Transcript for Staffroom Catch-Up
Episode 7: ‘A tenacious idea isn’t always a good idea!’

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 Simon Lewis. Simon, could we start with you telling us about your current role?

Simon: Good morning, er, thanks for having me. Um, my current role is er, I'm a nursery teacher; I'm head of Early Years at a primary school in south London; um, I work in Reception a bit as well. Um, I also look at the maths in the Early Years and um, organise the curriculum.

Fran: Fantastic stuff. Thank you very much. Um, so to begin with, um, I'd like to share with you a line from a Sondheim musical which goes [sings] ‘Something familiar, something peculiar, something for everyone. A comedy tonight!’ And ask you to share something either peculiar or familiar that you found funny, that you've experienced connected with your work.

Simon: This is tough because, er, it's Early Years and the kids are kids [Fran chuckles] and constantly um, random and [laughs] unexpected, and it's brilliant. And it's one of the reasons I love teaching is that every day is funny. Every single day something happens that makes us crease up, laugh or have … However you’re feeling, you will [Fran chuckles] go to school and you'll come away happier.

So that's, that's, that's pretty much why I teach. And it was really hard to think of this, that one particular thing. Um, I've, you know, I've, er, by first week um, I didn't realise that little, young little boys sometimes didn't know what urinal was. And so [Fran laughs] I sort of had to be called to the toilet for a little boy who was stuck sitting in a urinal because [laughs] he thought that that's what you use it for.

Um, a parent has asked me on holiday to, with them one year because they want, they thought I was better looking after their kids than they were, so they asked me if I would go on holiday with them. [Fran laughs] Um, one of my favourites is when you, when we're doing Sea Life and you have the word er, 'crab', but lots of children can't say the word crab and they change the 'b' to a 'p'. And so they spend the rest of the week [Fran laughs] shouting that out around the classroom, which is endlessly funny. [Fran continues laughing] Um.

Er, and last one is er, a little lad ... last year, a little boy, he was um, Spanish, couldn't say the word 'Simon' and spent the entire year calling me 'semen', which was, [gasps] which was [laughter] endlessly hilarious. So, yeah, I mean, I got thousands, but there, that, I think that's a-a good, a good cross-section.

Fran: That's a fabulous range. Can I just clarify for listeners, I-I'm taking it you didn't go on holiday.

Simon: No, no, no. It, it was tempting – they were, they were going to the Caribbean. So it was tempting, [Fran gasps] but my wife would not have been happy if I spent the entire summer with some random family.

Fran: No. Well, I can imagine. Okay. All right. So a lovely offer, but, you know er, yes, amusing for all those reasons you've just explained. Fantastic stuff.

Um, okay, so could we start then by thinking about educational research and particularly what the word research in that context means to you?

Simon: Um, oh, I think, as I say, as a co ... literally, I'm, I'm fascinated with, with the, with children and how they develop. And th-that's why I work in the Early Years. I think it's the, it's the really crucial time, where you see the most change and you see the most development. And, and it's nothing better than kind of just trying to work out w-why this child is like this child.

And I, you know, I've been teaching for 14 years, so, you know, that's over three, four, whatev - five hundred children I've sort of had, um and taught. So, and it, and it really, it was really clear that the, the 'unique child' in the, in the Early Years curriculum is absolutely correct because while we try and say, 'Oh, this child is a bit like this child', um, that's definitely not the case. But th-there was, but there yeah, 'But a lot like this, but a bit like this'. Why? And then it's 'Why'? And you have, and then you have three children from the same family and they're all completely different. So we spend our time as, as

Early Years practitioners and teachers generally of, of researching our own children, researching the children in our class and working it out. And it's not, you know, um, scientific in a particular sense, but it's, it's every day you're trying to work out why are they doing that? Why can't they do that? What's stopping them doing this? Why can this child do this but this child can't? How can I change my practice to try and help these children, um, and to learn the best way they can? So that's, that's kind of, you know, in the, in the sort of broader sense, researching every day is, is what we do and then, you know, trying to find solutions.

