



Staffroom

Catch-Up

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Transcript for Staffroom Catch-Up Episode 6: 'It's made me a better practitioner'

Fran: Hello and welcome to this first practitioner podcast series from Cambridge Mathematics. I'm Fran Watson and I'm a member of the writing team and school liaison lead at Cambridge Mathematics. Part of my role is talking to teachers about products we design and very excitingly, creating new opportunities like this to have conversations with educational practitioners.

This series is called Staffroom Catch-Up, and some of the things we expect to touch on are people's interpretations of the word research, how they feel about it, and how it affects the work they do in classrooms.

As all these people have been recorded in their settings, I'm going to issue a challenge to listeners to tally the number of interruptions in each episode, and then we can see if our tallies align at the end.

Today, I'm here with Julie DeFuyck. Um, Julie, could we start with you telling us about your current role?

Julie: Yeah, I am currently a Year 6 teacher in a rural primary school in Devon, and I also lead maths across the school. I used to lead maths across the primaries within our academy, um, but this year it's changed slightly. So now I'm just focused on the, our, our primary school that I'm currently in.

Fran: Fantastic. Thank you very much.

Um, so to begin with, um, I would like to share with you a line from a Sondheim musical, and it goes [sings] 'Something familiar, something peculiar, something for everyone. A comedy tonight!' And I'd like to ask you to share something either peculiar or familiar that you found funny, that you've experienced connected with your work.

Julie: I think one thing from my personal experience is that it doesn't really make me sound very good, [laughs] really, I don't think. But um, when I was very early on in my career, um, and I was doing supply work and I went into a school, it was a Year 6 class, and it was long division. They had to do long division.

And I looked, and the teacher went, 'This is, you know, this is what we're doing.' And I thought, 'That's ...' and I did that typical, 'That's not how we were taught when we were at school!' And it was like, 'Oh my gosh, I don't know! What am I doing?' And I ended up ... Actually, as I said, it was very early on in my career – I'm more experienced now! [laughs] But um, where it was a case of getting a child to go, 'Oh, do you want to show me what you did yesterday?' And had to almost get them to teach me, you know, in quite an overt way, where it's er, 'No, I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm talking about, really! But actually, you do it first!' And then it ends up after that that I get a job and become the maths lead! And I've been maths lead ever since – I'm teaching Year 6! [Fran laughs] So I owe a lot to that one child many years ago [laughs] about how you teach long division.

Fran: Really nice. Thank you very much. Well, and I wonder if that child felt um, really special in being asked to show, you know, what they had been doing and sharing it with you. So, you know, as a modelling of, you know, getting our learners to tell us and do some of the teaching, I think that's a lovely anecdote. Thank you very much.

Okay. So um, perhaps we could start then with educational research. Can I ask you what research means to you?

Julie: I think it, it just means to me, particularly education, the, the learning all the time, learning from experience. So when, you know, you-you're part of work groups and things like that, it's, you're researching to find ways to become better practitioners in order to make learning better for children in every which way. And I think through that research is how we can be better in our practice.

Fran: Okay, that conjures up all sorts of different avenues for me that might come up. I-I wonder if you could talk to us a bit about what some of those might look like from your point of view, about how that learning either with or without colleagues in order to be better in our settings, what does that mean? W-where do you go to find that inspiration or to um, find the focus that you're go- then going to reflect on? Tell us more.

Julie: So in, as my role in Maths Lead, it's, I'm reading new things all the time and you go to [subject leader briefings](#), and you're learning new things from, um, part of the Devon Learning Services that we're part of. Um, and like last year, for example, I was part of an [oracy workshop group](#) and it was research based. So it's finding out new things, trying it out in class and feeding it back. And it was really interesting because we had primary teachers, secondary teachers, so it was nice to see how does it look in Early Years all the way up to Year 11. And it was interesting because some of the things that I was doing, another teacher was doing with a Year 11 class, and it was that, like, connective thinking.

Um, and it was a lot of, we were finding, and what we found in common was that so many teachers were feeling like children don't do enough talking i-in maths. There's not enough maths talk. And that's been one of our focuses for the last year and still continues within our school. Um, and I read a document called '[Private Talk, Public Conversation](#)' by Mike Askew, and there's really interesting bit in it where he just listened to some children talking about calculation on the board and it was, he went and said, 'Oh, what did you', you know, 'What, what do you think?' And he said, it was, 'I agree.' And Mike Askew said, 'Well what do you agree with?' He said, 'Well, what he said.' And there's so much of that, kind of, 'I'll go with that child. They seem to be better for quoting, better at maths than I am, um, so I'll just go with what they say.'

