REFLECTIONS

"You can all come in now," declared a small boy no older than 6 or 7, and with that we squeezed through the main entrance of the school into the crowded meeting area, finding some space around the edge of the room. I was visiting Summerhill school in Leiston, Suffolk, a 'free school' that operates as a self-governing democratic community. The decisions the community abides by are those reached by majority vote at its daily meetings, in which all members participate on an equal footing, whether pupils or staff. On this particular day the first decision had been to vote into the meeting the thirty or so teachers, parents and other interested individuals who had been waiting nervously outside! The meeting that followed covered matters familiar to any school council – litter, preparation for a party – but also items less commonly trusted to children and teenagers, such as discipline of individuals, scheduling of lessons and staff behaviour. The business was conducted in a friendly, purposeful and polite manner, with a noticeably greater degree of dignity than is present at many school staff meetings!

Summerhill works on the basis that pupils are free to sign up for lessons as and when they choose, and in a sunny post-exams period such as the day of my visit there are typically few lessons going on, and in particular I unfortunately didn't get to see a mathematics lesson. In fact I got a worrying sense that the mathematics teacher is rather less busy than, say, the art teacher, though that may be unfair! There was interesting work on display around the school and pupils were eager to chat about what they had been doing and answer our questions. Pupils decide for themselves what to engage with and when: most students attend some lessons.

I had been keen to visit Summerhill for some time, and I left very impressed by the friendly and grown-up atmosphere. There was a calmness combined with a purposefulness – one person commented, "these kids know exactly what they're doing; there's nothing random here". But I was also uneasy about the extent to which pupils opt out of subjects like mathematics, possibly without fully appreciating the implications in terms of their future, or even exactly what it is they're rejecting. But at least some of the pupils are sharp enough to realise that if they don't choose to do any mathematics because of a fear of the subject, that is not a truly 'free' choice. At any rate, it would be rash to draw any sweeping conclusions on the basis of one day's visit. I understand that the best book on Summerhill has yet to be published – an updated version of the founder A S Neill's original **Summerhill School**. I shall be getting a copy as soon as it's out.

The first proofs of this issue of **MT** arrived just after I returned from Summerhill, so I approached them with thoughts of happy children skateboarding and biking up and down ramps in the sunshine. It wasn't too big a jolt from there to **Matt Skoss**'s stimulating ideas for practical *Maths on a mat*, and it was encouraging to hear how memorable such activities can be for learners. Equally memorable, no doubt, will be **Paula Maida**'s lesson on *Edible reflective symmetry*, which saw young pupils experimenting with symmetrical and unsymmetrical jam sandwiches and cookies! Now there's a real-life context!

Shirley Sides offers us *Essential ingredients* of a non-edible kind, stressing the importance of a balanced diet including plenty of investigational work. Hands-on practical mathematics with real-world contexts are also some of the features of her course that give **Su Nicholson** and her students an answer to the question *Why AS use of mathematics?*

If it's fun and games you're after, **Paula Ross**'s Y6 class present us with their verdicts on Adrian and Jeni Pinels' collection of *Mathematical games*, and **Chris Clements** invites us to try some *Transformational golf*, which gave his Y8 pupils plenty of enjoyment in the computer room and taught Chris a thing or two along the way. Learning from the learners also lies behind **Edwina Theunissen**'s *Revisiting fractions*, in which she accompanies her daughter on a journey through some bewildering mathematical territory.

On a more disturbing front, we discover that **Mike Askew** is *Sending out an SOS* because of his anger about what he sees as an absence of caring in our schools, suggesting that because teachers are not valued they find it hard to value their pupils. And in a bold move, **Stephanie Prestage** and **Pat Perks** propose a daring suggestion for aiding pupils' progress with algebra: *Ban the equals sign!*

And what do you do when only two of your sixth form class turn up for a lesson? Cancel it? Not if you're **Jonny Griffiths** – you always have something intriguing in reserve: *Phi Oh Phi Oh Phi* don't I come up with clever ideas like that!

Happy reading!

Colin Foster is second in the mathematics department at King Henry VIII School, Coventry, UK. He joins the editorial team for Mathematics Teaching from January 2006.

Geoff Giles

Geoff, a member of ATM for over 40 years, died suddenly on 4 August. He was a regular contributor to MT and wrote the recent publication **Proof in elementary geometry**. Many will remember and still use his DIME materials and also the ideas gained from his inspiring workshops at ATM conferences. A full obituary will appear in the December issue.

Visit www.atm.org.uk to read personal tributes from his many friends and colleagues in ATM.

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