I'm really a fan of um, research material. So things that have been proven, things that you can replicate, things that have been looked at carefully. And so you can say, okay, this works because of this. We tried it with these number children. So as a school we read the, the, is it John Hattie book? Um, which is, basically it takes lo ... all that research and, and sort of boils it down and r ... the fantastic thing where they, he ranks all the research about what's really important, and what's less im-impactful.

So things like class sizes: 'The smaller the class, the better the teaching.' Yeah, and that-that's one of the ... private schools thrive on that. The fact they have smaller class sizes and they could have like boast about that. But actually, the research suggests that it's a very low impact. In between having 25 in the class, having 30 per class, is very little difference to children, and actually what they'll have to learn.

Whereas feedback, talking about, talking to children about how they're doing, how you feed back, how timely your feedback is, how relevant your feedback is, has a, you know, a 50-fold im-impact on the children's learning compared with class size. So I love seeing that information and actually go, 'Okay, this is how I'm going to use my time'. Time for teachers is, you know, it's like lots of people, but it's, it's critical, you, you are, can't do everything. So why, w-when I do something I want to know that it is going to be the most impactful, and the best use of my time and the best use of the other teachers' time in, in the Early Years. So if I can have some research that is, you know, valid and you know, well done, then that's really, really helpful for me.

Fran: That that gives us a, a wonderful scene setting. I loved your phrase 'working out why', which I'm sure applies to every teacher I've ever met who has tried to do that; either on their own account, 'Hang on, why did that or why didn't that go the way that we expected?' or 'In what way can I effect this?'; and then taking that more broadly.

Er, so debunking that myth about class sizes. The number of people who have very proudly said when they have a smaller number of children, and 'I wonder if I should point you towards this, because I'm not sure it's having the impact you think it's having!' And particularly when you get down to

really small class sizes the children are lacking that um, cross-pollination that happens between learners if you've not got that um, kind of mass, critical mass to get conversations and discussions going, or for children to see how others learn, it can be a-a very different situation.

Um, can I come back then and ask you um, how you learned about the Hattie book in the first place?

Simon: Um, we had a very good headteacher that was very, very keen on um, using um, er, evidence based um, research to influence our teaching rather than just haphazardly throwing things at the wall and seeing what sticks, actually going and, and finding out what is the best use of, of, of our time, and particularly things like the Scandinavian model. Why, why are Scandinavian countries, why they're more successful than we are in our education? Why do they have better results with less time in class? They have less time in class, they don't start school till later, they don't have homework, and yet their results across the world, are much better. Why? And again, the why word. Why is that happening? Why, you know, why is the, the fact that we keep pushing writing further down the school, early, early, earlier is not making us better writers as a, as a country.

So, you know, if that's not happening, why are we, why do we keep doing it? How can we change? And that, that disruption ... I quite like a bit of disruption. I quite like going, why? Let's not do that anymore, because I don't know why we're doing it. B-because we've probably done it for ages, just because it's a tenacious idea doesn't make it a good idea.

So, you know, it's, it's, that's, that's the kind of thing will one - and having a head that gives you the freedom to, to do that, to read books, you know, and say, 'Look, I've read this research. Because I've read this research this is the, um, I want to try this because of this.' Not that because because, just because, I've actually had something to back it up. So if we could go to him with some research and say, 'I've read this book, it's really interesting. I want to try this because of it', and you go 'OK, go for it.'

For example, we had no school uniforms for a long time and we kept having pressure to have uniforms because people like uniforms in a certain demographic of a, of the country likes to see a, a child in a [chuckles] uniform at school because it looks professional. I disagree massively. Anyway, so I had to, I got lots of research together that suggested th-that uniforms make no difference to a child's education and it kept it out, uniform, for a long time. Unfortunately, we eventually had to, for financial reasons, had to kind of give in. But, um, but that research did back up. And it, and it was that, that's really useful to go, 'Well, look, this is, this, why are we doing this? It doesn't make any sense. There's no research to back that up', or vice versa. There is research that backs it up.

Fran: Right. Okay. Um, and I like your um, point about finding reasons for why we do the things we do. There's a difference between doing them because we've always done them. And, you know, having the evidence, as you say, or at least the most up to date evidence that we can possibly access to say this is or isn't a good idea.

