

## The NCETM Maths Podcast Episode 86

## We need to talk: exploring the Oracy Commission Report

**Julia Thomson [JT]:** Hello and welcome to the NCETM Maths Podcast. In this episode, I recorded a really interesting conversation between my colleague here at the NCETM, Jane Hawkins [JH], and Geoff Barton [GB]. Geoff has spent over 30 years in education, including 15 years as a headteacher before going on to lead the association of school and college leaders (ASCL), representing 25,000 senior education leaders across the UK. In 2024, he was appointed chair of the Oracy Education Commission, or the Oracy Commission, as most people call it, where he's championing the importance of spoken language and communication in every classroom.

Jane, as well as her role as an Assistant Director for Secondary Maths at the NCETM, is Assistant Maths Hub Lead at Jurassic Maths Hub. She's a passionate advocate for oracy and has been instrumental in promoting its integration into maths education through her leadership of the Maths Hubs Research and Innovation Work Groups on oracy.

Honestly, I can't think of two more qualified people to discuss the topic of oracy in the classroom, especially the maths classroom. And I think you're going to really enjoy this conversation. So, I'm going to hand you straight over to Geoff and Jane. Enjoy.

**JH:** Hi, I'm Jane Hawkins, an Assistant Director for Secondary at the NCETM, and I'm thrilled this morning to be talking to Geoff Barton, who is chair of the Oracy Education Commission. Good morning, Geoff.

**GB:** Hi there, Jane. Thanks very much for asking me to come and talk to you about this.

**JH:** Thank you. Really excited to continue to think about how we can develop oracy across the curriculum.

And for us, obviously our interest is specifically in disciplinary oracy and mathematics and what that might look like for our young learners. As we continue to think about the curriculum.

**GB:** And I'm an English teacher by background. So speaking and listening has always been part of the English curriculum.

It's been part of the national curriculum. It's just not been noticed very much. But when I was stepping down from my previous job, which was leading a trade union of headteachers and deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers, et cetera, I've essentially gone back to those roots of exploring spoken language, particularly with this strange, ugly word, oracy.

I was asked by Voice 21, the national charity on oracy education, whether I would chair a commission on it. If you say the word literacy, people know what you're talking about. You say the word numeracy, people generally know what you're talking about.

You say the word oracy, their eyes flicker. So, can we make this punch through a bit more would be one reason for doing it. And the second reason for doing it is: it matters. There is a feeling that this is potentially the game changer. In the way that phonics had a big effect on



children's reading skills, maths mastery has had a big impact in terms of children's mathematical skills.

The view we take is that oracy is the next game changer, and we need to be able to convince the Secretary of State and other people why that is. And that's why it's so useful to talk to you and the people who are listening here who might have thought like I used to; that oracy was about other people's subjects.

Fundamentally, as we'll hear, I'm convinced that in maths and science particularly, we could make the biggest impact on children learning, behaving and being able to articulate why they love those subjects.

JH: Well, you're in the right place, Geoff, because we couldn't agree more!

The report focuses quite heavily on disciplinary oracy. Could you just tell us a little bit about what is meant by disciplinary oracy and why you think it's an important feature of the future of oracy education?

**GB:** You know, that was a call we made because we did have people, right at the very beginning, when we'd agreed that we were going to do this commission on oracy, I had some people contact me saying, if you're going to make this cut through, then it needs to be like literacy and numeracy, and have a literacy hour and a numeracy hour.

And you can see why, from a kind of political point of view, there might be something beguiling. It would make it easier for The Times and The Guardian and the people who write about it by saying 'commission calls for an oracy hour'. But, the reality with oracy, where there's a lot of unpacking of what this actually means, where it's going to have its biggest impact is, if you want children to learn about climate change, you want them to learn how to be able to construct an argument about climate change with people who understand the facts of it, their geography teachers, their science teachers. And, for me, the big revelation about oracy came from maths, which is why I'm pleased to talk to you about it today.

JH: Go on. Say more about that. What was your big revelation about oracy from maths?

**GB:** Well, there were two things and two people who particularly talked to me. So, it's worth remembering that what we did, when we said we were going to do an oracy commission, the reason for doing it was partly because 50 years ago last month, the Bullock Report, Language for Life, came out, and one of the things it talked about was the importance of speaking and listening.

It used the word oracy, and 50 years on we still haven't embedded that in our pedagogies, in our subjects. So, there was a question about, let's go back to that and look at what it means now. That was point one and, secondly, Labour in their manifesto - you'll remember this was before the general election - had said, we are going to want to give oracy greater focus.

What we said, what does that mean in practice? That helps to explain that oracy is suddenly on the agenda. The big revelation for me about mathematics came from talking, first of all, to Tim Oates, from Cambridge Assessment, who as you know, is the architect of the existing national curriculum.



He had three years to review the curriculum back in 2012 or whenever it was, and essentially said oracy was important. People don't realise this, but oracy does show up in the current national curriculum. The trouble is, as Tim would say, it shows up in the wrong place: it shows up in the aims for each subject.

