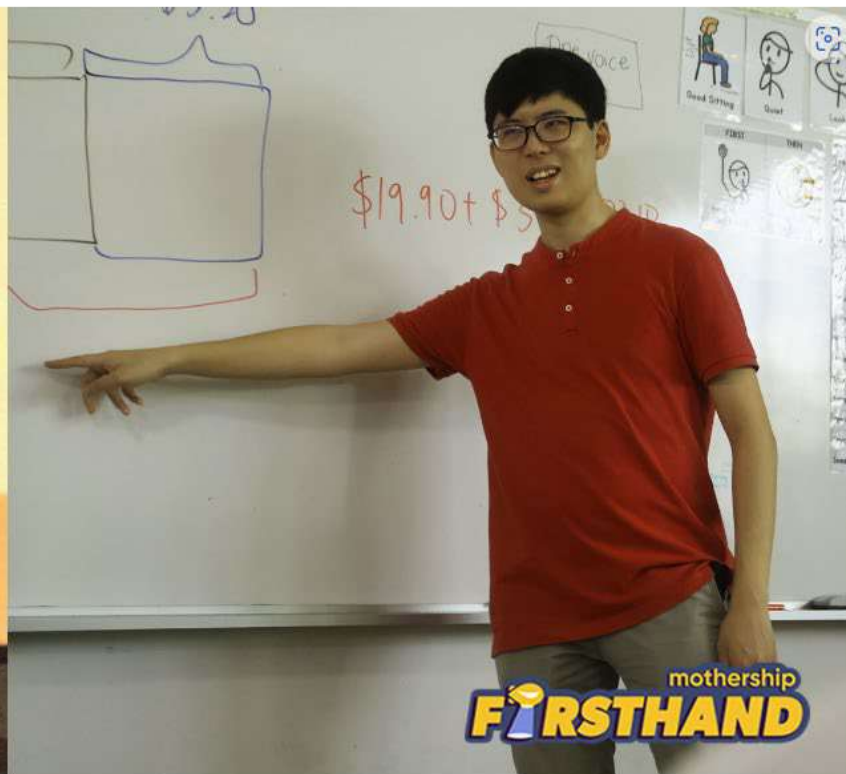


From O-Level high achiever to Maths teacher: S'porean with autism hopes to show he is 'just a normal person'

"I might be autistic, but I can still teach...I'm just a normal person basically."

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With his smart dress and neat hair, Mathematics teacher Joel Lee, 27, seems at once composed and self-assured.

If you're observant enough, you might notice that he stumbles over his words now and then, trying to gather his thoughts.

But few would realise he has autism.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental condition, often leading to challenges with social interaction and communication. As its name implies, ASD manifests in various degrees.

Lee falls into the category of high-functioning autism. Nearly a decade ago, he made [headlines](#) by achieving an L1R5 score of 7 points in his O-Level examinations.

Today, he is a Mathematics teacher at [Pathlight School](#).



Photo by Oon Zhi Xian Wesley

Embracing growth

In 2004, instead of joining his peers in primary school, seven-year-old Lee became part of the first batch of Pathlight students under a one-year “preparatory programme”.

The programme, intended to prepare students for transition to mainstream schools by simulating a school setting, proved beneficial for Lee. When he enrolled at Cedar Primary School in 2005, “it was actually a breeze for him,” said Karen Tan, his 67-year-old mother.

The programme has since been phased out and replaced with the Primary 1 Foundation programme.



Receiving an award for scoring the best in mathematics in Primary 5 at Cedar Primary School in 2009.
Photo courtesy of Joel Lee

Despite his smooth academic transition, Lee remembers feeling isolated due to his differences with his classmates. He found himself a victim of constant verbal and physical bullying.

“Back then I still didn’t understand why I kept getting...this kind of treatment,” he said.

This also affected his confidence. “Feeling like I was alone also made me think teachers would not want to help me either,” he said.

“I was a silent lamb amongst wolves, without a shepherd to guide me.”

Outside of the social setting, it was also hard adapting to changes in his everyday

routine. “If we change the routine...he would cry because that’s not what he [was] expecting,” his mother explained.

Nevertheless, Lee drew strength from the knowledge that his family always stood by him when he faced these challenges.

His mother, his greatest pillar of support, provided crucial guidance along the way. “Not everyone will accept him, there are bound to be some children who find him ‘weird’,” Tan said.

She would frequently remind him of social cues, such as to respect people’s physical boundaries and to refrain from oversharing.

Despite the pain of being bullied, Lee’s experiences with bullying helped him better understand human nature and behaviour. He learnt that everyone has their own struggles — even bullies.

“Who am I to get angry quickly?” he said.

How his passion for teaching started

In secondary school, the bullying began to die down — a change Lee attributed to a growth in maturity in both himself and other students.

It was in his third year that he began teaching them, which gradually led him to assume the role of a tutor. “They realised my strong maths sense then, and asked me for help in their maths work,” he explained.

Apart from teaching his classmates, he also created a WhatsApp group to help juniors in his CCA — Boys’ Brigade — with mathematics.