I was lucky enough to sit in on a school council once and they had a, um, a child whose role, and I kid you not, was they ... I said, you know, 'So what are you doing here?' when the others were all explaining their roles, and they said, 'My role is head of strategic abandonment.' And I said, 'S-sorry!?' And they were like, 'Well, it's my job to say, what? Aren't we going to do any more ...? Because if we're taking on new things, we can't keep doing all of the old things that we were doing.' And I was like, 'I think I know plenty of staff bodies who would benefit from a head of strategic abandonment!'

And for the reasons that you outlined, is there good evidence for doing this? Okay, we need to make a way of you know, making this fit together. Um, I also love the fact that you're clearly um, talking in a way about the autonomy of going away and finding out and, y-you know, looking for research that, that um, feeds your professional curiosity and will impact on your learners. And you have a senior leader who you can take that to and have those conversations with.

Can I dig down even further and say, if you are curious, as you clearly are in your role, about a particular thing, where do you go? How do you find out um, what research might be helpful?

Simon: That is, yeah, that's a big question because I, it's kind of stumbling around. Basically I, there is no obvious place to go for information. A lot of just reading lots of books and trying to find out if any, and then looking in, in references to try and see where that information's come from. Talking to people, you know, professionals who've been in the career a long time that might have some information.

Often, actually, it's the, it's sort of, of talking to new qualified teachers because they have had access to the more new research than people have been in the job for 15, 20 years because they've been taught recently and it's hard being a teacher. And in there will be, you know, the, the most co-, most useful up-to-date information where we, we're still talking about Maslow's, you know, hierarchy of needs, you know, from a long time ago, where as they're looking at absolutely brand new research. So I, I haven't got a good answer to that I'm afraid, because it, it's really difficult.

It's th-the, you m- sear-, teaching research is not that prolific and it's not prolifically used either. So it's not as if you can go, 'I saw the Hattie, but was so good because it was kind of, you know, quite.' And the um, Teach Like a Champion, and literally I think lots of people have read as well. Those kind of

books, are, because they could have condensed lots of other information all in one place, which is really good for, for teachers to read in one, in one sort of small kind of bite sized chunk. Um, podcasts – there's a few podcasts out there that-that, they look at some in-, new information, which is good. Um, but yeah, it-it is really difficult. I have, sorry, I haven't got a good answer for that.

Fran: Well, you say you haven't got a good answer, but I think that's a fabulous answer. And th-the fact that it is acknowledgedly a difficult thing and you could go to any number of different places, but there isn't a hard and fast, 'Oh yes, this is definitely your channel' um, is probably really reassuring. Certainly, when I was in the classroom, I had no knowledge of lots of the things that were going on and was less well connected than many teachers are today. Um, possibly that's something to do with the advancement of the technology available, but I'm fairly sure it was also a, 'Oh, I've got my head in it and I haven't, you know, I don't think I've got time to look elsewhere.' So unless somebody actually put it under my nose or I came across someone who I found particularly inspiring and therefore used that as a springboard for further things, that's totally understandable.

Um, you mentioned podcasts. You mentioned ... I liked the, you mentioned talking to newly qualified teachers, so early careers teachers. Um, one of the things that we're very lucky at Cambridge Mathematics is that we're in touch with a lot of teacher training providers who tell us that they use um, the *Espressos* that we produce, which are summaries of filtered research, which is as up-to-date as we can have access to. They use those with um, PGCE or B.Ed students. So them coming through with different streams of er, available knowledge [clears throat] seems to me to be a great way of um, er, doing that cross-pollination we talked about that happens between learners, but between colleagues in, you know, professional development settings or just conversations in the classroom or er, staffroom to say, 'Oh, there's this thing I read', and 'Or did you see the such and such on', you know, er, in the newspaper that mentioned ... and then people dig down further because they want to know more.

Okay. You've mentioned, um, with huge enthusiasm the, your reasons for finding out more and for looking for evidence. Tell us about the, the impact that it's had on, on your practice, perhaps.

