

# RETEACHING FRACTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper reports on the viability of a programme aimed at encouraging sixth grade students who have already been exposed to teaching practices leading to entrenched limiting constructions, to construct the concept of a fraction anew and to invent solution strategies for realistic problems involving fractions, in a school and classroom environment with serious practical and organisational problems.*

## **Introduction**

Much research has been done on the problems elementary school students experience with common fractions and on the design of teaching programmes for fractions at different grade levels (see Pitkethly and Hunting, 1996, for a review of the research).

An important issue is the effect that limiting constructions (D'Ambrosio & Mewborn, 1994) has on students' attempts to make sense of fractions. These include, for example, the influence of whole number schemes, which encourage the student to interpret the fraction symbol as two separate whole numbers, and limited part-whole contexts, where the student has had no or not sufficient experience of fractions as parts of collections of objects. Another issue is the possible adverse effect of rote procedures on students' attempts to construct meaningful algorithms for operations on fractions (Mack, 1990).

The above problems can be *prevented* by appropriate programmes for learning fractions in the lower elementary grades (e.g. Empson, 1995; Murray, Olivier & Human, 1996). However, when these limiting constructions are already firmly entrenched, it is to be expected that the task of encouraging students to develop strong and error-free conceptual and procedural knowledge about fractions will be much more difficult. Such attempts have already been made successfully (e.g. Bell, 1993; Kamii & Clark, 1995; Mack, 1990) in what we believe to be favourable learning environments.

In this paper we explore the possibility of implementing a programme for common fractions for Grade 6 students in less than favourable learning environments.

## **Theoretical framework**

In line with our approach to the teaching and learning of whole number arithmetic (e.g. Murray, Olivier & Human, 1994, 1998), we believe that the teaching and learning of fractions should be based on eliciting and clarifying students' intuitions about fractions through posing realistic problems for which students have to invent their own solution strategies (cf. Empson, 1995; Kamii & Clark, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, H., Olivier, A. & De Beer, T. (1999). Reteaching fractions for understanding. In O. Zaslavsky (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Twenty-third International Conference for the Psychology of Mathematics Education: Vol. 3*, (pp. 305-312). Haifa, Israel.

# Reteaching Fractions For Understanding

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