Lee (second from left) stands among his peers from Boys Brigade. Photo courtesy of Joel Lee

In the group, his juniors could reach out to him whenever they had questions. He would then guide them through each step, encouraging them to seek his assistance whenever needed.

“That’s how I knew I could help others in the subject,” he said.

After graduating from Zhong Hua Secondary School (ZHSS), Lee went on to Nanyang Junior College where he performed well in his A-Levels, graduating in 2015 with 81.25 out of 90 rank points.

He then pursued a Bachelor’s Degree in Science, majoring in Mathematics at the National University of Singapore.

From there, his passion for teaching only grew. In 2017, he began tutoring in his church as well.

He spent the next five years assisting Secondary Two students every Saturday.

Navigating ASD Challenges in Teaching

But his transition into the teaching profession wasn’t entirely smooth. He initially intended to teach at his alma mater, ZHSS, but his application was unsuccessful.

He then applied to teach at Pathlight School. After three months, Lee was called in for a second interview. His passion and genuine interest in teaching helped him to secure a one-year teaching contract, and he started working as a primary school Mathematics teacher in December 2021.

Yet Lee faced challenges while teaching. “With me being autistic, I will admit that being adaptable is a difficult thing,” he said.

In the early stages of teaching, he once felt overwhelmed by a student’s

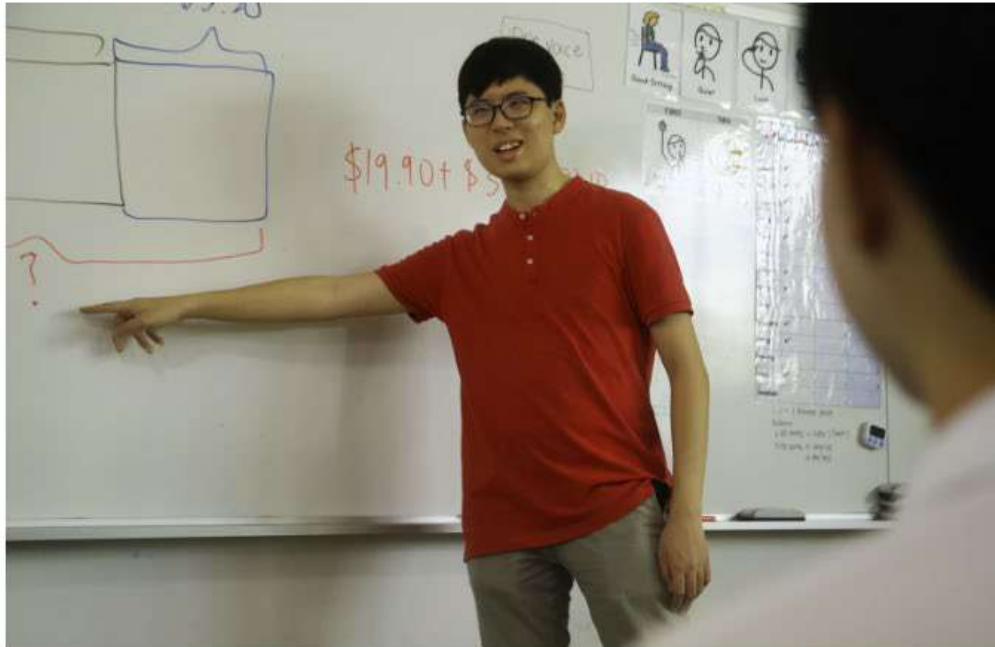
In the early stages of teaching, he once felt overwhelmed by a student's disruptive behaviour. This led to an outburst, with the scolding leaving the student in tears.

Recognising the lapse in composure, he learned to empathise with the nature of children, understanding their actions are unintentional. "It's just their nature, it's not like they mean to do it," he said.

This prompted a shift towards a more patient and understanding teaching approach, as he learned to adapt and stay calm in challenging situations with his students.

Teaching special needs students is no easy task. But Lee hopes to support those with similar conditions as him and assist them in building a strong educational foundation despite their challenges.

"I want to be able to look at my students as my children," he said.



In the latter part of 2022, he received a six-month contract extension, and was officially converted to a full-time teacher in June 2023.

Lee recalled a student who faced challenges due to cancer and visual impairment. She needed to use a large sheet of paper and constantly position herself closer to the screen. As her teacher, he ensured she received clear instructions to help her understand the material better.

During the year-end assessments, he was deeply moved upon grading her mathematics paper and discovering that she had passed.

"I honestly almost burst into tears, like the support that we gave her really helped out," Lee said.

Giving back to his community

Since attending that preparatory programme at Pathlight all those years ago, Lee has come full circle.

Not by accident either; Lee chose the school as the means through which he wanted to educate and connect with his community.

“I really want to give back to the school that started me out all those years ago,” he said.

More importantly, however, Lee hopes to show that individuals with autism can perform the same tasks as everyone else, and chart their own paths instead of being limited to predetermined vocations based on their special needs.

“I just want to make a statement to not only Singapore, but also possibly the world, that it doesn't matter what your background is,” he said.

“I might be autistic, but I can still teach... I'm just a normal person basically.”

This article was produced as part of Ngee Ann Polytechnic's media practicum module collaboration with Mothership.

Top image by Joel Lee