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FRIDAY

Pupils don't love maths, they endure it

Published: 10 March 2006

The curriculum has been dominated for years by two main subjects, with a small concession to a third. The core skills of mathematics and English have been promoted by the Government and their dominance assured by the amount of time they take up; more than 50 per cent every day.

We've become used to negative attitudes about maths, but after all this effort, shouldn't we be witnessing a renaissance in the subject, with positive involvement and outcomes?

In order to confirm the efficacy of the policy, a survey was carried out over five years to test attitudes to learning maths among more than 1,000 pupils aged 11 to 14 in a Manchester secondary.

They were first asked why they did maths; they were given opportunities to testify to their pleasure in it, the usefulness of the subject or anything they could think of. We were taken aback to find more than 80 per cent said they did it because they had no choice; they submitted to the fact that it was central to the standard school routine. They could justify the importance of maths only by saying it was necessary to pass exams to get to college.

The message was clear: they had heard about and been constantly reminded of the centrality of maths until they felt compelled to study it. There was no mention of pleasure. They were nervous of the subject and reiterated their fear of failure, of getting poor marks.

What was interesting, however, was the way they associated maths with certain styles of working. When asked to explore what they thought doing maths was like, they had three main themes: it was mostly to do with memorising, with rote learning, with routine. They also felt it had a lot to do with good luck, as well as natural ability. To those who were good at it, such prowess came naturally. The rest had no chance.

The linking of maths and memory is a consequence of the countless tests.

The pressure to perform and the need for high attainment dominates their experience. Their association with maths was worry, even panic, and the

fear of doing badly rather than trying to do well. One word summed up their overall attitude; maths was "pointless".

How can this be? After years of school improvement, with inspection and tests, with the promotion of maths, how is it that it remains pupils' worst subject, the most difficult and, most telling of all, the most irrelevant to their lives and their futures (apart from the need to do the tests)?

No one doubts the efforts invested promoting the centrality of the subject, but how much has gone into the support of teachers, of convincing the pupils that it is not simply something that they have to undergo, without conviction? Is it possible that the implacable national curriculum, with its accumulation of testable facts, has something to answer for? It certainly does not help the struggling teachers.

CEDRIC CULLINGFORD Cedric Cullingford, professor of education at Huddersfield University, wrote this piece from the late Tom Swarbrick's doctoral research. Mr Swarbrick, head of maths at a large inner-city comprehensive, died suddenly last year before completing his degree

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