The reality is, if you're a teacher planning your maths lesson or your geography lesson, you're not going to be looking at the aims of that. You're going to be looking at the substance of it, if indeed you're going to look at a national curriculum at all, because in secondary, you're largely looking at your specifications for exams in reality.

But what Tim said was, if you look at the places that are particularly effective in their teaching of maths, and he was citing Japan to us, for example, he says that when you've got to secondary level, mathematics is about articulating your problem solving and arguing why your approach beats somebody else's approach.

I was just very taken with that: I hadn't thought about that. The second person I talked to was David Thomas from Axiom Maths. (Both conversations, by the way, are part of this ongoing set of podcasts, which we did as part of the commission.) There are 56 of them: the Tim Oates one is there, where he talks about maths, and in the David Thomas one we only talk about maths. It's a particularly interesting one because what he says, and I'll be interested in your view of this, Jane, because you might disagree with this. Remember, I'm a grizzled old English teacher, right? So, I bow to your expertise. But what he said was, if you look at how children do in primary school, they've got a good curriculum for mathematics.

You've got the mastery approach to mathematics. You've got the testing of arithmetic going on, which focuses everybody's minds he says, and although they're being taught by primary teachers, who will largely be non-specialists, because that's the nature of primary teaching, our kids by the age of 11 are doing very well in world rankings in mathematics.

Now, we might dispute that, but that was David's starting point and then what he said - and this is where it gets contentious, and I think your listeners will find it interesting to agree or disagree with. He says, but what then happens when we get to secondary, when the majority of children will be taught by maths specialists - if we can recruit them - is that maths starts to move into different territory.

It starts to become more about right and wrong answers, and it starts to become a more solitary experience rather than a communal experience. And he said (this was David Thomas) if you look at the places that do maths the best [South-East Asian countries], it is about articulating how you've approached things, justifying your answers, and that sense of being engaged in spoken dialogue with other people and, in particular, listening to what other people say and responding to what they say, that will make you a better mathematician. And he says, if you look at what maths is when people get to university, it really isn't about right and wrong answers; if we simply make it about right and wrong answers, we are not preparing our mathematicians of the future.

All of which is a long-winded way of saying, the thing that struck me and surprised me about oracy, where I assumed that everyone was going to tell me it's all about, we need to assess speaking and listening in English more and have it formally assessed and showing up and it'll be important in the humanities.



I have become convinced that where we make the biggest impact will be in what we are doing in our maths and science lessons.

**JH:** Well, what a fabulous introduction to a maths podcast. I couldn't, I absolutely couldn't agree more. And from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group report that was released a couple of years ago, maths teachers stood out as one of the groups who perhaps thought oracy was less relevant to their subject.

I thought that was really interesting, because all the work of our Research and Innovation Work Groups through the NCETM have shown that maths teachers are really, really interested in how oracy can make a difference to the learning of their pupils.

**GB:** It's funny you mention that, because I was head of a comprehensive school for 15 years here in Suffolk, and like pretty much any school, particularly in any rural area, being able to recruit teachers in any subject, but particularly maths and physics was always difficult. As a result of which, and I hope colleagues who worked at the school listening to this will forgive me for the way I put this, you used to have teachers who didn't necessarily have maths as their first subject. And you know what it's like with kids? If kids sniff that maybe they've got somebody who isn't a specialist, they will take it less seriously. Therefore, what I used to say to our leadership team is, look, let's not spend our time in offices at all.

If you've got work to do, go and sit at the back of a maths lesson with your laptop, because that will focus the minds of children on listening to the teacher, whoever she or he is. It'll create the conditions for that teacher to be able to teach better. Do you see what I mean? What that means is this old English teacher has spent an inordinate amount of time watching the teaching of maths and listening to the way teachers interact.

And what I saw was if what they largely did was to say, right, we've done questions 1 to 23. Jane, what did you get? Omar, what did you get? It simply reinforces this sense that it is about right and wrong answers. One of these teachers came to me one day and he wasn't the head of department or anything, but he transformed that maths department because he came to me with the most mad-cap suggestion.

What he said was, could we take all the displays out of our maths classrooms, so they're just white walls? I said, you are mad: why would you possibly want to do that? You want to make the place enticing? He said, no, let's put whiteboards in them, old-fashioned whiteboards. So, we did with his classroom.

What I then saw - which I now realise was oracy in action - was that what he did at the beginning of the lesson was to say, okay, here's what we're working on today.

And you would know what topics those might be. I can't remember what they were but: here's what we're working on today.

I'm putting you in groups. I'm going to decide what the groups are, and I'm giving you a set of challenges and you're working in a group of three or four. You are working on that whiteboard there, this group you are working on, that whiteboard there, et cetera. And he then gave them 20 or 25 minutes in which they worked their way through.

And then what you did is you got the whole class to stand up and move from whiteboard to whiteboard, where each of those groups had to explain how they had approached the



problems, where they had got stuck, and where they disagreed about it, and how they came toa resolution. Now you'll know better than I do, there will be some bits of mathematics that don't lend themselves to this, where basically you just need to drill youngsters in thinking skills and routines.

