

Denominator

By

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*At a high need
middle
school
at the border,
María dutifully takes on the problem,
released from
a high-stakes test:
“If 12 of 36 squares are shaded,
what percent are shaded?”
Her answer (“12, meester”)
Betrays little
awareness of the whole
or etymology words have – even in math,
that so-called universal language.
Under my university research hat, I’m noncommittal,
encouraging more thinking-out-loud (a request
she seems not used
to), restraining my urge to
stop and teach
that percent corresponds to a fraction whose
denominator, that numerical bottom-dweller, is
100 since there are
a hundred centavos to a peso,
a hundred cents to a dollar,
a hundred years to a century.
4 _ centuries ago Juan Diez in México City made
the first algebra book in the Americas--
But pride in this or the Mayan zero
won’t ensure this muchacha rises above deficit thinking and
have the success she can,
nor will faith
of any
denomination.*

*Back in my office, I ponder incomplete
parts of a whole, where
denominators deny –
the relative who says, “that’s okay, mija, I wasn’t good
at math either,”
the economics that force parents
too soon to leave
school for low-wage jobs,
the reality
of the barrio’s overstuffed
schools having teachers less
versed in the subject
matter, much less
in reaching students of all
backgrounds.*

*Every rise is tied to a denominator of run
and (for the z-scores of my data) each steep
slope is a correlation. They say
correlation does not imply
causation, but
poverty comes close,
perhaps explaining why
the squared correlation
is named
coefficient of determination—
unless it’s the determination
needed to rise,
not run.*

*When I taught high school, my students
lived in a neighborhood I never could have afforded
on my teacher pay’s small
denominations, but I glimpsed what
more money brings: better
trained teachers, private tutoring, test prep classes....
There, I fought excess of entitlement;
here, I fight its lack
before hitting
limits of the 24-hour day,
our lowest
common
denominator.*