# DMT INSIGHTS

Issue 15 · 2025 · by Jonathan Brendefur, PhD and Associates

Math Success by DMTI

## FRACTION UNDERSTANDING: CHALLENGES, MISCONCEPTIONS, AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

### Introduction

A student adds one half and one third, writes two fifths, and does not notice that the answer is smaller than the half they started with. The procedure was followed. The sense of size that would have caught the error is missing. Fractions are a cornerstone of mathematics education, essential for number sense and for the algebra that follows, and they remain among the most persistent difficulties learners face. Traditional instruction often falls short of meaningful understanding, emphasizing procedures and algorithms at the expense of conceptual development (Lamon, 2001).

The difficulties are not random. They cluster around a small number of ideas about what a fraction is, and each cluster produces its own predictable errors. This Insight sets out those ideas, the misconceptions that follow when one of them is missing, and the instructional practices that build them.

> **Key Idea • Fraction errors are rarely careless. Each one identifies a specific understanding the student does not yet hold.**

### From Parts of a Whole to a Count of Units

This construct asks for a shift in what the two numerals mean. Traditional part-whole language is limiting. Brendefur and Strother propose reading the numerator as the count, the number of equal units the student has, and the denominator as the unit size, how many equal units the space from 0 to 1 is partitioned into. Saying “the unit of 1” rather than “the whole” reinforces that the unit size is set by the number of equal partitions between any two whole numbers. Partitioning the unit of 1 into four equal units produces fourths. Language of this kind lets a student read three fourths as three units, each one fourth, and it makes fractions greater than 1 ordinary rather than impossible.

> **Key Idea • The denominator names the unit size and the numerator counts those units. A fraction measures a unit rather than a picture of parts.**

**CLASSROOM SNAPSHOT**

**Teacher: “What is one half plus one third?”**

**Student A: “Two fifths. You add the tops, then you add the bottoms.”**

**Student B: "It cannot be. Two fifths is less than one half, and we started with one half."**

**Teacher: "How would you find it?"**

**Student B: "Make the units the same size. Sixths. Three sixths and two sixths is five sixths."**

Student A operated on four separate whole numbers. Student B estimated first, then renamed both fractions in the same units. Only the second student can tell whether an answer is reasonable.

## The Developmental Understandings

Five understandings build this construct. Each one reorganizes what the student attends to, and each can be read directly from student work. They are given here in the order instruction usually develops them.

The unit of 1 and partitioning. Before a fraction means anything, the student decides what the unit of 1 is and partitions it into equal units. Difficulty with the referent unit appears whenever the unit of 1 differs from the quantity in front of the student (Simon et al., 2018; Tzur, 1999). Whole-number work leaves the unit implicit, so students usually need to be taught this understanding rather than assume it. Changing the unit of 1 from task to task, and asking the student to name it, reveals this understanding.

Iteration and the count. A fraction is built by iterating a unit fraction, copying it with no gaps and no overlaps. In five-fourths, the space between each pair of whole numbers is partitioned into four equal units called fourths, and one fourth is then iterated five times to reach a precise location. This understanding makes the numerator a count rather than a second number, and it allows a fraction to exceed 1.

Fraction magnitude on the number line. A fraction is a quantity that can be ordered, compared, and operated on, and it has a location (Simon et al., 2018). Many students read a fraction only as parts of a whole, not as a number with a size. Benchmarks of 0, one half, and 1 give students something to judge against, which makes an unreasonable answer visible.

Equivalence and renaming. Different fractions name the same quantity (Simon et al., 2018). The understanding beneath the rule is that a unit can be partitioned into smaller equal units without changing the amount. A student who holds this renames rather than applies a procedure, and the procedure of multiplying the numerator and denominator by the same number becomes a description of what they already understand.

Composing and decomposing to operate. Addition and subtraction require units of the same size. To solve three fourths plus one half, a student may decompose three fourths into one fourth and one half, then compose the two halves into 1, giving one and one fourth. Working this way develops flexibility that a common-denominator procedure alone does not, and it shows why a common denominator is needed, not merely that it is.