Whereas actually, what we're trying to develop, is that learning through each other. So not only are you supporting those children that, that struggle with maths, it's also allowing those children that are quite, you know, that are really good at maths, for want of a better words, that they listen to others' ways and put, ways of thinking and the ways of calculating things. So it's not just my way and that's it, it's, 'Ah, but he did it that way', or 'She did it that way', and learning through each other all the time through those conversations.

Fran: Lovely stuff. And you said you heard about this particular um, document as part of an oracy project. Did that come to you through one of the subject leader briefings that you mentioned, or did you find out about that otherwise?

Julie: No, that was through subject leader briefings.

Fran: Okay. And this was a-a an opportunity given to a range of schools? Was it they were looking for a particular number?

Julie: No, it was just er, put to us as a learning opportunity if we wanted to be part of it. So, I think there, there wasn't a limit of how many schools. So there was quite a few of us actually, I said, throughout Devon.

Fran: Interesting stuff, because sometimes we hear from teachers that they see opportunities and they might think in their heads, 'Oh, it's only going to be available to, you know, people who've done this before, or is only going to be a set number of places', and what I'm hearing from you is that it was a very open call and that everybody was welcome and that whether it was primary or secondary or, you know, regardless of your setting, people got involved, and then um, went from where they were perhaps, and what it meant for them in their own setting. So that sounds really usefully personalised.

And sometimes, teachers can feel perhaps that um, research has to be done in a particular way or means a particular thing. And certainly, from the sounds of this project that you've spoken about so far, it um, comes across as being pertinent to where you're at; so a bit like instead of going to a-an

organised exercise class, you've got a personal trainer who looks at what your capabilities are and where you are, and then starts from that point.

You're nodding. I'm, I'm assuming that's kind of how it felt.

Julie: Absolutely. Yes. Yeah.

Fran: Nice. And um, is it still ongoing, Julie?

Julie: No, it, it only happened for the year last year. So every six weeks we would meet, you know, online, we would meet, share our experiences and we would be given kind of a-a question to think about, to go away and, and implement if we can, and then come back and feedback from it.

So, one thing that I implemented with my class and it's it worked brilliantly. So, I have the children sat in mixed-ability groupings and um, something called 'talk tokens', they are. And basically, you'd have kind of a problem on the board and the children had have little counters and, for example, a green one would be allowing them to talk and then they would have three red ones and a red one would be to ask questions.

So, it was lovely because again, it was developing, it was allowing children to explain their thinking, explaining their methods, but it also allowed children, if they didn't understand what their partner or the people in their group were saying, they could then put a red token in and ask a question. And so there's that two-way conversation. [emphatically] And the feel in the room!

And it took a, yeah, it took a bit of training. But it really allowed, as I said before, the, the children that consider themselves, you know, very good at maths, it allowed them to actually take a step back and listen to go, and this and go 'Oh, I never thought of it that way!' But also, that's supportive, 'I'm listening, I'm not really understanding.' And it built the children's confidence to turn round and go, 'I don't really understand what you're saying. Can you explain it in another way?' So again, it developing their explanation skills and their reasoning skills, which we were finding was a weaker area. So we kind of, we were nailing the fluency, we were getting there with problem solving, but the reasoning was still that ongoing development. But through the conversations, through the use of these talk tokens, the children were developing their reasoning all the time, learning to talk in full sentences. And it, it's been brilliant.

Fran: Amazing stuff. Can I ask if that was something that was suggested to you as part of the project or whether that was something that, you know, somebody came up with or maybe you devised for yourself?

Julie: No, it was again, something that came up in, through the workshop and um, it kind of overlapped, cause Ruth Trundle, um, she is our subject leader briefing person and then she was also leading the oracy workshop. So it was quite good; it's almost like an advantage, if you like, because I was getting

the nugget of subject leader as well as the oracy. So it all combined, yeah, got quite a few bites of the cherry for that one. So I was quite lucky [laughs] with Ruth because she's fabulous. So um, but yeah, so it was through those su-subject leader briefings and the oracy workshop that that was something to try out.

Fran: Okay. Nice, and you mentioned there Ruth Trundle who runs your subject leader briefings and was also involved in the oracy project. Um, have you been involved with other work that Ruth has, you know, kind of engaged with, with schools, or was this your first experience of working together?