But to have that transformation, so that at times young people were having to look each other in the eye and describe what they'd done. To articulate that, I now realise what I was watching was great maths teaching, it was great maths teaching because it was underpinned by great oracy skills going on, and it was the oracy skills of the teacher who was empowering youngsters to use theirs as well.

**JH:** I think that's so true. The role of the teacher in making the pupils think deeply and reason is a really skilful art because - I know less about primary than I do about secondary - I think there's a bit of an expectation that you as the teacher have responsibility.

You are in control of the lesson, and it's really hard as a teacher to hand over that responsibility of learning to the pupils. But there's a faith element to it, a trust element that these pupils, these learners are capable of learning maths, and as long as I've created the conditions and created a set of experiences which will enable them to think really deeply about maths, then I have to trust that they will think mathematically as long as they're given something mathematically worthwhile to think about.

**GB:** Totally, totally. And that's what the David Thomas podcast is all about. Butin response to that, just two or three reflections.

We're in a bit of a culture, particularly if you find yourself on certain bits of social media where there's this kind of grandstanding going on, that didactic teaching, the power of the teacher, tell them what they need to know, keep the corridor silent. All that presentation of the youngster as the passive recipient of my adult expertise.

That for some people, seems to be a prevailing discourse. I'm convinced that is untrue. There will be times, of course, I happen to have a degree in English. I know about Hamlet. I know more about Hamlet than you do, and at times, maybe I just need to tell you stuff. Part of my skill as a teacher is to explain things, but I also know, two things. Robin Alexander, who is the world guru on oracy, talks about how the ability of the teacher to ask fewer, better questions, and then to give space to children to answer those questions. But me, as a teacher, not think that because Jane has put a hand up and answered it, the whole class knows about it, that therefore what I need to do is to find techniques to see if *all* those youngsters have understood it.

My experience from watching lots and lots of lessons, you rarely see that. Good questioning, I think is the difference between the teacher who's okay and the teacher who is exceptional. And the exceptional teacher will ask fewer questions, bigger questions, better questions, but will build in listening time.

As a result of listening, we'll do what Robin Alexander calls 'the third turn'. So, you ask the question, you listen to the class's answer, and the third turn is you then decide which direction you need to go next in order to deepen the understanding. I think there's something really important about that.



And my final point - and I will try to do some shorter answers at some point, Jane - is when I say to Tim Oates, who as we say is, expert on assessment and curriculum stuff, tell us what do you think is the one big achievement that having an oracy rich school would bring? And he says, behaviour. Young people will behave better, and people would be surprised that Tim Oates says that. He says, it is because this is about engagement, and if you've got youngsters, whether they're excited about maths or they're disgruntled and worried about maths, engaging them in the why they're learning this, the how they're learning this, why this matters, how they're learning skills around all of that.

Whether it's maths or home economics, or P.E. or whatever it might be, is something we need to get back, I think, for young people, who are voting with their feet at the moment. You know, a fifth of them are not in school as often as they should be. Engaging young people is really important. I do think that the oracy argument is an important part of that.

**JH:** That's tied in with empowerment and agency and ownership and all those broader themes about pupils as participants and learners.

I think you're right. Interestingly, to pick up on something you said there. You said ask a question and the teacher listens to the pupils' responses, and for us, that's something significant. Listening to what pupils have said, not for a specific answer, this picks up on some of your themes earlier about right and wrong.

I'm not waiting for somebody to give me the one correct answer. I'm listening to what pupils do and don't understand because I'm authentically listening to their responses. It's from there that I make decisions about the next best step for this lesson. Are we where we need to be to be able to move on?

Or do we need to revisit some of the previous ideas that we've got a more secure foundation to build on?

**GB:** Exactly, and we can call that teaching. Because, essentially, that's what great teaching looks like and it consists of. Yet, when you look at how much we train teachers, both in terms of their ability to explain stuff, the difference again between a mediocre teacher and a great teacher, purely my experience, is mediocre teachers talk too much. Bit like I am.

And they lose the interest of the class. So, knowing how to put stuff, using sufficient time to keep the child's interest, and then as the next step, knowing what they do, and then listening. It's interesting that we had a commission made up of people who are not the usual suspects, right?

You had some people who do work in schools and trusts. Someone like Christine Counsell who brings a real curriculum expertise, but you also have someone from high up in KPMG, you had Rufus Norris, artistic director of the National Theatre, because we wanted to make oracy punch beyond the echo chamber of education.

What Rufus said in the very first meeting - and it became a theme - is, let's make sure we are giving enough attention to listening. In an age when everyone is cross about everything all the time and when, as we are seeing at the moment, opinions are bandied about as if they're facts all the time, the ability to actively and critically listen is really important for the teacher and always has been, but has become more important for young people because they are bombarded by stuff all the time.



If we're not in the final safe place, which is what schools and colleges are, that's the last place. Because you haven't got youth clubs anymore. Churches aren't working for most young people, I suspect. But in the safe place of a classroom, to be able to actively teach listening and give children practice and to model that as a teacher as well, that seems to me has a real sense of urgency to it.