> **Key Idea • Five understandings build the construct: the unit of 1 and partitioning, iteration and the count, magnitude on the number line, equivalence and renaming, and composing and decomposing to operate.**

## Representations Build Meaning

Multiple representations, explicitly linked to each other, produce a comprehensive understanding (Watanabe, 2002). The progression runs from enactive to iconic to symbolic (Bruner, 1966). Enactive work with fraction bars, pattern blocks, or Cuisenaire rods grounds the concept in something the student manipulates. Iconic models follow, and the order within them matters: bar models and number lines first, area models later. A student whose understanding of two-dimensional figures and their areas is still developing often struggles to reason with an area model of a fraction (Watanabe, 2002).

Symbols acquire meaning through connection rather than repetition. Instruction should build symbolic meaning by connecting notation to referents students already understand (Wearne & Hiebert, 1988), reducing dependence on memorization. One practical consequence is to begin with one-dimensional contexts such as a length of ribbon or a distance, and to leave circles until later, because a circle asks the student to compare areas before they can compare lengths.

> **Key Idea • Enactive, then iconic, then symbolic. Among iconic models, the bar model and the number line come before the area model.**

## Reading the Errors: What Each Misconception Reveals

Applying whole-number rules to fractions is the most common error, and it takes several forms: thinking a larger denominator makes a larger fraction, or adding numerators and denominators separately. This additive reasoning works for whole numbers but fails in multiplicative situations. The error identifies a missing understanding of magnitude.

A student who treats a fraction only as parts of a whole partitioned into equal pieces may find an improper fraction illogical because there appear to be more parts than there are (Simon et al., 2018; Stafylidou & Vosniadou, 2004). This limits the student to fractions less than one and makes mixed numbers difficult. The error identifies missing iteration.

A student who reads a fraction only as an arrangement of designated parts does not hold it as a quantity at all (Behr et al., 1992; Mitchell & Clarke, 2004; Simon, 2006; Simon et al., 2018). Outside a partitioned picture, the symbol means nothing to them. The error identifies a missing unit of 1.

> **Key Idea • Each predictable error names the understanding that is missing, which turns a wrong answer into the next instructional move.**

## Conclusion

Fraction understanding is built, not practiced into place. Instruction that moves beyond memorization develops the unit of 1 and partitioning carefully, establishes symbol meaning before syntactic routines, and holds part-whole and comparison readings apart rather than blending them (Watanabe, 2002; Wearne & Hiebert, 1988). Attending to predictable misconceptions, using precise language, and grounding the work in meaningful contexts builds a flexible, confident understanding and lays the foundation for rate, proportion, and algebra.

**Key Idea • Fractions are a reorganization of number from counting to measurement, and the understandings that carry it run through rate, proportion, and algebra.**

## References


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## Social Media

**What does a correct fraction procedure actually show?**

A student adds $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{3}$ with a common denominator and writes $\frac{5}{6}$. Asked whether $\frac{5}{6}$ is more or less than $\frac{1}{2}$, she is not sure. She followed the procedure correctly, but she read each fraction as two whole numbers rather than as a count of units of a named size, so the answer carried no sense of size. A student who reads $\frac{1}{2}$ as three sixths and $\frac{1}{3}$ as two sixths estimates first and knows the total is more than $\frac{1}{2}$ before computing it. This Insight examines why fraction errors are rarely careless and what each one reveals about the understanding a student is missing.

Inside this Insight, you will learn:

- Why “count” and “unit size” work better than “numerator” and “denominator”
- What partitioning the unit of 1 and iterating a unit fraction reveal about fractions greater than 1
- How the bar model and the number line prepare students for the area model
- Why each predictable misconception names the understanding a student is missing

Read the full Insight at mathsuccess.io/dmtinsights.

When your students add fractions this week, can they tell you whether the answer is reasonable before they compute it?

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