Julie: Um, I have worked with her in the past, not necessarily directly, but um, through my previous school was also part of the subject leader briefing. So if it wasn't with Ruth, it was with one of the others, um, maths advisors within Devon. So, throughout my career I've always been lucky enough, if you like, to have the, the training, support and everything from, from the Devon, Devon team.

Fran: Right, okay. And that's really interesting because some of the teachers that we're talking to, it is um, for that very reason. We want you to share your experiences with hopefully a wider listening audience so that people are aware of the sorts of opportunities that are out there and how positive an impact it sounds as though you're reporting it's had on your ongoing career, that that's been a regular part of hearing inspiration from other people and then seeing how you might take that on board.

Can I ask um, a bit about ... You said you came back and tried it with your Year 6 class. Has it pervaded more widely across the school? And if not, is that something you're hoping to, to develop?

Julie: Because it was more the summer term that, that it was kind of introduced, so, the Year 5 class also tried it. So that was, it's been quite a good transition where they've come up to me and they're aware of it. It's, I'm kind of trickling it in to Key Stage 2 and, cause I think, and Key Stage 1, we will, it's, we'll get there [laughs] with Key Stage 1 – we'll get there!

But um, yeah, Key Stage 2, it's trickling down from Year 3 to Year 6 and it's something that's on our action plan; oracy, is er, continued to be on our action plan this year. So it's something that, although I'm not part of the work group anymore because it finished, it's still applying everything from that last year within the school.

Fran: Nice! And as maths lead, now that you're focusing on your own setting, how do you share your learning and um, findings about research that, of things that you've tried in your own classroom more widely across the school?

Julie: Through staff meetings. So I lead quite a few staff meetings when it's a-a maths focused one. Anything that I've read or I found interesting, it's one of the, I email it out and go, 'Just a little!' You know, to let if people, and it's if you want to read it, you can read it; if you don't, and it's just, 'Oh, that's another email from Julie – off it goes!' You know, that's up, you know up to everybody. And I also do regular monitoring throughout the school.

Um, so a lot of my monitoring and things is based on [pupil voice](#) as well, because I think it's who, who else is better going to tell you than the children? So, I do a lot of pupil voice, and a few of the questions that I've asked them is, 'When does talk happen in your classroom?' And to be honest, I-I have to say across the school it's happening. The talk is happening. So like, [enthusiastically] 'Yes! It's working! [laughs] What I've put in place is working!' So, [Fran laughs] it's, you know, so it's all those different things in the role as subject leader, really.

Fran: Nice! Well, I'm keeping, er, abreast of, as you say, talking to the children, but being aware of what's going on so that you have an understanding of er, where it might go next or that, you know, people perhaps that you could team up to say, 'Oh, I heard some great stuff in such and such's classroom! You might want to go and look at what that looks like for ...' You know, kind of feeding into next steps for broadening it across those key stages.

You mentioned in your um, in your emails that you send to colleagues er, that if you'd read something you might share that. Can I ask how you find things to read? Do they come across your horizon from other people, or do you go out and look for things yourself? What does that look like?

Julie: To be honest, it's a bit, a bit of both really, because again, there's like, I come back to the subject leader briefings because there was another document that Devon Learning Services came up with and it's called '[Learning to Talk and Learning Through Talk](#)', which again is a really good document to read. And um, I've just started an NPQ in senior leadership, so I think there's going to be more things to come from that that I can share out. So, a lot of it, if I'm honest, is through getting it from elsewhere, and then it just might be Facebook pages or Twitter pages, which I know it's not Twitter anymore, but you know, where it's that whole, you know, 'Try this! Read that! Have you seen ... ?' And I'm part of a lot of forums, kind of maths subject leadership forum-y things.

Fran: Ah, interesting! Okay. I love the diversity of, you know, kind of places that your inspiration might come from – er, Facebook and X (I'm still calling it Twitter, too!). I wonder if um, in finding out about things on those forums, do you use the forum itself for discussion purposes, or is that something perhaps that you do more in school rather than in a public forum?

Julie: No, it-it's more in school, Yeah. So it's, it's almost y-you read it, you take it. [laughs] But I don't really kind of, if you like, socialise on social media if that makes sense.

Fran: Right. Yeah. No, perfect sense. Um, when you run a staff meeting, um, I wonder if you have come across staff who find taking those ideas on board more challenging, and if so, how you've managed that, what you do about it?

