

Interviewing Tips

Approach the student interview as an opportunity to listen to the mathematical sense-making of one particular child. This is *not* a tutoring session, nor a test, but an interview whose purpose is for you to understand the mathematical thinking of the child. As one teacher put it, it is “just to see what they know, not like a quiz.” Finding out what a child knows involves asking questions to which the child may not know the answer. Don’t push the child in a certain direction (i.e., toward the right answer).

Before:

When you invite a child to participate, explain that you would like to interview him/her for a class where we are interested in knowing what children (you can say first-graders, second-graders, etc., as appropriate) think about mathematics. Make it clear that you value the child’s ideas, and that this is more like a news interview than a quiz (don’t mention testing). Most children feel good to hear that an adult is interested in their ideas.

You also need to make it clear to any relevant adults what you are doing. You may want to send a short letter to the child’s parents ahead of time in order to clear the interview with them and explain its purpose.

Once you know your interviewee, prepare starting point questions: Wonder what children would think about a certain topic. Also, make sure your questions are appropriate to the child’s age. Explore the student’s ideas about numbers and other mathematical ideas. Ask the student to perform some tasks, which might include reading and writing numbers, counting, adding, subtracting, etc. Feel free to draw from readings, or from activities we have done.

During:

You should record (audio or video) the interview so that you can refer back to it later in making your write-up. You will not need to provide a complete transcript of the interview, but you should cite some dialogue that strikes you as especially important in understanding this child’s level of mathematical understanding.

Begin with a question you feel is well within the child’s capabilities, and build from there. Do not act frustrated or disappointed if the child does not know the answer to a question — you should expect to have some questions like that, in order to understand the limits of the child’s understanding. Instead, either ask a smaller part of the question or move on to another topic.

Although you will come with starting-point questions prepared, you will need to follow carefully what the student does and says during the interview, and follow up on responses with questions that build on the discussion already generated. Remember that the point of the interview is to find out as much as you can about the student’s ideas, not to try to teach the student anything. Also note that in order to determine the limits of the student’s understanding, you will have to get to a question the student cannot answer.

Some interviewing tips:

- *Maintain neutral verbal and body language.* Avoid reactions that make the child think that his/her answer is right or wrong. If the child asks for confirmation or whether an answer is correct, respond with “That’s fine” or “You’re doing okay.”
- *Probe, don’t lead.* Do not try to direct the child to a certain response. Instead, ask for elaboration on the child’s reasoning.
- *Allow the child to answer.* Wait after asking a question, and after the child’s initial response, in order to allow the child to formulate and communicate his/her entire response, including the thinking behind the answer. Do not interrupt or correct the child’s wording or writing; if something is unclear, wait until the child has finished, and then ask for clarification.
- *Consider both concrete (context-based) and abstract versions of a question.* A child unable to answer “What’s 7×5 ?” might be able, for instance, to figure out how many days are in 5 weeks.

After:

In your write-up, give an overall narration of the interview (e.g., say what tasks you asked the child to perform), and include dialogue that you found especially helpful in gaining insights into the child’s thinking. Point out what you learned about the child’s thinking, *and* what you still don’t know. Describe anything surprising that happened, what questions were raised for you, and what you think you learned from the process. What should this child work on next? One question you might consider as you write is, what would you say to a parent about this child’s thinking?