

The NCETM Podcast Episode 76

Hear from a headteacher: top reasons to work with a Maths Hub

Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the NCETM Maths Podcast. I'm Rebecca Longworth [RL] and I'm going to be your host for today. I'm here with Gabriella [GM] and Sarah [SS] at a school in Blackpool. We're going to talk about the benefits of getting involved in the work of your local Maths Hub as a participating school, but also what the impact is of having some of your staff become Local Leaders of Maths Education (LLME), and actually run some of the Work Groups for the Maths Hub. I'm going to start by asking Sarah and Gabriella to introduce themselves and then we'll get started. Sarah, if you'd like to go first, could you just tell us a little bit about yourself and your school, please?

SS: I would, thank you, Rebecca. My name is Sarah Smith. I am the Executive Headteacher at Christ the King Catholic Academy and St Cuthbert's Catholic Academy. Both of those schools are in Blackpool, and I'm really excited to be talking about maths this morning.

GM: I'm Gabriella May and I am a maths lead and Year 2 teacher at St Cuthbert's Catholic Academy. I have been working with the Maths Hub for about four years now, and trained as a Mastery Specialist.

RL: Okay, thank you very much for that. So, Sarah, could you just tell us a little bit more about the context of your school and where we are today?

SS: Sure. So both of our schools are in Blackpool, and Blackpool is at the top of all the wrong league tables, sadly. We're in a really deprived part of the country. St Cuthbert's and Christ the King are both in the top ten most deprived wards across England, which means that there are lots of added difficulties that our children face prior to getting in front of a teacher at the start of a normal day. The joys of this town, the seasonal work, and the nature of the challenges that deprivation gives our families, means that we have a challenging job. But the work that we do is very fulfilling, and the children do, with our support, help and guidance – and the Maths Hub is part of that support, help and guidance – we do change those children's lives. When they leave us and go to secondary school, they're in a really strong place mathematically.

RL: Yes, it is a challenging area. Having worked in Blackpool as a teacher myself, there are a lot of challenges, but also a lot of joys in helping and supporting the pupils and their families. So how has the Maths Hub and getting involved as a participating school helped with that in your school?

SS: Both of our schools, in terms of their academic success that we measure at the end of Year six, are achieving well. And that for us is down to the great work that the Maths Hub has allowed us to be involved in. Gabriella, as she described, has a significant role within the hub. But we also have another colleague, Heather, and other colleagues within our schools, that are part of that journey. It started, I think, probably about six years ago, as Heather began a journey with the Maths Hub. She now works for a couple of days a week for the hub. The journey that we've been on has allowed us to almost backfill, so when colleagues have been involved in the hub, there's been opportunity for aspiring leaders to come and take over those roles, or for others to see that practice. In terms of our children, the mastery approach has been incredible. We now have children that are confident mathematicians, that do not fear the subject like perhaps they would have done six or seven years ago. The ability that our children have to reason and to think about the maths that they're doing is just so very different to how it was when I was a teacher, back in

the day! It's groundbreaking and I am very, very proud of the work that we've done. But I'm also aware that we wouldn't have been able to do it without the partnership that we have with the hub.

RL: Prior to the partnership that you have with the hub, did you go into it knowing what mastery was? How did you get started, how long ago was it, six years ago?

SS: I honestly can't remember. It feels like forever! But we began because Heather was keen on engaging with the Hub. There'd been some links, and the journey just evolved. I became a Headteacher Advocate about four years ago. There's just always been something else around the corner. There's been another promotion, there's been something new, a new set of skills that we could develop with kids or with staff themselves. So the journey has evolved slowly, but by doing it slowly has allowed us to embrace it across school. Prior to the Maths Hub, we had a scheme of learning that wasn't really fit for purpose, we had a reasoning-based curriculum, we were keen on that, but it didn't address the aspects that mastery does now.

RL: So, Gabriella, from your perspective as a Year 2 teacher, how has the mastery approach in the school that you teach in had an impact on the pupils, and even you as a teacher and the staff?

GM: It's had a huge impact on the children. We now see children confident and excited about maths and they're not worried at all that they're not going to be able to do it. We focus a lot on growth mindset and making sure that if they make a mistake, that's fine. Actually, someone in my class from the beginning of the year said, 'the mistakes are all part of the learning', which I just thought is a huge improvement from where we were previously. And children are just excited about maths, which is really positive.

