

Helping My Neighbor With Her Homework

A Montessori Moment

By Jessica Mallett

I remember helping the neighbor girl, a dear friend of mine, with her fractions homework. I was sympathetic about the fact that she had this homework, because in my public Montessori school, we did our work at school with the help of our peers and interactive materials. We were not expected to listen to a lecture about a concept and then do our work on our own without resources (dynamic, contextual and interactive resources).

My friend was struggling to understand how to add and subtract fractions; the role of numerator and denominator were unclear to her, and conversion even more difficult. Through the process of helping her with her problems, I realized that she did not have a clear abstraction of the fractions themselves (how $1/3$ is different from $1/5$, for example). I found myself drawing for her what I knew as the “Fraction Insets” and asking her if she had ever seen them. She told me she had not, and I was confused and frustrated by this.

As we were painfully working through her problems, she resigned by telling me that she’s just stupid and cannot get it. I was really upset about this and tried to convey to her that she’s not stupid. It was clear to me the problem was that she was not given the correct tools to understand the concepts!

I remember wishing that I could take her to my classroom where we could figure out these problems with concrete materials (where we could *play* with ideas, essentially). I wanted to demonstrate the materials to her and physically piece out the problems in her homework so she could see them and make sense of them. What bothered me the most is that she was expected to follow along without having the opportunity to truly explore and understand the concepts and quantities she was working with. I found it disturbing that my beloved friend internalized this in a way that made her feel “stupid” and unable to comprehend.

At the time I did not fully understand what was at stake for her; more struggle as the class moved on to the next segment and the finality of grades. It was hard for me to understand why she just gave up. I was accustomed to having many different ways to explore a topic until I understood it clearly enough to progress to more challenging things.

Grasping a challenge with comprehension builds confidence and excitement about applying new knowledge to greater challenges. This is what

made learning fun, and I was heart-broken that my dear friend could not also have that experience. I felt blessed with the benefits of my Montessori education. I also discovered the travesty that not all my peers were as fortunate, but equally deserving.

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