

RESPONSES TO HURSH, AND RUMPH ET AL.

Janet Ellis and Sandy Magee
University of North Texas

Hursh and Rumph et al. both introduce NCLB via history—albeit different historical perspectives: Hursh describes the historical occurrences leading up to NCLB; whereas, Rumph et al. describe historical origins of progressive education which, in turn, undergird the current American educational system. Both Hursh and Rumph et al. agree on the need to apply behavior analysis to current educational practices. They applaud NCLB's focus on evidence-based educational practices and assessments; however they agree that currently, these are educational *goals*, not educational *realities*.

These papers are reminiscent of an important distinction that Glenn (1985) introduced: ceremonial behavioral contingencies vs. technological behavioral contingencies. She defined ceremonial behavior as “that fostered and maintained by cultures intimately associated with ‘status, mores, and legendary beliefs’ and which does not build on itself. Ceremonial behavior tends to be static, resistant to change, and when widespread, establishes institutional patterns that bind the culture to the past.” Glenn maintains that the family, the church, and the state exemplify and maintain ceremonial behavior because the social function of all three is “the investiture and transmission of power and status” (1985, p. 18). Glenn further elaborates, “the social reinforcers maintaining ceremonial behavior derive their power from the status, position or authority of the reinforcing agent independent of any relation to changes in the environment directly or indirectly benefiting the behaving person” (Glenn 1986, p. 3). “Because of this arbitrary feature ceremonial behavior typically involves aversive control. . . and maintains itself because of its advantage to those with the control [ed. in this case employees of educational systems]” (Ellis, 1991, p. 203).

Ceremonial contingencies, given the aforementioned definition, tend to impede and prevent implementation of new technology. Glenn also described a competing repertoire that she labeled technological behavior, defined as “behavior maintained by non-arbitrary changes in the environment—by its usefulness, value, or importance to the behaving person and others...Technological control ensures change, because technological behavior is maintained only if it proves useful to the culture” (Ellis, 1991, p. 203). It appears, given the content of these three papers, that technological progress (as exemplified via evidence-based instructional materials) will be achieved only when the system is sensitive to negative outcomes currently resulting from today's problematic educational approaches.

Hursh, and Rumph et al., agree that the current educational system is not a functional option for achieving the desired outcomes as currently envisioned by NCLB. Based on the opinions expressed by these authors, Ellis and Magee have concluded that

rather than imposing systemic changes onto the present educational regimen (i.e., remodeling the nonfunctional, expensive, existing structure) this system may be irreparably damaged and require a complete “overhaul.”

Hursh and Rumph et al.’s descriptions of the current educational system and its approach to teaching students are accurately described in Englemann and Carnine’s *Theory of Instruction: Principles and Applications* (1982). According to these authors, analyzing learning is difficult because the analysis would have to include a) the behavior, b) the teaching stimuli, and c) the content of what is to be taught. It appears to us that NCLB’s focus is almost totally on content—as exemplified by the acknowledged practice of “teaching to the test” and incidences of falsifying the test data. Our paper deals almost exclusively with the inappropriately designed educational contingencies that NCLB has generated—namely, providing powerful positive consequences for staff whose classes exceed NCLB basic minimal standards (cash bonuses) and, conversely, providing equally powerful aversive consequences for staff whose classes fail to meet NCLB criteria for acceptable, recognized, exemplary progress. We agree with Rumph et al. that punitive sanctions based on student scores have resulted in reports of widespread, seriously inappropriate behavior of teachers and administrators. Skinner (1987) predicted that a focus on punitive sanctions would lead to further deflection, and suggested instead that behavioral science could give students and teachers better reasons for learning and teaching, so that no one would need to be coerced into using effective instructional practices.

Regarding NCLB’s focus on data-based, scientifically-evidenced effective education, we offer the failure of the federal government to adopt Direct Instruction® as an example of federal action that contradicted the government’s stated goal when they funded Project Follow Through. Likewise, why have such well-researched, proven effective programs as the teaching machine, Headsprout® and Precision Teaching not been adopted?

Skinner answered our question when he described the fact that while everyone is unhappy about current educational progress, we punish students who do not learn by flunking them; we discharge teachers who do not teach well; we disband schools that do not perform because that is easier for “a culture too strongly committed to the view that a technology of behavior is a threat to freedom and dignity...” (p. 128). How much longer will it take our culture to recognize and support a behavioral approach to education?

REFERENCES

- Ellis, J. (1991). Contingencies and metcontingencies in correctional settings. In P. A. Lamal (Ed.), *Behavioral analysis of societies and cultural practices* (pp. 201-217). NY: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.
- Englemann, S., & Carnine, D. (1982) *Theory of instruction: Principles and applications*. NY: Irvington Publishers, Inc.
- Glenn, S. (1985). Some reciprocal roles between behavior analysis and institutional economics in post-Darwinian science. *The Behavior Analyst*, 8, 15-27.
- Glenn, S. (1986). Metacontingencies in *Walden Two*. *Behavior Analysis & Social Action*, 5, 2-8.

Skinner, B. F. (1987). The shame of American education. In B. F. Skinner, *Upon further reflection* (pp. 113-130). NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.