RL: I mean, what more could you want than children to be excited about maths?

GM: And with the Mastering Number Programme we've seen, I teach in Year 2 and, in the end of Year 2 SATs, a lot of children with the arithmetic paper answering without having to do a lot of formal methods, because we've done so much of the groundwork looking at their sense of number up to ten and then up to 20. They're able to transfer those skills and make the connection to 100. We've seen a huge improvement in that this year as well.

RL: That's amazing to hear. And I know that you had some showcase sessions as well. How many of those have you done? Tell us a little bit more about how that's worked.

GM: So we did two showcase lessons of the Mastering Number, where about 30 people came into our school hall and we brought the children into the school hall, then did the session in there. Just to show, as part of a Work Group, how the Mastering Number session worked for maybe some schools that were not sure about how the session should run, or a little reluctant about the impact that it would have on the children. Because some of the sessions only go up to numbers to ten in Year 2, there are sometimes staff that are a little bit reluctant and think it's too easy, but the sessions really focus and go into depth to encourage that number sense for children. It was received really positively.

SS: Really positively! The staff as they left that day were just, 'oh, I can't wait to go back to my class now and give it a go'. They talked so, so kindly about our children too, didn't they? And I think that when you work in a deprived town, there is a suggestion that the kids are just going to be a nightmare. Well, that isn't the case. If you have good-quality teaching and good-quality behaviour expectations, our children are like anywhere else. It's just the benefit that they will get is far more. But the feedback was really positive. Seeing things in a practical sense, you can go to all the courses in the world, can't you? And it's you actually having a go with your class, but there is a reluctance. You need a bit more, and that showcase experience, logistically it was a

little difficult and we were in the hall and the children had to file in and out, it wasn't quite a classroom experience, but it was very, very close.

RL: It sounds great. Sarah, you said before that it was useful to have the showcase session for all those teachers to come and have a practical view of a session. You can go on a course and, you might think, 'oh, what a nice day out', but if we think about it from the Maths Hub perspective, the Maths Hub programmes are not your typical course; they are a series of training days over the course of the year with intersessional tasks to do in your school. As you know, staff in your school have been on the programmes. But also, now I'm thinking, what's the impact on your school in having someone like Gabriella leading a Work Group and being out of the classroom for three, four or five days? And then having to go and do visits to other schools to support them? How does that impact your school, with having someone who is a strong teacher out of the classroom?

SS: So the first thought when you're asked as a headteacher, 'can so-and-so go out?' and 'can be this person be involved in those things?', you instantly think, 'what is going to be the impact on the children?'. That's my go-to place. And from time to time, as headteachers, we have to say no. But we said yes in this case at the start of Gabriella's journey, and we said that for the following reasons.

Gabs was ready for something new and something exciting, and if we hadn't given her that opportunity, there is the potential – I hope I'm not speaking out of turn – that she would have been saying, 'well, actually I'm ready at this point in my career to be looking at something else' and leaving us. I am incredibly protective of the staff that we employ. I think that they do an amazing job in our schools, and I want them to carry on doing that amazing job. In order to retain them, we sometimes have to meet a little bit halfway and in order for her to be allowed out of class, that allows her to be brilliant on the two or three days that she is in school for the rest of the working week. It's the same way that we approach Heather Martin's role. Heather is working more now this year than previous years for the hub. But again, we benefit from Heather's expertise, and it also allows her to embark on new chapters and other aspects of her career. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is that there is a great deal of benefit for us as a school that Gabriella is going out and sharing St Cuthbert's and Christ the King's names. We are two very small Catholic primary schools in Blackpool, and it is important to us that we remain full, that children come to us, and that the impression that people have about our two schools is very positive. That is important. We're proud of our name and Gabriella is an amazing advocate for that. Amazing.

And probably the third thing is that it's good for the rest of our staff to be able to look at Gabs, you know, those lower down in terms of their career year (the time that they've been in the profession) and think, 'well, actually, I could be the next Gabriella'. And we want that. We want that continuous journey for professionals to come in and to have great opportunities to work with experienced people like Gabs, and then to be able to think in two or three years' time, 'I could do that. I could take on a role within the hub'. In order for that journey to be sustainable, we have to have that constant move, even though I'm reluctant to let them fly entirely.

