I'm investing in myself and I'm a small business owner. So all of the expenses with the hotel and the traveling, you know, it was pretty much out of pocket for me. I, I didn't get reimbursed every book that I purchased and sometimes I would purchase a book and it was a dud. It was an absolute dud. And so I felt like in some cases my investment was hit or miss and it wasn't connecting all of the pieces. But the Number Sense 101. And I was so thrilled that it was called 101 like in the college age. Cause then it was sort of like, it wasn't intimidating. I'm like, I can get through 101. Right.

Christina: That was the point. It's like it's the foundation, yes.

Lemi-Ola: Yes. The foundation. And it sure was because it gave me the foundational blocks that I knew I was doing right. So for example, there was strategies that we're working within our program. We have a very successful program, about 85% of the students that come through our program actually tested to gifted programs. So we have a pretty good track record, but there are always students that for some reason it's sort of like, oh, they're really struggling and how can I help them, you know, tap into their, their learning style and help them learn elementary math. And I came across Number Sense. It explained a lot of the research. It helped me understand what I was doing, right. What I can do more of. Subitizing was my first sort of, wow. They have a name for this skill that I'm teaching with the dominoes and the dice has actually called subitizing. And so I love all the spatial the spatial skills and tools. And what I was finding with my students is that they were getting a lot of memorization using symbols because as parents that's sort of like how, you know, we however we learned in schools, how are we going to pass that down to our children, good or bad.

Lemi-Ola: But we do the best with what we have until we learn more. And by me learning more and understanding the power of, you know, subitizing and the whole trajectory, the learning trajectory, that, you know, there is a roadmap. You don't have to guess with math there's sort of a roadmap and things you should be doing besides teaching them the numbers symbols. You want to make sure you include, visual because we have a lot of visual learners, right? And young kids they learned through seeing. So why do we limit that part of the learning? And that's what one of the things that I noticed was very lacking. And so doing the pictorial, doing the concrete and the abstract, all three connecting together became sort of my secret weapon in the classroom and it was a lot of fun.

Christina: That's awesome. So through all of these things that you've been implementing, have you, can you talk to a specific instance where this has made a big change in the student learning?

Lemi-Ola: Yes. There's so many different examples. I think at a general level, it has empowered parents because now I have the vocabulary and I have the fun tools that I share, not only with the students, I also can share that with the parents and the parents are inspired because their easy to use, they don't look intimidating and the learning or relearning if you will, alongside their child. And that's what they want to do. They want to be engaged and they just don't know how. So when I introduced the techniques and tools and strategies I learned through Build Math Minds and the Number Sense online courses, I do have to translate them in a way that parents can understand cause you know, they don't have the teacher training, but it is easy to understand and, and it's easy to model, which is great. So over all parents have come away with a wonderful experience. I feel like we're in partnership now. Before I felt like I was doing a lot of the teaching and a student was doing a learning and a lot wasn't being reinforced at home. But now I feel like theres that connection to, to the classroom and to the home connection

Christina: and so powerful. Lemi, because there's such a battle between, you know, parents, yes. And, and the teachers right now because parents are so like, you know, they're into teaching math differently and, and they're frustrated because they want to help their kids. They want to be able to help their child do the math work, but

they didn't learn it this way. And so they, you know, were how they don't know how to help their kids. So that is such a good point that all of this can be used to help the parents understand the mathematics in a way. We can't just send it home and say, here, do this. We have to work in partnership.

Lemi-Ola: Absolutely. And I want to give you one example I recall working, a gifted student. And this young boy was in, I pick around in first grade and very bright, but he was really doing the work, of a third grader in math but still he was learning very fast and he just doing lots of math facts, it's multiplication charts and so forth. And he was really getting bored in a class room cause he would finish paths with the worksheets and then he didn't know what to do with himself. There was no additional thinking going on. And, through this after school program that they brought me in, and I actually called it Number Sense Bootcamp, so that was the name of the afterschool program. So he enrolled, his parents enrolled them in their Number Sense Bootcamp and it was just so life changing for him.

Lemi-Ola: He came in and he thought it was going to be the same old math that he was doing that he was accustomed to. But once we brought out the Rekenrek the math rack and we also showed the 10 frames with the dots and the dot patterns we even used, I might mess his name up. Steve Wyborney's lab? Is that his name? Okay. Yes, yes. That was wonderful, to use. And there was all kinds of tools that we put into place. And I did start off with the assessment. I'll never forget, I started off with just a quick assessment, the Running Records by Dr Nicki. And then from there I was able to see the gaps and then pull in those tools to help make math fun for him. Now, initially he did resist because he didn't view this as, you know, an experience that he was accustomed to. But after about the first session and he started seeing the, hey, wait, this, it's still math. Oh my God. He was so excited. And with that excitement there was less behavior issues. He paid attention, more, listening skills. And he was somewhat of a loner because he was sort of above the class. And then we started to have them engage in groups. And so he made more friends. It was just really a positive overall experience. And I've seen many students like that that are just waiting for the opportunity for someone to help it all click so that they can see themselves, you know, understanding math and having that flexibility of what math is really all about.

Christina: Yeah. And all too often with our gifted kids, we just kind of want to push more on them. Like, here, I'll just give you the next grade level stuff. We're really, like you said, that that kind of isolates them from their peers and, and it's not giving them a deep okay understanding of the mathematics. So there's a lot of, of issues of just pushing kids forward when we see those gifted kids. So I appreciate that, push for us to think about ways to go deeper with those kids and involve them in ways that are still at their grade level so that they can interact with their peers when doing that. So absolutely. Well let's end with my final question is always for those teachers who are out there listening and they want to make a change in their teaching, what's one thing that you suggest they try?

Lemi-Ola: Okay. One thing that teachers and parents and you're listening to games try to games in a classroom. Um, yeah. Well because

Christina: absolutely I'm laughing cause I love it.

Lemi-Ola: Games, games, games and in the classroom when kids are playing games that can tend to be some worry from teachers that it may look like they're not learning or the games may be too long and to compliment to implement. How can you assess through games? Uh, you know, I didn't learn through games so don't be afraid to try games in the class with games are so powerful. There are so much fun and Build Math Minds, Christina, you guys have done a wonderful job collecting those games, you know, testing them and bringing in, you know, all kinds of different solutions and everything Games, those are great everything games that will last a lifetime. All you have

to do is change up, you know, the different concept. But they work the same way and so try games in the classroom. That's the message I want to leave teachers and parents with.

Christina: I love it. I think that's a great place to end and we will link to all the resources that Lemi has talked about. She is referenced a lot of great resources that she uses and in the show notes of this episode we will make sure that we link all of those apps so thank you very much. Lemi for giving all of this, these resources and inspiration for when we are working with our gifted students and the parents as well.

Lemi-Ola: Thank you Christina. It's been a pleasure.

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