One of the things that we've said to the government, is, should we make this stuff land is if ever there was a time that democracy needs people who can listen as well as to articulate, it's now. And that ability to disagree agreeably has never been more important than it is now.

And, frankly, whether it's in a maths lesson or whether it's in an assembly, all that matters more. You can see why what we've tried to do, therefore, is to take the 50-year-old Bullock Report and say, it was a great report. It was 750 pages long. That was its strength. It was comprehensive. Its weakness was it was 750 pages long.

No one would use it. So, let's do something which speaks to the profession and says this is going to make children behaving better in your classroom. It's going to help you to explain the love of your subject better to those young people.

If we fundamentally believe that this is a pedagogical approach and it's not just learning to talk and to listen, it's learning through talk and listening, then you learn through talk and listening in your maths lesson and in your other lessons as well.

There were other traps that we could have walked into.

One of which we've come back to now, because I had people, particularly from the English community, saying, look, if you're going to make oracy matter, then it's going to have to be assessed. So, we presented oracy as the fourth R. Right. So, you say it's unarguable that one of the foundations of great learning is reading.

Another one is writing, another one is arithmetic. Well, what we're now saying is the fourth R is oracy. The trouble with reading, writing and arithmetic is that they are assessed, and they're assessed at different points, including at the age of 11 and then the age of 16; we avoided saying that it needs to be assessed at 16 in English GCSE.

But we have returned to that, just in talks behind the scenes, because what happens at the moment is when you have a child at the age of two, somebody, a health visitor, will come and do a very basic language check just to check that they're starting to build the kind of words that they need.

And then on entry into primary, in a 20-minute slot, somebody, an Early Years teacher or primary teacher will do the fairly basic spoken language test again, just to make sure that child's on track, as it were. After that, we've got nothing. We haven't got any data because it's not assessed at the age of 10, it's not assessed at the age of 16.

There is an argument, per se - and again, Tim Oates and I were talking about this - should there be on the transition into secondary, maybe at the beginning of secondary, could there be something that just says on behalf of parents and the child themselves, actually this child probably needs more intervention, more support?



There might be a need for a specialist to do it, or they might need to work with teaching assistants. Because if we agree that this is a foundational part of learning, just like reading, writing, and arithmetic, why would we not have some low-stakes kind of assessment in the interest of the child to help them to get through Key Stage 3 and learn the skills they need later.

That's not part of the oracy report, but it shows how the oracy report continues to be live as we continue to explore some of these ideas. There will be some people who listen to that with absolute horror, thinking the last thing we need is more assessment. We're not saying high-stakes assessment.

We're not going to do league tables of speaking and listening. All of this is in the interest of the child to help them to be more effective learners, whether that's within their maths, or whether it's across other subjects.

**JH:** Well, I will wait with interest to see how that turns out and what your recommendations end up being around that.

So, the first section of the report is, why this, why now? Could you just tell us a little bit about why you think oracy should be on the agenda now?

**GB:** So, the ability to express yourself through spoken language and the ability to be able to listen critically to other people and then respond to what those people have said, and to do that in a way which isn't you shouting at them, that feels like something our society needs to give more emphasis to.

There's a bit of a prevailing mood that, education of young people is passive for them, active for the teacher, and the teacher simply describes things. What we therefore wanted to do is to say, well, let's just make sure we're understanding what oracy is.

Because oracy is a misunderstood word, It's easy for people to think that it's about oratory, that it's about public speaking. Now, public speaking is a useful skill at some points, but what we wanted to do is to say there will be some young people who actually wouldn't have the confidence to be able to speak, and won't have the experience at home of having conversations across meal tables, et cetera.

I'll come back to that point in a second. Therefore, if their education isn't giving them that, where are they going to learn those skills? Because what we know from employers in particular, is they want people who can solve problems by looking each other in the eye and doing the things that the robots can't do.

So that deeply human skill becomes more important. But the trap with all of that, which is what I want to go back to, is it's a very easy, therefore, to make rather unhelpful assumptions that this is all about young people who come from backgrounds which are somehow inferior. And there were academics like Julia Snell, who we talked to in one of our podcasts, and Ian Cushing, who warn us that this must not be a reductive model of saying, because you don't have conversations across the Daily Telegraph in the evening with your parents, we are not saying that you are inferior. What we're saying is, like all teaching, that you bring a set of experiences from home, and what school then does is to help you to be able to develop those and extend your repertoire, and this is about the repertoire for young people to be able to speak in different ways, in different contexts, and to listen actively and critically to make



decisions about what they can trust and what they can't trust, but also for teachers to be able to do that.

So, two big strands of what we say in the Oracy Commission are about how this is good for children's learning and how this is good for teachers' teaching as well.

**JH:** Absolutely: the benefits to pupil and teacher in oracy-rich classrooms, I think, are just huge. I've seen some beautiful teaching where the teachers benefit as much as the children do from the children's language and speaking.

I was privileged to be at the launch of the report and for the three young people who spoke there, I'm sure that's an experience they wouldn't have had as part of their normal daily life, but there they were in front of, I don't know, a hundred professionals and they spoke incredibly powerfully and articulately.