Simon: One idea er, we, so Early Years , um, th-there, there's a dogma in Early Years that you do learning journeys. So, you record the children's um, a-activities, you take a photograph, you write a Post-it, and after school you spend hours with Pritt stick sticking it all in the lovely book. At the end of the year, that book goes home to parents. And I was f'years doing this because that's what we did. And I kind of, I asked, 'Well, why, why do we do this? Why do I spend, you know, an hour of evening sticking this in the book? No one's ever looked at it.' It goes, it's a lovely thing for parents, I mean, you know,

parents, you know, give them this a lovely sticker book of their kid's activities have, have for a year, two years. Is a lovely thing to have, but why are we doing it? And the results was, ‘Oh, there’s evidence that we know where the children are.’ And then, so then I sort of started talking to … my research basically was go talk to lots of other practitioners and any, when we went anywhere I said, ‘Do you do learning journeys? What do you think of them? Why do you do them? What's the benefit of them?’ And just try to get an i… And every time it was [sigh] ‘Oh! Such a pain! I would take such a long time.’ I said, ‘Who looks at them?’ ‘Nobody.’ ‘W-well, why do you have them? Okay.’ And then ‘Certainly, th- are they c- … have you got a coverage? So do … does your books cover every child in every aspect of the curriculum?’ ‘Oh, I don't think so.’ ‘How do you man… How do you a-assess that coverage?’ ‘Well we don't, we can't possibly.’ Sometimes, some people try a tick list, try to tick every single area of the curriculum. The all, all of, you know, the 14 areas, all the areas with all the children, which is … Then I tried, then I tried to do some maths and work out well, how many observations do you have to [Fran chuckles] do to get absolute coverage of all the children to make sure they definitely can do all the things?

And it's thousands. It's thousands and thousands. And then you look at how many, at-at how many times a day. Well, that's, that's your entire day. So it's 1, w-there, it wasn’t me, it wasn't meeting the requirements. It wasn't giving you coverage, and 2, it wasn't useful. So I said to my head, ‘I want to try and not do them.’ I mean, I was not try and do them, to not do them. [laughter] Um, anyway, ‘OK, what’re you going to do instead?’ I said, ‘Well, OK, well, I have to work out that I, everyone knows their children. So they all, at the end of the year we took, put the books away, and I think the moderation when I talked to all of the, all the um, staff and said, ‘OK, Billy. Why is Billy, um, expected in writing?’ ‘OK, because he can do this and this and this.’ ‘Why isn't he exceeding?’ ‘Because he can't do this.’ ‘OK.’ So we went through almost all the children with all the staff, and everyone could instantly go, ‘Well, it's because this, because of this. I saw him do this.’ So it was all in our heads. All the information was there. So then if it's there, why are we doing the, of doing the, the-the learning journeys?

And then I also realised that if we weren't with a camera taking pictures and writing Post-its, we were interacting with the children. So suddenly every, every 5 minutes it took to do an observation, we would be interacting with children, which is clearly more important. So suddenly we freed up hours of time with the children and hours of time of our own in the evening, and it, sort of in-in a no brainer. And then I went around the schools; I’d go to moderations and said, ‘Where's your learning journeys?’ ‘We don't do them.’

And the-the shock and the horror. [Fran chuckles] But then, I thought, ‘Oh no, I’ve made a mistake here!’ But then every single teacher was jealous, [Fran laughs] every single teacher was going, ‘Well, that seems completely sensible. Why are we doing them? It’s a crutch. We have to do this.’ We … s-so very few people, even though they entirely agree with me, have refused to give it up. So that was it. I-I thought it would start a bit of a revolution, at least in, at least in Wandsworth.

But [laughter] to people to, to sort of free, free the shackles of learning journeys and be able to sort of like spend their time, and even the, even the new um, Early Years framework says that positive interactions are the most important things. Your time with the [**Fran:** Yeah] children is the most important thing you can possibly do above anything else. So every moment you spend talking to a child, feedback, and giving feedback to a child, just spending time with them, you know, listening to them, that is what we’re, that is the number one and most important thing we can possibly do with children.

