

Julia Wolf

Power Autobiography

One of my favorite summer jobs was working at a Montessori school's summer camp in 2019. The camp welcomed kids ages 3-12, and I witnessed the impact that nurturing a students' own love of learning had on students. Each day and at every classroom level, we had structured activities to teach the kids about cultures around the world (the theme of the camp) and free time for the kids to do the Montessori "works" stationed around the rooms.

Even though it was summer, I watched these young learners develop their skills in math, reading, spelling, and more. For example, one of the four year olds started to work on a long chain. In the Montessori world, the long chain is - you guessed it - a long beaded chain that helps students count and group numbers; this fosters skills like skip counting that are used later in multiplication, cubing, and square roots. The long chain that this four year old had picked up was the Ten Chain, which grouped beads by tens going all the way up to one thousand. One thousand! He was successfully grouping the beads, marking the numeric groups on his paper, and I watched as he eventually got his work approved by the lead teacher in the classroom. At four years old!

In the Fall of that same year, I worked as a tutor for a reading program on my university's campus. We partnered with elementary schools in and surrounding the nearby city of Detroit to try to get students reading at their grade's level. The state of Michigan had just passed its Read by Grade Three retention policy, which meant that any third grader who finished up the year testing below the third grade reading level could be held back.

In my tutoring program, we went through training sessions to learn about phonics, effective read aloud techniques, and comprehension questions to use during our time with students. After about two weeks of this training, we were sent out into elementary schools around Detroit with our self made tutoring plans. We met with students individually for 30 minutes once a week, and we felt we had the knowledge and power to help ensure these students' reading and comprehension skills improved.

I worked primarily with second and third grade students who had fallen behind in their reading. All of my third graders were reading either at the kindergarten or first grade level, and most of

my second graders were similarly reading at kindergarten level. With so little time to transition into tutoring and so much happening around us in the building, it was often hard to get our students to concentrate. And, only working with the kids for 30 minutes each week made it even harder to make and maintain progress.

Sure, the Montessori summer camp utilized different instructional styles and was operating outside of the typical school day structure. But it was a summer camp - primarily working to keep kids entertained and safe while their parents were at work. Watching a four year old essentially do multiplication up to 1,000 over the summer and then working with eight year olds who didn't know how to read words like "there" and "would" made me feel powerless. These kids were, at such young ages, already examples of how the education system can so easily favor or fail our students.

As the year went on, I wanted to do more for my tutees. I worked even harder on my lesson plans, and I went to extra reading events in the community. But, very shortly after we started - not even halfway through the semester - we went on a two week break. Which then became a month, which then became the rest of the year as the world shut down due to Covid-19. After that, I never saw my students again. Once more, I felt powerless.

I started doing a lot of research about the education system: its flaws, its strengths, and how different it is throughout the US. I learned more about the policies that have been passed, how their implementation often led to them failing the communities they were meant to serve, and how historical racist practices like redlining were far more present in the education system than I had been aware of. I learned more about where the power lies - and where it should lie - and started to understand that I wasn't powerless. I was more so uninformed.

All of this grew my interest in education reform, but more specifically education policy; I used my Covid summer to work and apply to education policy master's programs. I got into a Masters of Education Policy program in DC, and I started my classes right after I graduated from college. Throughout the program, an idea that had been presented to me during a class I took in undergrad became the center of my philosophy, "You don't work *for* communities. You need to work *with* them." This idea is the center of the best practices in drafting and implementing education policy, as well as doing any sort of community organizing or nonprofit work. The power lies in communities, but our country is still working on using that power to create change.

Working with communities and engaging with the voices of those most impacted by policy will create new opportunities for our schools, city, and country to grow. I gained more hope and power through learning about the way that the education system works - but right now, learning about these systems is seen as a privilege. We need to use information to educate and



empower communities so that they can create equitable and sustainable change. So moving forward, as Malala Yousafza famously said, “let us pick up our books and our pens, they are the most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.”