

How Mathematics is assessed and monitored in a Secondary school

Introduction to Secondary School Teaching Task 5 – Assessment

There are many ways in which pupils are assessed in secondary school for maths. One of the most frequently used is quick-fire in-class questioning; the teacher asks a question and makes a mental note of those who volunteer an answer. Usually only one person is chosen to give an answer, but more information is occasionally gleaned by using a method such as personal whiteboards, so every pupil has a try at answering the question. These methods help the teacher to see how much of a topic the pupils are understanding as they go along. There's no use in getting through lots of material in class if half the pupils don't understand it.

Another common form of assessment is working alone or collaboratively on textbook questions. The progress of the pupil can be monitored as they work during class time, and a better understanding could be achieved by setting homework questions to be marked the next week. The issue of homework marking is an important one, since it is not as immediate as answering a verbal question or checking through an exercise immediately afterwards in class. First, there will inevitably be a gap between the lesson and the actual completion of the homework, and there will also be a gap while the teacher marks the work to feedback to the pupil. In my school, the teacher made a point of giving a grade for effort alongside the mark, and also writing a comment on the whole homework, which then required a response written in by the pupil. This ensured that if there were any issues with the topic, they could be addressed by the teacher, and if a poor homework was merely a result of a minor misunderstanding later cleared up the pupil could report this.

One important issue it is hard to escape from concerning assessments is the way pupils are trained up for a particular test. How well a pupil is expected to do in their SATs seems to be more important to some teachers than their actual mathematical understanding. One teacher I observed sat the pupils in order of achievement on a mock paper, and more often than not referred to them by their rank number rather than name. A lot of the work during revision time seems to be focused on practising exam technique instead of building up a firm mathematical knowledge base and understanding.

I had the opportunity to examine the marking of a number of different teachers, and aspects which were particularly useful included the way teachers would examine questions pupils consistently got wrong in order to find the misunderstanding, and address this in their comment along with a worked example. If necessary they would arrange to go through the topic with the pupil individually.

Diagnostic assessment is also an important aspect. Pupils are streamed in maths in most secondary schools, and their group is usually chosen based on an initial exam. In my school, however, once teachers get to know their groups and make a personal assessment of pupils, their opinions are worth more than exam marks in choosing sets.