But, you know, w-we still, most people are still doing them. So that, that was a surprise that I, i-it hasn't, hasn't caught on as much as. [Fran laughs] But I think everyone wants, I think I all teachers want it to catch on. But I mean, it, it's, you know, it needs a look, it needs a refresh anyway. So I'd love to have some research and have some proper research about how to think ‘Ah!’ you know, having ten schools not use them, ten schools use them and just see if there's any sort of correlation with results and teacher happiness. And teacher kind of like, you know, interaction with children is what you want to do. So surely teachers will be happier if that was the case.

Fran: Right. Well, and I i-it's really interesting um, that you make a point of its impacting both on learners, er, and their experiences, but also teachers and their, you know, feelings of wellbeing, and saying, ‘Could I be doing this smarter rather than harder?’ And, to take that on when you have the opportunity that you've clearly created, of asking lots of people and then being the first to, to make the move has clearly made a difference in your setting.

I guess that's something that um, lots of people experience. One of the reasons for doing these podcasts was because people I talked to, whether I knew them as friends or whether they came er, to us professionally through Cambridge Mathematics or other channels who were reporting things. And I was thinking, ‘Ah! This really fascinating!’ or ‘This is really interesting!’ or it sparks another idea for me, and I'm in a privileged position that I'm not teaching in the classroom at the moment, but I get to hear stories from

people regardless and wanting to put those out there so that people kind of had a broader staffroom to tap into if they wanted. And being able to therefore hear about what other people are doing and then reflect on it for your own kind of reasons. So sharing these sorts of things m-more widely than our own settings, I'm hoping is going to be, you know, interesting for people and also beneficial because they might hear things that, you know, their own colleagues are talking about something different, but they've then got something to share in a way that, you know, you and I are doing at the moment.

Um, I wonder, therefore, if, er, you might share with us the sorts of things that, er, you've come across. You've mentioned Hattie already and you've talked about um, the learning journals and the, the, the rebellion that you're [clears throat] staging in terms of, are they useful, and if they're not, could we do something different? Um, do you, do you get ideas from various different places? Do they come up because of things that happen in your setting or a mixture of the two, or maybe something else?

Simon: I think it comes from other people, I think. We, we cer- say that a lot when we, when we're start to teach of go and see other people teach. And that's, and it is still, you know, how many are, how often you'll teach, how often you teach how long you've been teaching. It's going to see other people teach, going to see other settings is always, always fruitful. I mean, going, yeah, you can see 'Oh, that's interesting way of doing that!' Particularly the Early Years, because there's so many ways just to skin a cat in the Early Years. I mean, a-a Year 6 lesson, a good Year 6 lesson is pretty much a good Year 6 lesson everywhere. There's not a great deal of difference in a kind of standard Year 6 maths lesson or literacy or whatever it is. You know, that the format, the structure is pretty sort of, sort of set in stone, whereas the Early Years you can, you know, the, the Scandinavian model, the, you know, the Steiner model or the Montessori model; the, though, you know, the Forest School model, you know, I recently saw a, went and had a talk with a-a, um, a lady from Denmark who is trying to do the whole outdoor, you know, that entirely outdoor nursery, which is absolutely stunning. It's an amazing, it's an amazing thing. I was kind of very blown away by the whole thing. Um, but it's like, and in, in Denmark, that's what you do as a nursery, you know. That-that, but here it's like, 'Wow! All day? Ten hours outside?' But, but that's what they do. And it's just, and it works! S-so it's, so there's so many different ways of doing it, I mean, that and that's, yeah.

Fran: I, I want to ask more about that. So, sorry. T-this is an, an outdoor all day, not in. Where was this, Simon?