And I guess that's one of the facets of oracy that our young people are entitled to experience.

**GB:** We chose those three kids because they went to a primary school, which I went and visited on the Isle of Dogs. Literally in the shadow of Canary Wharf, so, you could see all of the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf.

They were in a little Victorian primary school beneath that. And when you said to the headteacher, 'how many of the kids in the school were likely to end up working in Canary Wharf in the city?', 'Er, not, not a huge number'. Well, we want those young people to have the kind of confidence and the kind of knowledge that is going to help them to be able to go and work wherever they want to.

Therefore, to bring young people who didn't come from the usual kind of polished environments where they are used to doing public speaking or any of that stuff, for them to have a bit of practice the day before, and then to come in, in front of a pretty august group of people, I'm so glad you picked up on it.

Because it was what I tried to do in all of my years as a comprehensive schoolteacher, and then headteacher, of saying, this should be an entitlement for every child from every background. I used to coach our debating team at King Edward's, and I used to take them out on the circuits of competitions.

I remember speaking to someone from a very good independent school and saying to her, how come your kids do so well in all of these debates? She said, why would they not do well in debates? She says, every evening they argue about things with their parents, and they have time to get the confidence to be able to do that articulation of ideas, as it were.

Well, we want every child of every background in every subject to get the same kind of thing. And although that will sound cheesy to some people - and I am known as Cheesy Geoff - I genuinely think it, and that's why I think this is the time to do it.

At the heart of what it's trying to do is to try and say, we have to tackle some of the inequalities in our society.



**JH:** I absolutely agree. One of the NCETM's underpinning principles for teaching for mastery is that all pupils can learn and enjoy maths. I think that's in a similar vein, we absolutely believe that all pupils are entitled to a maths education, which is going to serve them well in the classroom and beyond.

**GB:** One of the things I was pleased with the Oracy Commission: it was important right from the beginning - I mentioned Julia Snell and Ian Cushing saying, do not start from a deficit model. You don't want to be denigrating children's backgrounds. But it's not just those children we were talking about.

What about those who, for various reasons, can't speak. They're using sign language all the time. What about those children who've got stammers, for example? So, as part of the report and part of the 56 or so podcasts, I talk to people around all of that stuff because what we're essentially saying is this is about communication.

For some young people that communication won't be speaking with the kind of confidence which I'm speaking now. They couldn't do that. But, nevertheless, their voice, whether if that is through British Sign Language, or whatever, also matters, which is why we would continue to campaign for a British Sign Language GCSE for those young people, so that their voice genuinely does matter in the qualification system in a way that it hasn't always felt like it does.

So that kind of inclusion theme is really important for us just to bear in mind, I think.

**JH:** Yeah, all pupils and this actually feeds really nicely into our next theme, if you're happy for me to pick up on, is disadvantaged pupils, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and how, when we say all pupils, we really *do* mean all pupils. Disadvantaged pupils still do less well academically, proportionally, at the end of Key Stage 2 - it's something like twice as many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are represented in the group of pupils who didn't meet age -elated expectations. There's no academic reason for that, but something else is going wrong.

Fundamentally, I feel strongly that oracy is one of the ways we can tackle this disadvantage attainment gap. I know it's a theme of the report too, I just wondered if you had any thoughts around that which you were happy to share with us, please?

**GB:** Sure. It's a huge theme of the report. Even before I got into the Oracy Commission, it was a big theme, because at the Association of School and College Leaders - and I think people were surprised by this - we used to campaign on behalf of what we call 'the forgotten third', that third of young people who after all those 11 years or so, of having Early Years, primary, secondary teachers all teaching them, a third of them get a grade 3.

Now that seems to me, if an education system is predicated on the fact that a third of those young people are going to have a grade, which doesn't have a public credibility, but more important than that, they're then consigned to a hamster wheel of resits, where only 20% of so of them are ever going to get a grade \$, because you know, if they're doing an apprenticeship in building or something, they're still going to have to grind through an anthology of poetry for their resits in English and do the maths curriculum, which we know for some young people is simply too broad and is covering too many different facets of maths.



So, what you could argue is right when we need to do something about the qualification system, because we are disproportionately disadvantaging children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the view we take is the view that the Education Endowment Foundation said to us right at the beginning.

If you really going to narrow the gap, you start at the beginning with all of that. Early Years, although it's not part of the territory of the commission, we reference it at the beginning, because if you are really going to narrow the gaps, then children coming in from backgrounds where they will have had a less-rich experience of language, and that's not denigrating the household.

There'll be all kinds of reasons for that, but all the more reason why we will want to give them a rich experience of a range of different contexts to practise their spoken skills and to be able to assess them at different points, so that if they need specialist support, that's happening early on.

And I think that's turning our education system around in a way we should do, because at the moment we give loads of emphasis to A levels, for example. That's where the status often is in education, it isn't with those Early Years teachers, many of whom are pretty low status in many ways, yet that's where the real spadework of helping young people to be able to do well is, and that's where we're going to really narrow the gap.

Chris Patterson, who is the joint CEO at the moment of the Education Endowment Foundation, said to me, you do realise, Geoff, all the research tells us that a child's ability in speaking and listening at age five is the biggest predictor of how they're going to do in their reading, writing and maths, particularly at the age of 11.

So, there's this absolute integral sense that getting oracy right really early on is setting the foundations for how children will do better, and the children who will particularly benefit from that will be the ones who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**JH:** I was reflecting on *Coordinating Mathematical Success*, the Ofsted subject report, which was released in 2023. It again draws on that theme of, in some schools, in some cases lots of intervention work is put in at Year 6, but perhaps that indicates - I think it uses the word 'deficiencies' - from earlier on in the curriculum.

If you're having to do lots of top-up work and lots of catch-up work in Year 6 and Year 11, perhaps that indicates that something hasn't quite gone right before that. So that Early Years piece, and I know that the NCETM has a programme called Mastering Number, which targets particularly Key Stage 1, and there's a more recent Key Stage 2 strand as well.

Mastering Number targets Key Stage 1 pupils' understanding of maths and really precise mathematical language and terminology that pupils and teachers are using effectively in the right context. They are learning to speak like mathematicians and articulate their thinking and explain their reasoning from Reception and Year 1, I think is one of the ways that the NCETM is trying to do that Early Years thing. We know we don't even need to reduce the attainment gap at this stage. We just need to stop it getting greater than it is when pupils start school, because by the end of Key Stage 4 the average is about three years, I think, so the gap just gets broader.



**GB:** That's exactly right. And what we have got is a government which had originally talked about Early Years in terms of childcare. The trouble with childcare is that's predicated on the interest of the parent. What we really want is it being about Early Years learning. You want children, whether it's in their mathematics, whether it's in their social skills, whether it's in their language skills, to be developing those in a structured way. I think some people will think all of this stuff could have been soppy.

It's quite the opposite from being soppy. It is absolutely fundamental and an entitlement to young people. I do think it then throws a challenge up to us in I think has always been the problem area, which is the transition from primary into secondary, because that's where we lose quite a lot of children.

But also, there was a report by Ofsted probably a decade ago called *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?*. So, what is Key Stage 3 for? One of the things that we are interested in, is what is Key Stage 3 for? Because, for too many young people, it's a long and tedious runway heading up to GCSE, and it ought to be something distinctive in its own right.

That's why I referenced earlier on, we're just exploring, should there be some kind of lowstakes assessments of young people at the beginning of their secondary career at 14? OCR has brought a report out with Charles Clark chairing a commission, looking at whether there should be some kind of low-key sense of assessing young people, partly in their oral skills at 14, so that you then declutter GCSE just to be able to focus on the important stuff there.

Key Stage 3 is doing a bit more of the heavy lifting, but all of that is not our commission stuff, it's some of the ideas that have come up as a result of the commission going into the public eye and people responding and opening a debate about it like we hoped it would do.

**JH:** Well, exactly. The report in itself is a useful and interesting document, but I think it's been really interesting how its launch, and the report now being available has started lots of other conversations. Oracy seems very much like it's the buzzword of the moment and schools are talking about oracy lots and lots, and I think there's a risk that it becomes a thing to do. We do agree with oracy: we have vocabulary lists on the doors.

All of our children talk and, I think for the NCETM we want to be really, really clear that what we mean by oracy, particularly in maths lessons, is that it isn't about more talk. It's about really purposeful, really authentic talk, which deepens students' understanding. It's that learning-through-talk piece.

We are here to learn maths and one of the ways that we can best learn maths is by talking about it.

**GB:** That totally nails it. And if people listen to the David Thomas podcast talking specifically about that, he is compelling in how this is going to make a difference.

What that does, Jane, is it takes on the naysayers who say, oh, well, you know, you're trying to shoehorn something else into the curriculum. The view which I take is that what great oracy education does, is that makes your teaching and learning more efficient because children are learning more effectively than that.

We know there's a curriculum review going on and it's easy for us, therefore, to think, is oracy adding something in? Oracy is about how you teach the curriculum. That's why



fundamentally, whilst of course the argument should be that this is going to help our children to learn mathematics better, to talk like mathematicians, to understand mathematics, the biggest impact is actually on the repertoire of the teacher.

The teacher is going to find that teaching becomes a more rewarding and more joyful experience, which sounds like a very, very grand claim. But against the background where we lost the year before last, 44,000 teachers from the profession, we've got to do something to make it a joyful profession, and oracy, I think, the evidence is telling us that, from Robin Alexander, from Tim Oates, and from Neil Mercer at the University of Cambridge, this is the element that reinforces a sense of human interaction between teacher and child being one of the most important things we can do.

Great for children, and it's great for the teacher.

**JH:** So once again, you've very nicely segued into another theme I'd like to draw out from the report, which is that of teacher professional development. Obviously the NCETM's remit is the professional development of maths teachers at all phases across the age range in England.

