

## Editorial

### *Measure for Measure*

For several years now, educators have been bombarded with terms such as *accountability*, *high-stakes testing*, and an overall emphasis on student achievement. In the view of some individuals, such emphasis means that there should be increased quantitative inquiry into teaching and teaching practices. Indeed some jurisdictions are again entering the realm of computer-assisted instruction with the hope that student achievement improves (Alphonso, 2004). Although much emphasis on student achievement is driven by government, could it be that such emphasis, which is interpreted as improvement in grades, misses much of the picture, or indeed the *essence* of education? Also, is such preoccupation a prelude to the reintroduction of undesirable pedagogical practices?

Rather than enter the debate on class sizes, which seems to dwell largely on numbers, I prefer to raise the question of the qualitative experience in the classroom. Immediately I recall many episodes from my own education, as well as accounts from my friends, some of whom are also educators. My family moved when I was 10, and this entailed changing schools. The grade 4 class I left had a friendly and supportive atmosphere. We were expected to help each other. For example, I was an excellent speller, and so for part of each day I helped a classmate who had extreme difficulty in learning to spell. The new grade 4 class, however, was known in the city as having the best mathematics achievement of any grade 4 class. The methods used to obtain this distinction bear investigation. The teacher always entered the room exactly on the dot, and simultaneously he slammed the door violently to ensure that our attention was riveted on him. With a curt "good morning," he would pick up a wooden map pointer (a narrow wooden dowel about a meter in length with a small rubber tip at one end) and with it point to four students at random. These individuals were then ordered to stand next to their desks, and then one of the four was selected to begin reciting the times tables. When a student made a mistake, the pointer was invariably slammed down on his or her desk. The teacher then directed the pointer toward another of the four and uttered the word "continue." Students who perpetually made mistakes—and I was one of those—were made either to stand or sit at the front of the class and were forced to answer questions at random throughout the class. More serious transgressions were dealt with more severely.

I had difficulty in conceptualizing numbers and arithmetic functions at that time, and I found that using my fingers not only as markers for the numerals 1 to 10, but also as multipliers, worked wonders. This practice, however, was not in the approved program of studies at the time and was, therefore, discouraged by obedient, if unimaginative teachers. I had been warned not to use my fingers, but instead to "imagine multiplication" or simply to commit the multiplication tables to memory. This proved impossible for me at that juncture, and I resorted to sneaky methods of using my fingers for calculation. Nevertheless,

my reliance on fingers was discovered, and I received a sharp rap of the pointer on the back of my hands after being ridiculed for using fingers, "like a baby," and risking the high achievement of the class.

Although the technique served to fill me with dread and terror, it did little to teach me the mathematical concepts that I had so much difficulty in learning and understanding. Moreover, the experience made me wary of all things numeric for quite some time and led me to plead with my parents to move me to another class. For those students who had mastered the concepts, the class provided them with the practice necessary to gain automaticity (Anderson, 1987; Resnick, 1989). In this manner my colleagues could rattle off the relevant material on exams and at competitions. Parenthetically, the teacher's habit of slamming the door came to an abrupt end one morning when after a particularly violent slam, the clock above the door came away from the wall, smashing itself on the teacher's head. Not only was his head lacerated severely by the broken glass of the clock, but the blow also rendered him unconscious for some time.

My experience was not unique, nor was it a local phenomenon. Many years later one of my graduate students recounted a family story about her scholastic experience. She had been raised in a rural area of Canada and had attended Catholic schools. Although she remains a highly inquisitive individual, she was apparently even more inquisitive as a child, always asking questions and challenging information, not to be contrary, but to discover the reasons why. Such inquisitiveness was not appreciated by the nuns who taught her, because they contended that if she asked so many questions, not all the relevant material in the curriculum would be covered, and class achievement would suffer in consequence. Admonitions were often accompanied by the warning that if her inquisitive behavior did not cease, she would perpetually "burn in hell." After being told this many times, my student thought that being consigned to the flames was inevitable. In consequence, she decided one day to go home after school and spend the rest of her time on earth huddled next to the furnace so that she could get used to the fiery temperatures of hell. Her absence from family activities was soon noted, and she was discovered. Although the episode is now regarded humorously, at the time her parents were outraged. My student was transferred from that school because her parents did not receive a suitable explanation from the nuns as to why they had threatened their daughter with eternal damnation and because one of the nuns said that too much inquisitiveness would contribute to lower achievement of the school.

The two stories are not to imply that scholastic education is essentially oppressive, but to illustrate that when there is an unhealthy preoccupation with achievement, then there can be, to borrow a euphemism from the United States military, *collateral damage*. To be sure most of my teachers were not sadistic, Dickensian, or unthinking individuals. However, in conversations with many in subsequent years, it has been made apparent to me that many believed they had no choice but to "follow orders." As one of my former teachers told me, "Because of Sputnik, achievement in math and science was everything. We were told by the principal that if we did not do what we were told, then we could expect to be unemployed" (Personal communication, July

15, 1981). Nevertheless, there was also a prevalent view that somehow corporal punishment or severe verbal rebuke would contribute to higher student achievement.

This idea is not new, as there was a saying among some ancient Greek educators that students' ears were on their bottoms (Marrou, 1956). Several centuries later John Locke (1632-1704) criticized the prevalent idea that physical punishment would lead to improved learning and achievement, saying, "The Pains and Pleasures of the Body are, I think, of ill Consequence ... they serve but to increase and strengthen those inclinations, which 'tis our Business to subdue and master" (Locke, 1927, p. 33). In the 20th century Shalka (1973), conducted a study on corporal punishment and its supposed benefits. In a survey of pupils, parents, teachers, and administrators, it was found that all groups contended that corporal punishment, although possibly improving pupil behavior, did not contribute to the improvement of pupil achievement.

Although the information cited—and indeed my own experiences—reflect conditions of bygone times, there is something from that era that has relevance at present. Although it is tempting to believe that such cruel and repressive actions no longer have a place in the classrooms of today, it is important to keep in mind that at least in some instances such practices were used because there was an expectation either for improved achievement or for maintaining the status quo. With the renewed emphasis on high-stakes testing in many parts of the world, and with accountability drives such as *no child left behind* in the US, there is a risk that in a desperate dash for higher student achievement some individuals will resurrect the ancient idea that corporal and severe verbal punishments will enhance student achievement.

Given my experiences, those of others, and the findings of earlier research, I sincerely hope that this scenario does not occur. It is critical, therefore, for educators not only to strive for a broader view of narrow issues deemed important by one or another stakeholder group, but also to keep in mind that although present conditions are never the same as in the past, it is not necessary to try repeating past practices in the hope that they will now result in a different outcome.

G.H. Buck

#### References

- Alphonso, C. (2004, January 14). Use of laptops powers better writing skills. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A5.
- Anderson, J.R. (1987). Skill acquisition: Compilation of weak-method problem solutions. *Psychological Review*, 94, 192-210.
- Locke, J. (1927). *Some thoughts concerning education*. Cambridge, UK: The University Press.
- Marrou, H.I. (1956). *A history of education in antiquity* (G. Lamb Trans.). New York: Sheed and Ward.
- Resnick, L.B. (1989). Developing mathematical knowledge. *American Psychologist*, 44, 162-169.
- Shalka, M.B. (1973). *The attitudes of pupils, parents, teachers, and administrators, toward corporal punishment in schools*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta.