

Children's Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, mathematics lessons in primary schools

Alison Borthwick

Abstract

Standards of mathematics have been much discussed and criticised over the past three decades (e.g. Buxton, 1981; Cockcroft, 1982). Adults frequently claim dislike or incompetence towards the subject, while many pupils choose not to pursue mathematics post-compulsory education. Recent reports (e.g. Smith, 2004; Brown et al, 2008) evidence a shortage of people qualified in mathematics in the UK. The primary school curriculum has undergone several changes in an attempt to raise standards in mathematics. One of the most recent changes was the implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS) (DfEE, 1999) across primary schools in England.

Among the reasons attributed to the crisis in mathematics education, disaffection with pupils remains high. While there are studies that investigate this pupil disaffection at secondary school, there are few that consult younger children in order to ascertain their views of mathematics. One of the potential reasons for the lack of studies involving young children may be the difficulties in consulting them. This study addresses this issue by using drawings as the primary source of data collection,

followed by interviews. It offers a view of how some children perceive their mathematics lessons and what this could mean for the future of the subject.

Data were analysed into four themes which looked at children's emotions and attitudes towards mathematics lessons, the perceptions that children have of their peers and their teacher, and the mathematics children associate with their lessons. Findings suggest that the NNS does not appear to be as integrated into daily mathematics lessons as much as it was intended to be. However, using drawings to gather data has proved a powerful catalyst in creating conversations with teachers about their practice and how pupils view mathematics lessons in their classrooms. This may prove an effective means of influencing teachers' thinking and actions.