We are really interested in what teacher professional development in oracy looks like. There's a reasonable body of research that says domain-specific professional development is the most effective for teachers. Pulling on some of those themes you mentioned- about teacher autonomy and teachers' love of teaching- we'd lose fewer teachers hopefully, but what would you say the report found or would advocate for in terms of teacher professional development around oracy?

**GB:** We believe that oracy is the fourth R in the way that we've said: just like reading, writing, arithmetic are really important for children and young people oracy is as well, but we also think, based on, as you say, a huge body of evidence, it is an essential ingredient for being a great teacher, and therefore it needs to show up in teacher training and ongoing teacher professional development more than it has done in the past.

I think there are some tiny generic bits of oracy, how I explain stuff, how I ask questions: those are really important skills I could probably teach people around all of that.

But your point is the one that we support, that domain-specific oracy is the most important thing that we want geography teachers and science teachers, if they're teaching about, say, climate change, to be able to explore how you give space for children to be able to explore what's reliable, or what's not reliable, and then to explain why it's not reliable and to be able to articulate that, and to know which bits of vocabulary are going to help them to be able to do that. That will be different if I'm a history teacher from if I'm a maths teacher. Christine Counsell, guru in terms of curriculum thinking, says in her podcast how one of the things that had particularly synthesised for her was how we need to reinforce a sense of disciplinary oracy.

The problem then is so how do you make that happen? I'm getting wheeled out from time to time to go and speak to staff meetings in schools to make the case for oracy, and people quite often come to me at the end and say, so is there a kind of template? Is there something, a bit like a knowledge organizer?



There something I can put onto a student's desk, and do it bit like you referenced, having, these are the words of the week on the door. This is much more fundamentally about how we are developing our teachers. The view that we take is not that there should be some kind of national strategy for all of this: we've got a very fragmented teacher training system, we've got an Early Careers Framework, which is struggling because mentors haven't got enough time for it. So, there's some clarification to do around that. But we suggest that subject associations are critical in all of this, and I've felt, in some cases for some years, that they've been on the margins of stuff.

Ultimately, if I'm an English teacher and I want to learn more about English, then the English Association, the National Association for the Teaching of English, are the specialists on this and if we've made the case for all of this, then they're the ones to do it. Similarly, speaking to officials at the Department for Education when the report came out and talking about how do we influence the curriculum review, how do we get the NPQs, those national professional qualifications to give more emphasis to oracy, some really very well-connected people at the DfE said, you can get this stuff into the national curriculum and you can get into the NPQs, but you really need to win the hearts and minds of the profession for the profession to think this matters and therefore I want to develop skills.

Therefore, one of the things I'm increasingly looking at is how do you work with trusts and groups of schools to say, let's build from the ground up a sense of what it is that oracy can do in our maths lessons. What can this department test out, report back on?

So, it's not something being done to you, it isn't a knowledge organiser, it's not a template. This is something which is about my professional learning, and I think the more we can get that back, that fifth of young people from Russell Group Universities who choose to become management consultants and wouldn't think about becoming teachers, might just see that actually there's something which we can do in education, which is taking a love of your subject and making you better and better at being able to communicate that love of the subject to young people, who then achieve more, and behave better as a result of it.

All of which, again, will sound hugely idealistic, but frankly this is nearer when we need more idealism on behalf of children and young people, I think.

**JH:** I absolutely agree. I wholeheartedly believe that teaching is the best job in the world. When you get to see children and young people with that spark in their eyes and their face changing when they have learned something for themselves and the way it empowers them, I think is just an incredible gift to be part of it.

Increasingly, it feels like teaching is, less that, and there's lots of other things around teaching that make it more difficult. One of the findings from our Research and Innovation Work Groups is that as teachers understand the significance of oracy and its role in securing greater equity and education, there's that huge piece about how we get education to be more equitable.

But as teachers increasingly understand that they are motivated to develop their practice and oracy as part of the picture, that, as you say, people's behaviour changes when they feel listened to, and they feel like they are a part of the learning and development of learning and thinking in the room, the behaviour changes, but also so do their outcomes.



Their outcomes get better: I don't know if that's because they're engaged more or because they are better able to think and articulate their mathematical thinking. I don't know what it is, but there is something in oracy-rich classrooms, that culture, it's bigger than learning about oracy: it's the culture in the room, where children are learning and articulating their learning and thinking, where schools do it well, you can feel it when you walk in the room.

**GB:** I agree with that.

JH: Have you been to Summer Hill, Geoff?

GB: No, I've not been to Summer Hill.

**JH:** It's one of the case studies in the report which I had the absolute privilege of visiting before Christmas.

They just embody what you want an oracy-rich culture to be in the school, and it really shows in their results. Their free school meal proportion is higher than the national average, but last year in their greater depth SATs in maths, 65% of their pupils achieved greater depth in maths.

And that's against the backdrop of a national average of about 20% achieving greater depth. But at Summer Hill, their free school meal average is above others, but they're doing something, and they would say it's a blend of oracy and curriculum. They're not separate; they're not distinct things.

They are working together on both, and their pupils are massively benefiting as a result of their teachers' practice.