So it works for us, particularly as, as you know, Gabs does such a good job. We hear lots of positive things and then others in school think, 'oh, well, I'll dabble'. The maths team is the sought after team to be part of. Across the two schools, people fight tooth and nail to be part of it, which is fabulous!

RL: Yes, that's exactly what you want isn't it? The maths team to be the strongest team. So Gabs, can you tell us a little bit more about what an LLME is, a Local Leader of Maths Education?

GM: We have some access to the Maths Hub three times in the year where we gather altogether as Local Leaders of Maths Education. We're able to access new research, there's keynote speakers that we can listen to, and it's a great opportunity, those sessions, to network and talk to other LLME. And I also, as a Mastery Specialist, lead a Work Group. I have two Work Groups this year, one in the Embedding phase and one in the Sustaining phase, and that is part of a teacher research group where I lead sessions. I will teach and then we break down the lesson and talk about it. Those schools also have access to school visits, where I go to their school and support them with their mastery journey.

RL: Okay, that sounds great. So what's the commitment? If you're running two Work Groups, how often are you expected to go and run those groups, and how often do you go and visit other schools?

GM: There's different commitments for each part of the mastery phases. In the Embedding phase, it's five Work Group sessions and one school visit. We go to the schools to look around for that Embedding year, and they're still accessing some support, really, they're still on that mastery journey. At that point in the programme is where they're starting to make whole-school changes. It's a big commitment for the Embedding. And then Sustaining is two TRGs, but then we support in other ways. We give briefings on research that's come up, and it's an ongoing support for Sustaining. I've been able to have a day out a week to support that, so that I have time to prepare my resources, to go to the schools to visit, and have the TRGs as well.

RL: So from your perspective, it's a day out of class a week, and you're a full-time teacher as well. How is it personally to balance your workload and your commitment with the hub?

GM: I found it really hard the first year, almost giving away my class and what you then come back to, and what you're giving the class to do when you leave. I found that really difficult. But throughout the time, I've been working with one teacher who's in consistently, which really, really helps. That person knows the children and that makes it easier for me to be out for that day, because I do find it hard to shut off between being the teacher and being in the Maths Hub. It's like two different hats that I have to wear, and I just almost have to put one hat on and take the other one off.

SS: It's a whole new way of working really. If you think about, as a class teacher, that guilt that you feel leaving your brood with somebody else and, 'oh gosh, is that going to be OK?' and are you going to miss certain things? It is a real shift, and it takes time. As Gabriella said, at the beginning, she found it really hard. It is still hard. I think it will always be hard balancing. But the benefits for Gabs and the benefit for her class continues to encourage her to do that. We're very grateful, certainly from a leadership perspective, that the Maths Hub provide the opportunity financially for us to do that. It isn't that school are just doing that because we want Gabs to be fulfilled in her role and to enjoy working. The financial commitment that we receive is also significant, and it really helps us make the thing work.

GM: Also, I feel I am better at teaching maths after I've been to see the practitioners as well. It's not just always a case of people coming and watching me teach. Part of the Work Group is it's a collaborative approach. We will go and see all the people within the group, and I am constantly picking up new things that I can use in my class; a different approach to mastery, how I can set them off in the morning so that it will support the maths lesson. I'm constantly learning myself and bringing things back, which I find is making it a lot better for the children.

RL: That's really interesting because, although your title is Mastery Specialist, you are still not the only specialist where, 'I have all the answers, come to me for everything'. You are still learning and you are developing. And that's the beauty of being part of the Maths Hub as a Work Group Lead, because then you're bringing that back.

How do you disseminate the skills and the learning that you've got to your staff in your own school? What is the benefit to your staff?

