

Leaders in Mathematical Thinking

Christine Suurtamm - Math Assessment

>> Assessment is really the area that I do most of my research in. And for me, assessment happens all the time. It's often actually hard to talk about assessment. Often I'm asked to give a talk on assessment, but assessment is not separate from instruction, and it's not separate from learning. So assessment to me is happening constantly, or it should be happening constantly. So as teachers pose appropriate questions, as teachers listen to student thinking and listen in ways where they are trying to understand that student thinking, and then respond to that thinking, that to me is the heart of what assessment in mathematics is. And that can happen moment by moment as one teaches the class. It also happens on particular events, like a performance task. But again, I think the kind of key feature of sound assessment is to pay attention to what that particular student is thinking, ways that they are thinking, and then to respond to it by posing further questions, to kind of move that thinking forward. So one research project that I did that we've written a couple of articles about was working over two years with teachers who, once we've put out a call to teachers who might want to work on enhancing their assessment practice in two school boards, and we had several professional learning communities with these teachers. They would meet after school. I would visit them every six weeks or eight weeks, and we'd get together. And my idea was we'd spend about an hour and a half, and often it would go much longer. So they would talk a lot about the kinds of practices that they were doing in their classroom. And they would be learning from one another. Sometimes I'd pull in a case study or bring in something to help to prompt the discussion, but really, they were feeding off ideas. So they would get an idea from one, try it out in their classroom, come back and report on how that was working. So they were really experimenting and trying new ideas, and thinking about assessment similar to the way that I was talking about it. And one of the things that I found interesting about that were the kinds of dilemmas that came up for them. So in one article, I wrote about their practices, but in another article, we wrote about the types of dilemmas. And sometimes their what I would call "pedagogical dilemmas," which are dilemmas about, so how do I do this, how do I create a checklist that does something? And sometimes they would be more what I would call "cultural dilemmas," so in other words, well, "I'm trying to work with my grade 11 class to just provide descriptive feedback, but they're wondering where the mark is." So it's a matter of sort of different expectations between students and teachers. And those kinds of things sometimes take a little longer to resolve, and they take some communication. So I've found many instances within Ontario where teachers are moving to a much richer array of assessment strategies, to make sure that they're really capturing the student thinking.