Julie: I think it's ... yes, you do. You do come across the challenges of people, and it could be [inhales] quite set in their ways, or if it's too much change, or and particularly, we would do an Ofsted. And so you're trying to implement, but then if everybody from different angles are implementing, you think you've got to kind of go, 'Is this too much? I don't want to overburden.' Because actually our job is stressful enough as it is [laughs] – you don't need it to be any more stress. Um, so I kind of, I give ideas and through the, the staff meetings, everything, through monitoring. But my monitoring that I do, is I have conversations. So always bring up the positive, you know, 'Love this, love this, this is great!' But then, 'Consider ...' And having written feedback, but also having that conversation rather than just having it on a written piece that you kind of email over and it's, you know, it's ... That's how I work in regards to monitoring is having the conversations, talking about it. And, 'I can help. Come and see me, come and watch my lessons. Not that they're amazing, but as subject leader the, you know, I'm asking you to do this, so I need to present what I'm expecting everybody else to do. So, come and watch your lesson with me. And if it goes wrong, it goes wrong. It happens! But this is, this is what I'm asking you to do. If you're not quite sure, come in! I'm very open, come in and, and watch.'

Fran: Lovely. Well, and it sounds like you're accentuating the personal, I guess, that, you know, having it written down to refer to later as a record of, you know, an observation perhaps, or a monitoring visit can be helpful. But you're right. Divorced from the conversation, it can er, work in very different ways and sometimes counter to what you had intended or were looking for.

So being able to follow up with people and say, as you are, you know, 'I'm not saying I'm necessarily going to, you know, it's going to go perfectly, but I am very happy to, you know, model in my setting. You can see what it looks like. We can have a conversation about it. You might, you know, say "Oh, I've got some slightly different challenges with my class – I wonder how that would work or what you think about it?" And then we you know, we move forward together.'

Um, you mentioned then the oracy project er, has now finished. Is there anything on the horizon, anything that you're, you know, looking to do next or any projects that you're aware of?

Julie: I think for, for us, this is focusing a lot on, on the school this year and just ensuring that the things that have been implemented last year are continuing and we've got a couple of new members of staff and supporting them.

And so, and we've also started, for our Early Years, we are part of the counting collections projects. So we are we, are a research school. So we've been given all of the counting objects. So you have your business as usual school and you'll be a kind of the research. We, we were chosen as a research school, so um, there's going to be a lot of focus on that this year because ... Personally, Early Years is not a strength of mine and I've had to learn through the years of, you know, 'How does maths work down there?', you know, and the, our Reception teacher is amazing and I've learned a lot from her, and just going into her class a lot last year. She's very much, 'Come in! I want to show you what we can do!' Because the children are brilliant, and so I'm going to be hopefully working a lot with her. So a lot of my focus, I feel personally, as subject leader this year is Early Years because we are part of the counting collections project – how it works, looking at the progress the children have made through the project. And yeah, I'm excited. I'm excited about it.

Fran: That comes across definitely in how you're saying it. It, it's really nice to hear um, someone who's in the position of leading mathematics for a school say, 'This isn't an area of expertise for me, but I'm super excited about learning from a colleague who is really enthusiastic!' You're going to hear and be receptive to things that she's saying in terms of making things work in taking on board something new. So, I think that's lovely to hear research can be about finding out more about things that you're interested in and have a particular focus on, but it can also be the other end of the spectrum in using it to find out things that you feel you don't know as much about and would like to, you know, know more and be able to develop in those areas of professional learning that perhaps you haven't had the opportunities to before.

Um, the counting collections, out of interest, is something I heard some teachers in America talking about very enthusiastically recently. So um, I shall be interested to hear how it goes.

Um, it will be interesting to hear from your Reception colleague, um, being involved in the research school part of the project, how she finds interacting with other Reception teachers in other settings. Because certainly when I used to teach in a very small sch... rural school, one of the things I valued about going out to maths meetings a little like the ones you're describing that

you attend as a subject leader, was hearing ideas from elsewhere because I could go back and share that enthusiasm, not because necessarily we had all of the answers, but because it was very comforting to know that other people were experiencing the same challenges, and then therefore, you know, we, dialogue helped us get closer to, you know, things that we might try differently that we hadn't thought about previously.