GM: I think often it can be quite informal. We have a WhatsApp maths leadership group and if there is something that we've come across – some research, a book, something new that we want to try with the staff – we will just simply put it on our WhatsApp group and then we will meet as a math team to look and almost strategise as to what is the priority and what needs to come this year. At the start of the year, we do a maths action plan, and we see what will fit in within that role. We have some professional development time built into our calendar in school for our staff meetings, so we will decide, 'is that something that we can support in a staff meeting, or is that something that maybe we need to directly support a member of staff with through coaching?'. We're also able to access a lot of the Specialist Knowledge Programmes (SKTMs) from the hub, so we've thought carefully this year about what staff would need to access certain subject knowledge. We've got quite a lot of new staff in our school this year and making sure that they are fully aware of the mastery approach has been really important from the beginning of the year.

SS: The other thing, just to think about Gabs going out and coming back, she talked about the informal discussions. It's not just maths things that she sees. I can remember early on, we are continuing to refine our behaviour processes within our two schools since Covid, as it has across many schools, has changed the nature and the way in which we approach behaviour. And Gabs went into a school and went, 'oh, I'll have that as an idea'. And then came back and we talked about it in a professional group, because we have a little behaviour team that work in the background to support the schools. But it's, that incidental professional discussion that happens informally. And then if, if it gets legs, then we can say, 'right, we'll take it into a more formal setting'. So many benefits.

RL: It sounds like there are so many benefits and it sounds like you're getting as much out of it as the staff who attend your sessions are getting out of it. It's all really positive. It's fantastic that you have supported so many schools in developing on their mastery journey, and it sounds like even though you've been doing mastery for so long, you've still got things that you want to improve and you're learning from other people as well.

I'm just going to ask you a closing question now. If there is a school out there who may be on their mastery journey, or some of their staff maybe want to get involved in being part of the Math Hub, either leading a Work Group or just exploring that side of their professional development, what would you say to the headteacher or leadership team, Sarah?

SS: I would say it's a slow journey. To make the first step to engage with your hub lead and to begin that journey. Go and have a look at other schools. Go and talk to all the heads of the leadership teams like me. People are very welcome to ring us up, speak to Heather or I about our passion for maths and how well our schools are doing mathematically because of that, and to just experience it. It's a long journey, though. It isn't something that is just going to fix maths results and maths teaching in your school overnight. Our journey, as you just explained, continues. And even when we got our year six results this time, and we were so pleased that those kids are leaving us with such solid results, we still know there is work to be done, particularly in a town like this. So to start the journey, it's really helpful to find out what's going on in your local area. And if anybody wants to have a conversation, I'd be happy to do that.

RL: So network, find out who's involved in the Maths Hub within your local area and speak to the hub. I imagine you've spoken to Abacus Maths Hub to find out what other schools are nearby, and who can maybe help and support you. Just have a conversation, have a coffee, and find out about what they're doing.

I guess a slightly different question for you, Gabriella, but in a similar vein. If you were speaking to a teacher who's saying, 'oh, I really want to be a Mastery Specialist, but I don't know how to approach my head teacher about that', what advice would you give to that person?

GM: I would say first things first, go and watch someone who has taken on the mastery approach and really be clear about why you want to do it. Talk to them about the benefits that you are going to bring back to school. I mean, that is why I am able to do what I'm doing, because there are just so many benefits that come back to school that make it that positive opportunity. It's a sharing experience, but we are benefiting loads from it. So I would say sell those benefits to the headteacher.

SS: At this time of year, it's appraisal review. By the end of October, people are setting their new targets. Now is the perfect time to be thinking about what we are going to do professionally in order to retain that particular member of staff, or to encourage them to have a really successful year, and that is the ideal time to have those discussions.

RL: Definitely. That sounds great. It's been an absolute pleasure to have both of you today.

SS: I enjoyed it. Thank you. It's been fantastic.

RL: I hope that the listeners have learnt something about the mastery approach and how it can work for a school, no matter where you are in the country. Also, I hope that people listening who are maybe thinking, 'oh, I'd love to be a local leader of maths education, but I don't really know how to get involved. What does it entail?', I hope that they've been able to listen and learn from you as well. Thank you for your time. I know it's hard to come out of class and the busyness of a school day, but I really appreciate it.

SS: You've been very kind with us. We've coped with those questions well, thanks a lot, Rebecca.

RL: Great. Thank you! So if you're listening and you'd like to find out more about how to get involved in the work of the Maths Hub, just visit our website and all the details will be in the show notes. Thank you very much, goodbye.