Simon: So it, er, in, it, well, in Denmark they do it all, they do, they, that's what they do. You basically get bused from the city center in Copenhagen out to the forests, and you get dropped off at 8 o'clock and then you get picked up at five. Obviously, there's people there. You're not letting the children just run free. [**Fran:** Sure] But [Fran laughs] but, but that's a-all day. No ... they, the weather – any weather they don't go out in is less than minus five. And er, if the wind is more than 40 miles an hour, because that's the wind, that's the, that's, that's the wind speed, it knocks trees down. So you have to kind of avoid being crushed by a tree. But other [**Fran:** Oh my word!] other than that, they have a, they have a few huts, they have, you know, a play area that's outdoor. To the toilets are in kind of little tents outside. You know, you've got two year olds being changed in a tent and then, then, then back, back with the full weather, wet weather gear and off they go. And it's absolutely mind blowing. It's, [Fran vocalises] it's, it's, it's stunning to see. And the, there, there's kids climbing trees really high, and th-there's a wonderful video that I saw of a school in I think it's in Sweden where there's a kid, there's a interview with a teacher. And behind them is a kid up a tree, really high. And the, and, and the interviewer can't continue talking. They go, 'Um sorry, I-I have to interrupt. That kid's really, really high.' And he turns around, 'Ah! That is, that is Sven! He, he loves climbing trees. He knows his limits.' And then carries on talking. And it's like, [Fran laughs] that is so cool. Um, that is n, that, you know. And they use, they use, they with the 3-year-olds whittling with very sharp knives because they've been taught to use them safely and they know; they take them out, they whittle a spoon and then put them back again, you know.

And so [**Fran:** Ohhh!] it's absolutely, it's absolutely astonishing. And when you think, yeah, and that's a, that's a completely different way of doing it, I once, you know. And it, and, and, in case, you can't do it for, but then now, you know, if it's raining, please go outside. There's no excuse. There's n-no, that that whole thing of there's no bad weather, there's bad clothing. So we're now trying to get some better clothing, some better overalls, that we can just go out in the rain because the kids a-absolutely love being out in the rain. They just love the s, the sound of the water on their hats and, and just playing in the mud, and st, jumping in puddles. And, you know. [Fran chuckles]

So I think, well you say, w-where you get the, where do you get your ideas from? I think it is just being around other people in the same ... You go to any conference where it's Early Years, th-the exchange in ideas is astonishing, is this a, a real feeling of togetherness. Because in primary schools generally, the Early Years are a little bit separate and it always has been, I think, because it's th-the, the er, you know, Year 6 teacher doesn't know what

happens in Early Years and. They should do, but they probably don't. And it's all a bit sticky and, you know, messy and, you know, they don't like the idea of children having accidents, all that kind of stuff. So they don't, they tend to st-stay away. So there's that separation between the rest of school. So when your Early Years people come together, it's a real sense of 'We are, we are one, and let's have some chats about what you're doing and how you're doing it. And I've got this child and what do you think?' And so there's, you know, forget what the conference is about, it's just generally is to exchanging ideas amongst yourselves. Which is lovely, is lovely.

Fran: Amazing stuff. What you possibly didn't notice was the fact [chuckles] that we're wincing, as you're saying this child is climbing a tree. And I can't b-, 'Oh, he knows his limits!' which is just a fantastic response.

Um, on that note, then, so when you see um, videos of this type. Simon, I'm not an Early Years um, expert er, or practitioner, what sorts of questions do you have? Er, are you looking at it and wondering how are particular things managed? Are you doing that translation of in amongst being a teacher, as a researcher, you're looking and thinking, okay, what can I adapt for my setting? You talked about getting some other outdoor clothing so that you can take steps towards, you know, a-adopting some of this practice for yourself. What's going through your head, other than, 'Oh, my word!' and 'Doesn't this look fantastic?'

Simon: Yeah, practicalities are a, are a big, big, big thing. You've got little tiny children, and keeping them safe is huge. And staffing levels are always kind of tight. So you, you got to work out, 'Can I do this? How can I adapt it? What does it look like in my setting?' I'm very lucky, I've got a really lovely outside area, so we could definitely use that in this sit-situation.

So it is just about how it fits in. And then th-there's also the question of, if I'm adding this – as your little, um, er, you know, that little person with a job was – what can I take away, cause I don't want to add any more workload to my staff? I don't wan, you know, don't want to make it so we're doing too much stuff, because you do too many things you're not doing anything well. So if we bring something in and we're going to focus on this thing now, you know, we're going to do this really well, how am I going to, kind of, what are we going to take away, where's it going to fit into the timetable? Because I'm, I'm, I'm constantly fighting in Early Years to keep play as essential part of what we do. And the more stuff you put in, the more lessons, the more sort of, the sort of formal side of things, if it is a lesson, then you're taking away of, taking away learn... um, play, which we, which in, er you can't happen. It's all, it's already squeezed, you know, l-lots of things we have to do. Pho-phon,

the phonic, phonics and that kind of thing that'll squeeze the lear-, squeeze the play. So we try to, try and keep that as much as possible. So by bringing something new in, where's it going to fit? Do I have to remove something to make it fit?