Um, I wonder then, in your, um, career progression so far, you said you've taken on a number of different roles – um, what advice you might have to listeners who um, this is new to them, that they might be listening to this podcast because they are interested in other people's opinions, but they haven't necessarily thought about whether they as teachers engage with research or not. Um, do you have any advice or any thoughts about what it's meant to you and that you would happily share with others who aren't yet in your position, perhaps?

Julie: I think I ... in the beginning I was, I was one of those people where it was, 'I haven't got time. I haven't got time to read things. I haven't got time that, you know, somebody said about this thing and I must read it, but er...' And then I might read it, you know, kind of an hour before something, just so it's in my head, that kind of thing. I was, I was very much one of those people, just the whole, as I said, because our job is full on all the time. [laughs] So it's like having that time to do it, but actually particularly being part of the research group last year and being part ... I would advise anybody, if you've got the opportunity to be part of something, yes, it is time consuming and it does take up, you know, um, say after-schools, or stuff like that. But actually, you learn so much from it and actually reading things and thinking about it, actually being part of something that then you have to go and try it out. It almost, it makes you do it and it makes ... I know it's made me ... I feel it's made me a better practitioner doing the, the oracy project because I'm implementing things and I can see the difference.

I think that's the important thing, is where you can see a difference. And the way you can see a difference is by actually doing, and y-you know, and so if you're given the opportunity to read something, read it, have, read it, highlight those important bits. And then if you're in a position of being a subject leader, go away and share it. If it's a 16-page document that you're thinking, 'Eurgh!' But, you don't have to share it all but share the important parts, that will, people will take notice of that could have an impact.

Fran: Fantastic stuff. Well, and I'm hearing you describing um, what er, I'm sure other people will recognise as being a discerning reader. So, you know, you've got a 16-page document. Okay. Is it all relevant or could you just

pick out, you know, three highlights or maybe just read the abstract at the beginning to give a, a flavour of whether this is something that's going to be pertinent and worth sharing? Or worth sharing [emphasises] now, is the other thing that somebody said to me the other day. It isn't a, er, dismissal of, but just, you know, deciding what the focus is, and does that align with what you're trying to do in your current role? Because as you've described, teachers are busy people, whether they are subject leaders or not, and trying to find the bandwidth space to be able to engage with anything extra, there has to be a reason behind that for them to, as you said, you know, the, seeing the impact of you doing things is, always reaps rewards for those people who feel like, 'Ah, look at the difference this is making!' That's just, you know, thoroughly enjoyable. And one of the reasons I suspect why many of us have been teachers.

So making sure it is relevant, making sure it's succinct for staff. Um, I love hearing you say, you know, the, the benefits you've seen when you have made time have outstripped the feeling that maybe that time is hard won, that you have to make space for it in addition to all of the other, you know, kind of constraints um, and pressures that, you know, are part of your daily job.

Okay. That sounds wonderful stuff. Thank you very much, indeed. I wonder if there's anything else that's come up as we've been talking about er, research, about how you feel about it, about people's different settings and what it means for them and how it impacts their work, that you haven't had an opportunity to, to talk about yet. Is there anything else that, you know, now occurs to you? Absolutely fine if there isn't, I was just curious and I wanted to give you the opportunity before we draw our conversation to a close.

Julie: No, I just think it's, if you're in a small school, it can be quite isolating if, whereas ... I think it's both, whereas if you c-, are in a huge school, it could be overwhelming. But you've got, I suppose in larger schools, you've got possibly teams of people that you can work together on, whereas a rural, smaller school, it's more, um, you know, y-you're working with colleagues that are from Reception to Year 6 and not necessarily in your team.

So there's, it's like a swings and roundabouts benefits for all really, but just embrace the research is what I say, if you have time to do it [laughs]. **[Fran:** Glorious!] And in practice, and put it in place and see the impact it has on the children because they become, they become better learners. And that's all you want as a teacher. You want the children to be happy to learn as much as they can, whether it's through you or other people. And yeah!

Fran: Great stuff. That's a-a lovely er, draw together. Thank you very much indeed. Okay. So it's been a-a fascinating conversation. Thank you very much for sharing your breadth of experiences with us.

Um, I'd like to invite you, the listeners, to engage with Cambridge Mathematics on X, formerly known as Twitter, er, or in the comments section on our website to share your thoughts about the conversation you've heard today or any of the ideas that we've been discussing.

Perhaps you'd like to share your story too. We'll look forward to hearing from you, and goodbye until next time.