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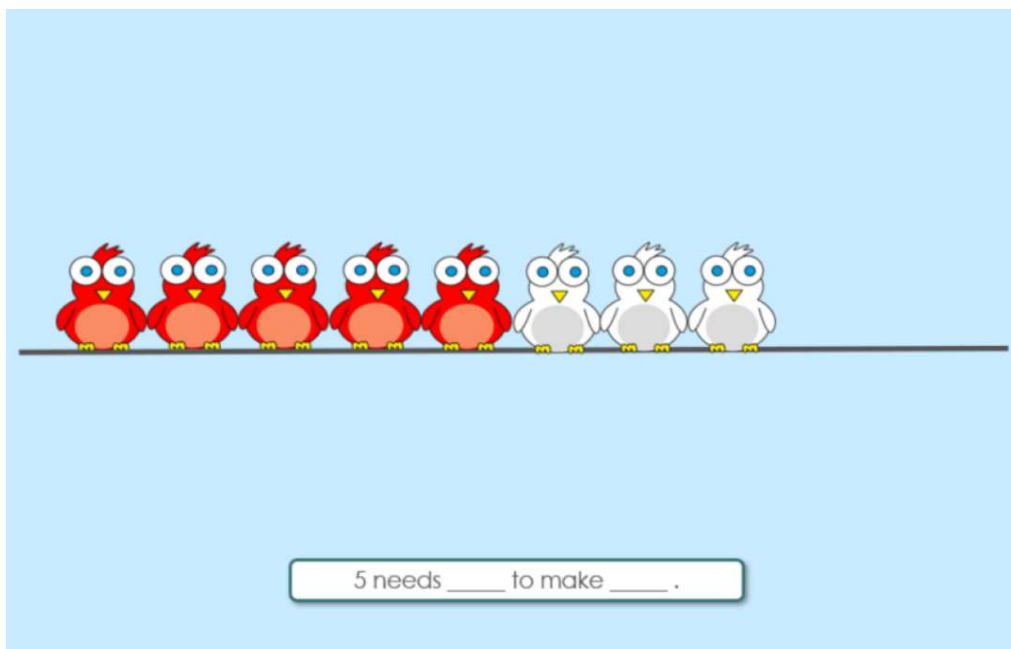
/ 'Taking the ceiling off learning' with Mastering Number

Article

# 'Taking the ceiling off learning' with Mastering Number

Building number sense and fluency in Reception and Key Stage 1

18/03/2025



We explore how one trust has invested fully in the whole-school systems and structures needed to ensure success in

the Mastering Number Programme, to help all children reach their full potential in maths.

Leaders at Elston Hall Learning Trust put professional development at the heart of what they do. School improvement lead, Samantha Wycherley, knew that when teaching for mastery and Mastering Number were introduced, school leaders would have to make sure that 'a lot of CPD' took place. Implementing the structures and systems to enable teaching for mastery and Mastering Number to thrive meant 'having to put in the legwork'. But already, only eighteen months in, Sam has seen that introducing the programmes effectively has 'taken the ceiling off learning' in maths.

## Why change what's already working in maths?

Elston Hall Learning Trust is made up of six primary schools which span Wolverhampton, Walsall and Sandwell. Maths is already very successful, with most pupils meeting or exceeding expected standards. Suggesting the change to a teaching for mastery approach in maths therefore posed some challenges for Sam. 'There were teachers who were concerned that we would lose or compromise the success we already had,' she explains. 'They were asking me "What's a minuend?", "Why are we using this language?", "Why are we changing things when the results are already good?".'

The ways in which teaching for mastery and Mastering Number were introduced allayed any fears. Professional development was extensive and given priority in the timetable. All teachers and TAs had the opportunity to engage in a variety of training opportunities, so they could develop pedagogical and subject knowledge and understand the rationale for change. They really bought into teaching for mastery when they saw it in action and could see their own pupils flourishing.

'It was about moving away from procedural maths to children being secure mathematicians and deeply understanding maths,' Sam explains. 'Our job is to send pupils from Year 2 to junior school or from Year 6 to their next journey in secondary school as confident mathematicians.'

# How were teaching for mastery and Mastering Number introduced?

In 2023/24, through a collaboration between SHaW Maths Hub and North Mids Maths Hub, the trust formed a Work Group made up of maths leads from all six trust schools working together to understand and develop a teaching for mastery approach. 'Having a common language and being able to go back to their schools and share the same messages was crucial,' Sam explains. In her trust-wide role, Sam also had to ensure that systems were in place across all the schools to engage and unite all staff (aligning with the latest [EEF guidance on implementation](#)). Trust leaders knew that the move to teaching for mastery wouldn't happen overnight, and that the buy-in would only come if staff were fully supported with the time and training needed to develop their pedagogy and subject knowledge.