So it's, it's a lot of the practicalities and then then it's obviously training and, and you know, doing it properly. And how can I help the staff to understand? If I'm, often I will come to a meeting enthusiastic about something and then I have to convince everybody else, you know why, why it's worth doing. Why is it worth spending our time learning what it, what it is, implementing it, monitoring it, assessing? Has it been successful? And then, you know, then rolling it out fully, if you, if that's what we want to do. So yeah, it's, it's a, you know, trying to fit it in to what we do.

Fran: Right. So it's, it's a huge undertaking. We're acknowledging that lots of times, you know, the finding out, or the working out why is just the tip of the iceberg and then all of the things that follow on from that, er, require effort, and planning, and like you say, you know, persuading people who maybe haven't been enthused in the way that you clearly are, um, of its validity and the reasonableness of why we should try this and, you know, see what happens in our setting.

I had a conversation with a PGCE student the other day, and they were, they're new. So they just s-started their course and they were saying it hadn't occurred to them before that they were allowed to challenge things they were being given. And I s – you're smiling, I like this! – and I was kind of like, 'A-ha, tell me more about this.' And they were saying, 'Well, you know, you read things and they like, right, ok, I'm meant to take this thing in.' And they were being encouraged in their teacher training to say, 'Well, what do you think about this? Well, hang on. Does this make sense? Would er, what questions do you have?' And to, as you say, take what is useful and think about the translation of that into your own practice, your own setting, because it won't be the same, er, environment, perhaps as the research was carried out in.

And it reminded me of a, a talk I'd heard at a conference where somebody was talking um, very knowledgeably from the Education Department in Singapore about um, the idea, er, it's come to be known as 'Singapore maths'. And she was saying, 'It is a little like bringing a plant from my country to the UK and expecting it to do well!' She said, 'We have very different climates and you want to take that into consideration in your planning and implementation so as not to fall flat on your face, or have a dead plant.' And I was like, 'Yeah!' I, that permission to question; that permission to interpret;

that professional judgment which this PGCE student was clearly learning to develop for themselves in a … it's okay. We're not expecting you to take these things wholesale. It is about, you know, developing your practice, developing the best possible environment for your learners and, and seeing what happens. It's an experimental um, er, turn of phrase, I guess. But, that you know, you'll suck it and see. And, and as long as you're doing it with the backing of as much good and high-quality evidence as you possibly can, y-you have to be prepared for some, you know, slightly unexpected outcomes perhaps in some cases.

I, it certainly sounds as though that's been your experience of taking things and then adapting them for what you say best are in, in where you're at.

Simon: Yeah, absolutely. The um, challenging things, challenging um, what you've been told to do is … took, it took me ages to work that out, that um, actually it was the maths that was the, the sort of catalysts for a lot of it. Maths lessons, I would, I was doing was what I was taught to do, when my, you know, my year partner, that's what they did, and they left. And so I then taught the person that the, that new, new teacher on the other side to do the same thing. So you just got a perpetuating this kind of like boring maths lessons. And, and it was, it was Reception and the maths lessons were tedious to say the least. Um, the children didn't like them. I didn't like – I love maths. I, you know, I'm, I'm dyslexic. I always found the English side of, of education difficult, whereas the maths side made sense. I a-and, al-always, always were sort of, was better at the maths than, than the English. And, and yet I was doing these lessons and it was just dull. I hated it. You know, the children clearly weren't enjoying it. They weren't learning. They were, they were learning, but not in the sort of way that I wanted to. Yet we put so much effort into making English exciting and books and stories and, and yet the maths lessons were like, 'Eurgh!' And you can hear them out – children going, 'Eurgh, it's maths!'