**GB:** Yes. I think it's the word you used earlier on, that when I visit schools, it is about the culture there, and that is absolutely, as you say, about giving agency to young people.

Again, that's not a soft and soppy kind of thing. That's not letting kids rampage around the corridors expressing their views. Quite the opposite: it's very structured and very disciplined, but you are giving space for them to be able to learn an inherently important skill around that. I think the other bit of it as well as curriculum, which you say is it needs trust of the teachers, it needs to recognise that actually there are no quick fixes or there are only a few quick fixes.

Some things will work everywhere: it's the Dylan Wiliam stuff. but the way, as a maths department, that we are going to become better at teaching is through sharing our insights, watching each other, recognising that sometimes things really don't work. Building our professional skill, not by bringing in consultants and other people to tell us how to do it, but working from the ground up and building that skill.

That's why the stuff about dialogic teaching from people who've written about this stuff from an academic point of view and have got the research base for it, is really, really important. One of the things I think organisations like yours can help to do - indeed, you do this on your website - is to be able to provide videos and other resources to help to make the case for why this isn't about something separate from maths.



Oracy isn't separate from maths: it fundamentally underpins it. Indeed, in a strange way, it's more important than literacy. Literacy is my thing, it's really important, but literacy is a strand, whereas oracy underpins learning, and it underpins your ability to read, your ability to write, and your ability to do mathematics and think mathematically.

It's really essential, so let's do it!

**JH:** Well, quite! No small task. There's a really nice quote in the report from Robin Alexander, which is, 'Although talk is a universal feature in classroom life, talk of the quality required is not universal, and making it happen requires skill and training'.

And I think that's what we are about. We know that there will be talk in maths lessons, so we need to do something, we need to attend to what the teachers need, the professional development that teachers need, so that they can make the talk of the quality required to make pupils' learning the best it can possibly be.

**GB:** It isn't idle, and it's not chatter. It's about the quality, and that's why what you want is teachers who absolutely understand that the kind of question, the kind of explanation, the kind of space you give to listen to the young people's answer, is then going to give you a direction as to where you go next. It's one of the greatest skills teachers have got, and oracy underpins that.

So, what we conclude in the report is that oracy has three facets.

It's learning to talk and to listen: you practise those skills. Then it's learning through talk and listening, and that's the compelling argument why oracy of all of all different bits of learning is the most significant, I think. But we also talk about learning about talk, and one of the things we're saying, which is less relevant to maths teachers than it is, for example, to English teachers, is that something as important as the ability to be able to change the way in which you speak and listen in different contexts is something that actively needs to be taught.

Why would you have an English GCSE language qualification that actually doesn't teach you about English language? You grind through an anthology of poetry, and you read a 19th century pamphlet, but something as rich as the English language - how it's had influences from different languages, which means that sometimes I might say, I'm going to ask a question, sometimes I might say, I'm going to inquire.

Sometimes I might say, I'm going to interrogate, depending on whether I'm going to use something from the Anglo-Saxon, something from the French or something from the Latin. Why wouldn't we want every child to know about language and to practise being able to use that, not just in reading and writing, but also in speaking and listening.

So, there's a strand about learning about language as well as the two other parts of it, which is learning to talk and listen and learning through talk and listening.

**JH:** Thank you. I think the equivalent in maths might be that we ask people to explain, reason and justify almost like they're interchangeable.

I think that they're not quite interchangeable: I think explaining and reasoning and justifying are distinct skillsets and distinct disciplines that we need pupils to be able to do all of those



things in maths lessons. And perhaps there's space for teachers and pupils to have a better understanding the distinction.

**GB:** Totally.

**JH:** And the particular skills that come along with those.

**GB:** Absolutely right. Exactly.

**JH:** Thank you so, so much, Geoff. It genuinely has been an absolute pleasure to have a conversation, and I really hope that maths can be part of the conversation around oracy.

**GB:** Well, as I said right at the beginning of this conversation for me it was the big revelation about oracy, the difference and the impact it can make in the maths classroom. And so, thanks for giving me an opportunity to talk about that in this conversation.

But I'll just point people again, if I could, to some of those conversations we've had, which are all just 20-minute conversations with people who've got a particular interest. Tim Oates making the reference to international evidence on why oracy makes a difference in maths, and then David Thomas talking about the primary-secondary transition and why he thinks it's the game changer there.

But thank you for your time as well.

JH: Thank you so much, Geoff.

**JT:** And thank you for listening. I really hope you enjoyed that episode. If you're interested in the topic of oracy, our podcast episode on 'Oracy in the maths classroom' where I speak to Jane and Kathleen McBride from Voice 21, a national charity that supports schools to develop and embed oracy, is definitely worth a listen, I'll post a link to that in the show notes.

Jane, with the NCETM's Director for Primary, Debbie Morgan and other colleagues at the NCETM and Maths Hubs came together to write a feature in response to the oracy commission's report and how its recommendations could influence maths education: I'll post a link to that in the show notes too.

The two podcast episodes Geoff mentions will also be posted in the show notes. Our show notes are always a wealth of links to interesting places and resources, so do make sure if you enjoy an episode that you take a look at those.

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