MISBEHAVIOUR in the classroom

BY Louise Cloutier

MS. CLOUTIER, RECIPIENT OF A 1999-2000 PRIME MINISTER'S AWARD FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE (CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT), IS AN ART TEACHER AT PUGWASH DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL IN NOVA SCOTIA.

Saturday morning the phone rang. It was the substitute teacher. Inservicing had lured me out of the classroom the day before and there was a particular class that she'd like to discuss with me, if I had a minute or two. One half hour later we hung up. Not good.

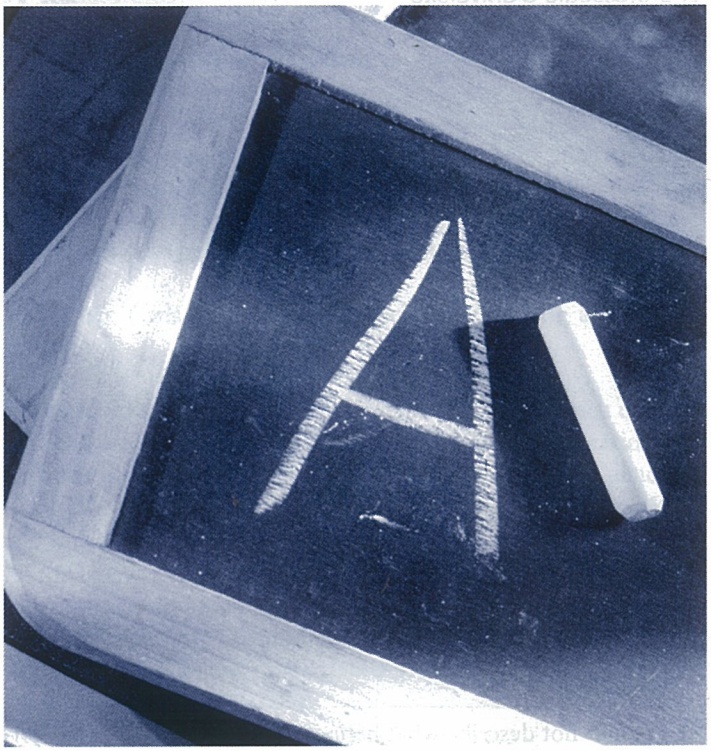
Predictably, negative student behaviours are exaggerated in the absence of the regular classroom teacher. A sort of "While the cat's away..." mentality prevails which challenges the new teacher to earn her relatively meagre pay. Several factors are certain contributors to undesirable behaviours on these days. A student feels anonymous in the eyes of the new authority figure. Anonymity means unaccountability. Paired with the impermanence of the substitute's status, a student realizes that there is little chance for the regular route of teacher recourse: the scheduling of a detention, the talk in the hall, or a call home to a parent. A trip to the office isn't completely ruled out but students feel safe acting out in numbers. Pinpointing one child in a sea of unknown faces is not an easy task and the substitute, in fear of being perceived as ineffective, isn't likely to send half the class to the principal's office!

New teachers as well as the veterans of the classroom encounter intolerable student behaviour. The general consensus amongst teachers is that there are more challenges pertaining to behaviour than there were in the "Good Old Days". The question that begs to be asked is "Why?".

All students, regardless of their abilities, will misbehave at some point in their academic careers. The reasons for misbehaviour are as diverse as are the people who cross the classroom's threshold. This does not suggest that all students are bad. Testing the limits of the tester is somewhat a rite of passage for students. Viewed in a positive light, occasional inappropriate behaviour is an exercise which familiarizes the student with accountability and consequences.

Chronic misbehaviour has more serious connotations. It disrupts not only the learning of the individual who is acting out, but also puts at risk the education of all students. Latch key lifestyles, unrestricted television and movie viewing, the disintegration of the family unit and the severing of community ties, to name just a few, have placed authority figures low on the totem pole. These students are unreceptive to the intervention of adults who have otherwise been absent in the decision making process involved in other situations in their lives. The most effective remedy in these scenarios is for the teacher to invest more time getting to know the student, an option which is nonexistent for substitutes.

A recent shift in educational strategies is also responsible for additional behavioural problems in the classroom. Accommodations and Individual Educational Plans mean that more special needs students are mainstreamed into the regular classroom. The upside of this is that these students are encountering more positive educational outcomes and are more likely to



stay in school longer. The downside is that behavioural problems often accompany students who, over the years, have learned to act out in order to cope with the daily frustrations of achieving success. Of the nineteen students who exasperated my substitute, five children are identified as special needs students. Two of the five require a teacher assistant in the room. However, budgetary constraints and scheduling have resulted in the unavailability of an assistant at that time. Had the substitute known this beforehand, she may have made herself unavailable for that day.

With the threat of more inservicing on the horizon, a mere talk with the disruptive class seemed insufficient. Temporarily putting the regular program aside, I opted to do interactive activities with the students which would enable them to adopt skills and responsibilities of good behaviour. Also in need of attention were my own preparations for the substitute. In the hopes of reducing anonymity, seating arrangement lists for my eleven different classes are presently in the works. In addition, I have created a few quick-to-read emergency lesson plans should the substitute feel more comfortable presenting a new lesson rather than following the one in progress. Finally, after further discussion with the substitute and on my invitation, she agreed, for better or for worse, to observe my teaching practices in the classroom.

I have yet to be absent from my room again, but I am confident things will improve. In the meantime, Saturday mornings are all mine!