And so, you know, and then I, er, um, I went to a conference and there's a lady called Sue Gifford who um, just changed everything. She kind of bounced into the room, talked about maths in a way that was like, 'Yes! I want this! This is, this is fun!' You know, and it was all about not lessons, it was about getting on the carpet, spreading some things out, counting objects, going outside, how many trees. You know, let's, let's try and experim-, you know, experiment on wha-, how, how do we build this tower? Why is it so tall? All this kind of like practical maths. And it was, it was ch-, r-really life changing's probably a bit, bit much, but it was definitely changing in my practice by a long way. I-I came back very enthusiastic, changed everything we did. We, we d-dumped the maths lessons, um, [chuckles] didn't ask

anybody, but just [Fran laughs] I went, ok, maths is now everywhere. Maths is what we do everywhere and it's my job to make sure everyone gets the maths every day.

And it was, it was absolutely changing and it was, um, I enjoyed it, which was one thing. So then the children then enthused it, and we started, we started every lesson with ‘I love maths! We love maths!’ So we did a little, perhaps we did a little carpet session and I said, ‘I love maths’ and they went, [emphatically] ‘We love maths!’ And they g-, by the end of the year they genuinely did – they genuinely did really enjoy it. They were like, ‘When can we do maths? Do we do maths now, Simon? Is it maths today?’ And it was like, and that, and that was, and it was, and it came from me. I had, I did, I didn't realise that I had to find my love of teaching it in order for them to, because, and it's not, it's not rocket science because children follow you. If you’re not happy about something, they're generally un something, and you're modelling – everything you do, your modelling, you know, your language, your maths, your appreciation, your, your manners, everything you do, they, they kind of copy. So I had to enjoy it. And then suddenly, you know, I was, I was, I was loving maths again and, and, and managed to make them. And then I reintroduced some lessons where it was like sort of fun, quick, short, sharp especially for the maths meetings. It was a little bit of everything, a little bit of subitising, a little bit of pattern, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. And they kind of like, ‘Oh!’ you know, they're desperate to answer. And it moves really slowly because it's like, you know, a little bit of the maths mastery approach of trying to bring everyone together, but in a very slow steps, very sort of, sort of um, slow sort of er, movement. And actually it worked fantastically well.

And they, the, the level of maths increased and th-the, the results were good, they enjoyed it, they had a positive reaction. We tried to get parents involved. And we, we banned anyone ever saying, ‘I'm not good at maths’, because that was a real problem. And I would, and actually, i-it moved into the whole school and actually, er, they at the same time, er, Dan, our Year 6 maths teacher who was the maths lead, he was doing some of the sim, similar kind of thing with the rest of the school and it was like this happened to kind of coalesce between the two of us, and we, to be talked about, and so our head, our deputy head at the time was phenomenally at English. She was like an English master, but she would happily say, ‘I'm not too good at maths.’ And then we had a, we had a conversation, ‘Well, we wouldn't say I can't read because that's embarrassing. But why is it okay to say I'm not good at maths?’ So we changed that. We made sure everyone was really positive about maths all the time and bigged it up and had math days and, and it changed

the ethos of the whole school and suddenly maths became a joyous thing rather than, ‘Oh, it's Wednesday, it's maths’ kind of thing which was, which w-, I think is a cultural thing, of, of, of being happy to say ‘I'm rubbish at maths.’

So, you know, it, that, i-it a-all stemmed from one meeting with one person and that's all it takes sometime just to kind of go, ‘You don't have to do it that way, you can do it this way, have a go at this way.’ And that's, that's what's kind of the catalyst of all of it.

Fran: That sounds superb and I have been er, just, er, gesticulating along while, er, Simon has been talking in a, ‘Oh, this is glorious!’ And [enthusiastically] yes, maths is joyous and the bit where you're talking about um, children following you and the modelling of it, and the if you're enjoying it, very often they feel that and they enjoy it too. So the, the Pied Piper kind of approach and, that all started, as you say, with one person, but look at the impact that it's had elsewhere.

This has been fascinating. And our conversation has been such a joyous and wonderful meander over much of your experience. Thank you very much indeed for sharing with us. That's been fabulous.

Um, I'd like to invite you, the listeners, er, to engage with Cambridge Mathematics on X (formerly known as Twitter) 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.