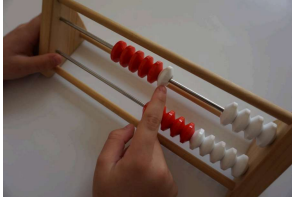
Although the trust was early in its teaching for mastery journey, in summer 2024 Sam and other trust leaders decided to introduce Mastering Number. They had identified a need for children to have factual fluency in maths, and knew this would be important in strengthening further work to develop a teaching for mastery approach to maths.

Having established what worked when introducing teaching for mastery, Sam knew what was required to make Mastering Number have the same success. Opportunities to work together underpinned the programme's introduction: teachers in two- and three-form entry schools used shared PPA to look at both the subject knowledge content and the lesson plans in the teacher guides. Maths leads met as a trust-wide group half termly, to co-plan and share best practice. Training in full staff meetings also took place, and cross-trust PPA sessions were timetabled. For example, all Year 1 teachers met every fortnight, bringing case studies and discussing their own pupils' maths learning.

This sort of effective timetabling, especially shared PPA, can help teachers to co-plan and therefore provide an opportunity for professional development as well as saving time in the long term.

The role of the Lead Teacher in Mastering Number has also been carefully managed by the trust, so that the right information cascades to all those delivering the programme. Trust leaders make cover available so the Lead Teacher can attend online CPD sessions and local face-to-face Work Groups, and joint PPA is

then used to share new knowledge with other teachers. The trust's focus is on supporting those who can't attend face-to-face sessions, so shared PPA might involve discussing the Mastering Number materials or watching back recordings of online CPD sessions on Axis, the NCETM's online portal for participating schools.



*Participating schools receive rekenreks, which help children visualise and understand the structure of numbers - [tap/click to enlarge](#)*

## What has been the impact so far?

Across the trust, Sam says, teachers are already commenting that they feel upskilled in terms of pedagogy and that their subject knowledge has 'gone through the roof'. Maths lessons now 'go deeper not wider', and all pupils – high prior-attaining, EAL, SEND – can participate actively in the lessons. Pupils who were less confident are loving maths because they can access the lessons.

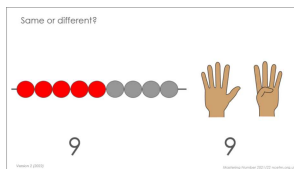
Sam has seen a significant shift in teachers' mindsets when it comes to teaching maths. There has been a move away from differentiation; teachers believe all pupils can access the learning. Parents are also involved in their children's maths. Initially some were sceptical about the whole-class approach and pupils being seated in mixed-attainment groupings. They didn't want their child sitting next to another child 'to help them', but now they are seeing that *all* are accessing the maths, and their children are talking at home about how much they are enjoying it. Mastering Number is about everyone – teachers, leaders, pupils and parents – uniting and working collectively with a common understanding of numeracy.

Pupils' confidence and enjoyment, and their ability to articulate the maths they are learning, have all increased. Teaching for mastery and Mastering Number have supported the development of oracy; pupils are talking much more in maths lessons and want to be

involved in discussions. High behavioural needs children have shifted their mindset when it comes to maths. A boy who wouldn't write in lesson now enjoys discussion and hands-on learning; he understands concepts better and, although his book looks different from others', he can still verbalise exactly what he is learning and his clear understanding.

Following some initial resistance at what was perceived as repetition of teaching topics – 'They already know 5; why are we doing it again?' – teachers and pupils are now embracing Mastering Number. Teachers understand why they are teaching the concepts and topics that it covers in the way it does, and their subject knowledge has increased exponentially.

The use of 'talking partners' is helping pupils socially, as well as embedding mathematical understanding, and pupils' mathematical vocabulary has also benefited, particularly amongst EAL pupils. 'We see Mastering Number as 'phonics for maths',' says Sam, adding that 'it is valued in the school as being crucial to pupils' early understanding of number. The repetition elements suit pupils in our trust schools.'



*Programme materials gradually build learning step-by-step - tap/click to enlarge*

## What's next for the trust?

Teaching for mastery and Mastering Number are a journey, even for already successful schools and trusts. Sam knows that Elston Hall have only just begun, but she has big plans for the future. **Mastering Number at KS2** will be introduced across the trust, and investment in staff development will continue, including timetabling opportunities for teachers to co-plan.

Sam hopes that there will be an opportunity to train teachers in the trust's well-established and extensive ECT programme to understand teaching for mastery. Trust leaders also want to

further develop support staff, especially HLTAs, as they know the positive impact that everyone working together can have.

‘It’s about embedding systems and providing professional development, not just getting the materials,’ Sam says. ‘Now all our staff are chomping at the bit to learn about teaching for mastery and Mastering Number if they are not already doing it. Our trust puts effort into developing people, and Mastering Number provides such obvious benefits for both staff and pupils. Why wouldn’t you do it?!’

## Find out more

Applications are open for Mastering Number! Visit the programme page for more information and then contact your local Maths Hub to apply

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