
In the second part of the SMP 11–16 course, designed for pupils in the third to fifth years of secondary school, there are four levels: Yellow for the most able groups, Red for the upper middle groups, Blue for the lower middle groups and Green for the lowest ability pupils. B4 is the fourth out of five books in the Blue series. Their mathematical content has much in common but presentation and pace are often different. Although there is rather more exposition and explanation in the books than is found in many other textbooks, the books are not intended, the authors tell us, to be self instructional. But more of that later. Six worksheets have to be purchased separately to accompany B4 and it is assumed that pupils will be using calculators.

At first sight, the book is bright and jolly—the word “mathematics” does not appear anywhere, including the front cover, and there is an interesting mixture of photographs, line drawings, tables and diagrams. The use of red over-printing is not overdone and always helpful. The print is not too crowded and each chapter starts with an explanation of a technique or concept followed by typical SMP-style questions. (I.e. few in number and designed to make the pupils think.) A calculator is, in fact, essential since there has been no attempt to make the answers come out neatly, e.g. “A farm of total area 4.8 km² grows wheat on 3.1 km². What percentage is this?”

The scope of the book, on its own, is limited and only covers arithmetic (calculators, formulas, mental arithmetic, approximation and percentages), elevations, time, probability, enlargement and volumes of solids. As with most SMP books, there are not enough examples for both homework and classwork but perhaps they would criticise my style of teaching.

The Teacher’s Guide is very sparse and little more than a list of answers. I remember that the first SMP Teacher’s Guides in the old hard-back series were an education (or re-education at that time) with notes on style, direction, extension topics and associated concepts. I have never found a list of answers any help at all since, in order to mark intelligently, I have always had to work it out for myself to be able to correct aberrations in method. It seems that either SMP writers now expect all teachers to have gained the same twenty years’ experience as themselves, or their work has slumped to the common-place or the general level of teaching has raised-up to match those heady days when SMP was still an avant-garde project.

I question the use of this sort of teaching textbook in senior classes since I think that people are best at teaching and class books should concentrate on providing loads of questions for the practice of skills. What is needed is a large and comprehensive teaching handbook with small booklets of associated questions. SMP have still got it the wrong way round for this age-group—or am I becoming achronistic?

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This book is part of the SMP 11–16 course which has National Project Status—a GCSE examination will be available through all examination groups. The course is divided into two parts. The first two years of the scheme are booklet based; the material for years 3, 4 and 5 comprises three (later four) series of books catering for different levels of ability. It is assumed that pupils will be grouped in sets according to ability in the third, fourth and fifth years and each series is designed for different levels. The Yellow series, to which Y4 belongs, is for the most able. There are five books in this series together with a couple of extension books for the most able. This book would therefore be used round about the summer term of the fourth year.