



Marcelo Staricoff and Alan Rees hail the success of Morning Starters for Thinking at Westbury Park Primary School

# Start the day on a thought

When Westbury Park Primary School was invited to become a Beacon School in September 2002, staff became very interested in the potential benefits that could arise from a Thinking Skills enriched curriculum and approach to the day (Staricoff and Rees, 2003). Thinking Skills stimulate an enormous range of ideas and it is wonderful to see how individual teachers are tailoring these to suit themselves and their pupils.

Of the many initiatives, the Morning Starters seem to have had the most appeal and success so far. Their impact is, I believe, largely due to the ease with which they can be implemented and managed. Their intellectual impact is immediate with both children and teachers. Morning Starters are contributing so much to the children's enthusiasm and love for learning that, as part of our Beacon



School remit, we feel it is important to share the idea with a wider audience and see if our model could generate discussion amongst fellow enthusiasts.

The Morning Starters have become a particular area of interest for the newly-formed *Bristol Thinking Skills Focus Group* with several schools in the group reporting transformed classrooms as a result of starter sessions. The open-ended, non-topic-based nature of these challenges makes them an ideal source of discussion with fellow professionals, creating a very efficient means of generating ideas for new starters.

The Morning Starters greet the children as they enter the classroom in the morning. Accompanied by appropriate background music, they make for a wonderful classroom atmosphere for both children and adults, setting the tone for the rest of the day. Starters motivate the children to view the beginning of each day positively by providing them with a secure, ordered and enjoyable routine in a welcoming and pleasant environment. The creative, positive and calm atmosphere helps all children to prepare themselves emotionally and intellectually for the day ahead.

There is little doubt that this very special start to the day is having positive repercussions for children and teachers in all kinds of unexpected ways. The very nature of the Starters means that all the children are experiencing a sense of success very early on in the day and on a regular basis, developing their self-esteem and love for learning. We are noticing that children are showing greater maturity and a greater degree of tolerance and respect for each other – particularly during playtimes. Our Headteacher, Alan Rees, has always maintained that what happens in the classroom influences how children respond to each other in the playground and vice-versa. We are finding it fascinating to

observe how our Thinking Skills and Values strands of the Beacon project are becoming so closely interrelated.

### Starters in practice

When I first introduced the idea of the starters to the school, we set aside some INSET time to discuss the best ways forward and to pool ideas. This process proved invaluable, as the nature of the starters has to vary dramatically depending on the age groups, even though the underlying structure and philosophy remains the same. One thing we wanted was the children not to perceive their starter activity as a chore, but as an enjoyable, fun challenge. We are finding that a daily dose is appropriate for upper KS2 but less frequent starters, as 'treats', work best with younger children.

The key to success with starters is to introduce them as fun, challenging and interesting – as a really enjoyable way of developing everyone's thinking skills. Once teachers have established a routine, the actual delivery mechanism becomes a very individual choice. I have found that, as a Year 5 teacher, greeting the children with a daily written starter on the board and classical music in the background creates such a wonderful atmosphere that it inspires me to begin the day in a very positive mood. It is a joy to see and feel the children's sense of anticipation as they enter the classroom and to see them begin to absorb the latest challenge.

The children have dedicated Thinking Skills exercise books in which to tackle the starters. In an attempt to free the children from any worries and to encourage them to have a go and experiment, liberated from worries over spelling, handwriting and presentation, I tell them that I never look at these books or mark them. *Right or wrong* then become less of an issue and the children feel free to

# Publication Preview

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