

# LOVED ARTICLES

*The following sequence of short communications were written in response to an invitation to members of the advisory board to think about the sort of articles that we want to see in FLM through reflecting on a particular one that has been important to each of us in some way. If you do not have access to earlier volumes of the journal, you will be able to read the articles from the FLM web pages at <http://flm.math.ca/>. The first piece can be read as an invitation from me, the editor, to you, the reader, to add your contribution to the discussion. It is an edited version of the original invitation. Your response can be written as an e-message to Laurinda Brown at [flm-editor@bris.ac.uk](mailto:flm-editor@bris.ac.uk). The intention is to publish some replies in a future issue of the journal.*

**The role of contexts in the mathematics classroom: do they make mathematics more “real”?** *Jo Boaler* 13(2)

## *Laurinda Brown*

Taking over the editorship of FLM, I am aware of the history of the journal as I look on my shelves and think back over all those issues. What does FLM mean to you? What do you look for when you open an issue? What sort of articles do you want?

The mechanism that I am going to propose, so that we can begin to talk about the journal, is for you to think of a particular article that has stayed with you and write (briefly?) about it. Why does it stand out for you? How have you used it? Or/and There may be many more than one that come to mind, but the discipline initially is to think of one and write something about it. I am interested in a range of views so that I can be aware of more than my own preferences.

Here's my first thought. There's an early Jo Boaler article where I saw her, a PhD student then, engaging with the literature on contexts as she grappled with interpreting the differences in the mathematics teaching and learning cultures in two schools in which she was working. There is energy in the writing that is somehow related to her developing ideas. The article is work in progress rather than a report of completed research. It raises questions. I have used it, since its appearance, with students on Master's courses and others because it illustrates an individual researcher starting to engage with a theoretical perspective (situated cognition in this case) and that then starts to feel like something they can begin to do too.

**Norman** *Jennifer Macpherson* 7(2)

## *David A Reid*

I read 'Norman' as a Master's student when I was learning what articles in mathematics education were like. I was reading a wide range of things such as PME proceedings, JRME,

ESM, JMB, but especially FLM, because there were a lot of issues on a shelf in the office I was given, and because once I started reading them I didn't want to stop.

The article about Norman was a contrast with most of what I was reading. Instead of long discussions of methodology (or worse yet, long lists of results with no discussion of methodology) I read a story. Not a story that was just a story. A story that made me think about the nature of mathematics, the nature of teaching, and the importance of listening to children. It made profound points, for me at least, that wouldn't have felt nearly so profound if I'd just read them stated on a page. Since that time, I have mentioned the article to many people at many times. It seems to be appropriate in a lot of the contexts I find myself in.

This article also taught me something special about FLM. FLM has occasional articles in the standard pattern for reporting research, and it has theoretical articles. But it also published 'Norman', a story about a kid that satisfied the mandate of being about mathematics education in a way that most articles don't. I haven't seen anything like it for a long time. Maybe such things are very rare. Maybe authors don't feel free to send them to FLM. Maybe 'Norman' wouldn't be published in FLM now. I don't know. I hope it would be.

**Norman** *Jennifer Macpherson* 7(2)

## *Dick Tahta*

I very much enjoyed David's recollection of what the story about Norman had meant to him, and felt like staying with that article rather than introducing the memory of another one. I recall feeling, not for the first time when reading FLM, that I missed further discussion of such articles.

I know that in the first few years of his editorship David Wheeler had often asked for feedback and further reflection on previous articles. After a while he gave up trying, having received no response. I sensed that readers probably talked to each other from time to time, but also that many articles were complete in themselves, closed some might say, so that there was not much further to say about them other than some general agreement or disagreement.

Jennifer Macpherson's article was different. It was open in the sense that it left the reader to answer some of its delicately underplayed questions. Do children in general have an early 'visual' competence? How much of this is genetic? Influenced by early experience? What sort of toys? What about the intriguing issues raised about number? Is there a genetically-determined, numerical sense (as some brain researchers are now claiming)? In what sense is number culturally determined? In what way do teachers 'compensate'

for genetic or cultural differences? Should they? (On the whole people send their children to schools of another culture precisely in order for them to acquire that culture )

Well, the questions multiply, but my point in raising them is to suggest that it is articles that do this for us that are most memorable, and for me are the most desirable. It is such articles that deserve and demand the informal, short communications that David Wheeler looked for and which I hope will still be sought in some way

### **Difference, cognition, and mathematics education**

*Valerie Walkerdine 10(3)*

#### **Brent Davis**

I found it difficult to single out one piece. In the end, I selected a paper that hadn't even crossed my mind when I began to think through the possibilities.

