My eyes were fixated on my laptop as the rhythmic sound of the clock ticking resonated in the quiet room. Pencils scratching on papers, students’ heads faced straight down, an unrelenting desire to get out of the torturous room of students on the right side having to do 10 pages of multiplication and division to the students on the left coerced by there parents to do derivatives and integrals of calculus while still in the first year of middle school, convincing themselves that this will somehow be useful for them in the future. Something I once told myself as I sat in their shoes just months ago.

On Valentine's day of 2022, after nearly 7 consecutive Valentine’s, I went into the classroom where I've learned every utterly possible mathematics concept present in my mind to this day for, hopefully, or so I thought, the last time, to do my Level O exam. But now I sit here as an intern, as the figure that I for years thought the use of. I looked at the kid sitting in the position I quite often sat in. She was a quiet kid, rarely asked questions. I knew she didn’t understand though. Her pencil has been floating above her paper for nearly 5 minutes, but her head stood low, not wanting to look up. My leg shifted anxiously. As a new intern, I was told to only observe the class and check papers. The teacher next to me was busy, so I shifted here and there, my eyes roaming the room to see if anyone noticed that she’s struggling. Something in me told me to go, because I knew how she felt. Not brave enough to walk up to the front and ask the teacher, so you end up waiting until they ask. It was heavy to think about.

But in the same time, I was in doubt. I was unsure if I was ready to walk up to students and ask them there concern. Thoughts of self doubt ran through my mind, I applied for this internship purely because I wanted to teach, first it was to step out of my comfort zone and try something new, the second was wanting to do something with my knowledge of seven years. It didn’t sit right with me that I have this and couldn’t do anything with it to help other people, so here I am. But regardless, my legs locked in place, not wanting to approach the kid.

I went home that day, sat in front of my desk, and stared at the similar white wall in front of me. “Why didn’t I help her?”

“If she needsd help, then she would’ve asked.” I told myself,

“You yourself didn’t want to ask, why would she want to?” I retorted once again, “be the teacher that will make a change”

Since day 1, it was my goal to be the teacher that I never had. But making the first move was never easy, it wasn’t the conventional system to come up to students and individually assist them, neither did I think I was capable of doing that, with my knowledge now. It was biology class the next day, I sat in front of my laptop as class went on, it was my teacher’s last year in school as she is considering retirement. She was telling us a story about one of the graduated batch whom she taught since the first year in secondary school.

“It’s not about how much you teach them, it’s not about how good you are at teaching, it’s not about how much you know, it’s about how much they get from what you’re teaching. To this day, that batch still visits and have dinner with me once in a while, although it’s been 10 years since I last taught them.”

A sense of inspiration and awe washed over me since I had always thought that a teacher was the epitome of knowledge, forbidden from making a mistake, scared of the embarrassment of being unknowledgable, a figure that could not afford to wrong.

The following afternoon, I observed the student again. This time, her pink pencil hovered around page 2 of the same paper she was working on yesterday. I glanced to my right for a second, to check if my teacher payed much attention, that gave me the signal to stand up and walk to her table. I sat

next to her and asked if she needed any help. The evident shock and hesitant look on her face was plastered on her face clearly. I looked at her paper and proceeded to explain how to do the question. She nodded slowly and started to do the question, while I occasionally corrected her mistake and added explanations here and there. Her eyebrows scrunched as I explained the following steps, but my joy grew for every time she solved the problems on her own. Once she finished her last question, I felt a sense of fulfilment and happiness realizing that I helped a student solve a question she previously did not know how to do.

The fear and lack of confidence that I once had vanished the moment she flashed a smile at me as I went back to my seat. I then approached another kid with his pencil hovering above his paper, repeating the process. I spotted more students and went up to them. When I went home that night, I wondered, “Have I done it?”

I went back the next class and sat down on my desk. As I was setting up a Zoom meeting, I was startled to see the girl I taught yesterday standing next to me holding her paper, waiting for me to notice before she asked. My initial quickly changed into a warm smile, and soon, I was explaining to her a new question. That was was I knew: I did it.

More and more students came to my table as days went by, from the quietest of kids to the ones with a gazillion questions. Three months passed, and it was nearing the end of my internship. I’d gotten to know some of the students there pretty well. At times they would tell me their day at school, and I would also tell them stories as a high schooler. In those three months, some kids went from never approaching anyone for help to actively asking about different techniques to solve a. The head of the KUMON branch came up to me and thanked me for my time in KUMON. Hopefully, I was able to make an impact and assure the children that it’s ok to make mistakes. They are learners for a reason, and there are teachers for a reason; both should play their roles.

With this new mindset and experience, I wanted to help more kids and opened my own tutoring page online and had primary students from Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia requesting a mathematics and Olympiad Mathematics tutor. It’s been nearly 6 months that I’ve started my free weekly tutoring with a total of 5 students, and I have never felt more fulfilled and ecstatic that my students have someone to rely on. As a high schooler who has developed mathematics concepts from courses and competitions, I want to help other students overcome their fear instigated from the common notion of how challenging maths can be. I am no expert , not does my knowledge of mathematics account for even a percent of all the math knowledge in the world, I shouldn’t wait till I know everything, to take action and create an impact. Whether I was good enough to teach no longer mattered. Even if I can’t teach them everything, I’ll teach them something.

Hi Valerie,

I thoroughly enjoyed reading your essay! Your vibrant personality shines through, and I am truly captivated by your unwavering passion for assisting students in conquering their fear of mathematics. Your essay demonstrates a clear and cohesive narrative, illustrating how you have successfully challenged your own preconceptions about the role of a tutor/teacher and made a profound impact on the lives of your students.

I have offered some comments to focus your essay on the important parts and make sure you elaborate on the parts that are still lacking sufficient reflection and/or context.

Well done ☺