Walkerdine's is among a handful of articles that I keep near at hand. It's by far the most tattered, underlined, highlighted, and margin-noted of the collection. The main reason that this article stands out for me has everything to do with timing. It came out when I was working through that transition from classroom teacher to graduate student. It was an eye-opener to encounter a discussion of the learning of mathematics that knitted together influences from psychoanalysis (Freud, Lacan, Klein), poststructuralism (Foucault), postcolonialism (Fanon, Bhabha), and anthropology (Althusser). As one who is often frustrated by the relative insularity of the mathematics education literature, I found in Walkerdine a different way to think about how I might approach research into the learning and teaching of mathematics.

I also admired the strength of the writing, as embodied in such assertions as "what comes to be valorised as a higher order activity might have everything to do with attempts to regulate and control through reason in a social order which finds its norm in a bourgeois subject who does not need to calculate to survive" (p. 54). My response upon reading the article the first time was "This is the kind of work that I want to do" (That, in fact, was my exact response. It's scrawled on the front page with a few exclamation marks )

### **Ethnomathematics: a dialogue**

*Marcia Ascher, Ubiratan D'Ambrosio 14(2)*

#### **Bill Barton**

What was it about this interview between Marcia Ascher and Ubiratan D'Ambrosio that was important? One of the things that we as mathematics educators do not do enough of, it seems to me, is to expose ourselves in the formation of our ideas, theories, research proposals and so on. It was refreshing to read two senior people in the field of ethnomathematics as they exposed their initial fumbblings with the intricacies of their field, wrong turnings, current thinking, and the things that had affected their thoughts. I remember clearly that it gave me the impression of theories in formation, as opposed to theories that exist, or theories that are to be used.

I'm not sure that the interview format was responsible

for that, although it was novel and did allow 'people' to speak instead of 'articles' (just like it is good to hear mathematicians speak about how they came to conclusions, and not only read the *post hoc* reporting of results and their proofs). I would, however, like FLM to continue to be more of a conversation about ideas, than a reporting of conclusions. If this is to be the case, then it is important to find ways that both new and experienced workers in the field can safely expose their initial and tentative concepts.

The other important thing about that particular article is that it illuminated some of the social history behind the development of the theory of ethnomathematics. This is important for ethnomathematics in particular, as that theory must be reflexive, but I think it is important for other theories too.

### **An experience with some able women who avoid mathematics**

*Dorothy Buerk 3(2)*

#### **Vicki Zack**

I have been thinking hard about which FLM article I would like to write about, as there were three which came immediately to mind when we were asked the question. However, the one by Dorothy Buerk was clearly the one that I found had the greatest impact. The article dealt with "math avoidant" women and their perceptions of mathematics. I recall being startled by the metaphors her participants chose to describe mathematics, especially "a stainless steel wall - hard, cold, smooth, offering no handhold" (p. 19). I saw myself in much of what was told about their histories. I recall feeling so sorry that I had never had an elementary, high school or university experience such as the one Buerk described offering the women in her study. I can still recall that ache.

Upon re-reading the article, I enjoyed the account of the various approaches to the handshake problem used by the women who were the participants in Buerk's study. I myself have learned much about this task while working with my fifth grade children as they solve it. In returning to teach in the elementary classroom in 1989, working with reform-oriented approaches in mathematics, I have been delighted to finally have the opportunity to play with mathematical ideas, and to use my own strategies as I construct meaning.

There is a quote attributed to Guy de Maupassant by my college lecturer that has been a favourite of mine ever since, usually thought of in relation to works of literature: "The public's cry to us writers is: make us laugh, make us cry, make us think." I look to articles in FLM because the writing often sounds natural and rhythmic, and the work makes me think, and at times makes me laugh and cry. Buerk's article was one of a number of articles that have evoked deep emotions and much thinking.

*Jill Adler wrote, having found herself returning over a period of time to thinking about her one article, that "it was more that FLM gave voice to issues of the social much earlier and more prevalently (i.e. in different forms) than other journals and so was such a useful resource." It is striking that writing from as far back as 1980, as is the case with 'Norman', still feels fresh more than 20 years later (eds).*