



# Thinking skills transform our days

**Marcello Staricoff and Alan Rees use thinking skills to transform learning at Westbury Park Primary School**

**A**t Westbury Park Primary School we are becoming increasingly interested in the benefits and rewards that can be reaped from a thinking skills approach to the school day. When our school was granted Beacon Status earlier this academic year, we decided to include thinking skills as one of the areas of specific focus. Our thinking skills initiatives are currently at various stages of development but so far the signs are very encouraging – children, teachers, parents and governors are all welcoming our approach with open arms.

We have developed several routines designed to maximise the children's exposure to the variety of opportunities which thinking skills can offer. In describing these here, we are hoping to generate discussion among fellow enthusiasts, enriching us all and helping to establish a more widespread national and international thinking skills communication network.

## **It all starts on the first day**

The first few days with a new class provide a wonderful opportunity to introduce thinking skills approaches in order to create a classroom environment where learning can flourish and the values we desire can surface – mutual respect, enthusiasm for in-depth discussions, a friendly sense of humour and the removal of worry are just some examples.

### A thinking classroom begins to develop

The classroom environment is very important and the children need to feel that *they* are working within, and helping to create, a Thinking Classroom. The left-hand side of the whiteboard is dedicated to thinking skills, whilst the right side shows the class schedule: a daily dose of Spanish, interesting news items and relevant websites.

- *'The board is so interesting – it's got so much information and I find it very stimulating'* (Kate)
- *'It's so well set out, there's always so much to look at'* (Dudley)

Permanent displays of learning styles, thinking skills, key words and brain cartoons are always prominent and a table of thinking skills books and resources is freely available for the children to access at any time.

As the children come into class in the morning they are greeted by classical music and a thinking skills task on the board. Examples of these include mathematical puzzles (generating the numbers 1-100 using four fours each time), illustrating a verb using its initial letter, the A-Zs of various things and differences and similarities such as comparing ketchup and blood (Marshall, 2002). The choices are endless. Children quickly settle to the daily thinking-skills task and write their thoughts or answers in their Thinking-Skills books. This very special beginning to the day is all conducted in Spanish, including the register. The thinking skills tasks are designed to be fun, challenging and appealing to all. Thinking skills books are neither marked nor looked at. After sharing the outcomes and ideas generated, we are ready and very motivated to tackle the first lesson.

From a teacher's point of view, I never cease to be amazed by the inspirational contributions and moments of originality that arise from these ten-minute sessions. The open-ended nature of the tasks often means that the children continue pursuing them in their own time, sometimes for days on end! Children have started bringing in their own ideas for these tasks!

- *'We think it's great to do these in the morning. They get you ready for the rest of the day. We keep thinking about them all day'* (Michael, Tom)
- *'These are so special. I can never wait for the next one'* (Bianca)
- *'Our brains feel so ready after these'* (Rosie, Rachel)

We place a lot of emphasis on good presentation of work and self-reflection and to this end we have developed a routine for our written work. The work is preceded by the date, title and TLP (today's learning point). Once the work is completed we add a TIL (today I learnt), which gives the children an opportunity to reflect on their learning or on any difficulties. Lessons are accompanied by a thinking

skills enrichment task that is intended to motivate the children by applying the TLP of the lesson in a different context. As an alternative, children may act as teachers as we believe that being able to explain a concept to a friend is a very powerful means of ensuring that the teacher has understood a particular concept.

We have a very special *Artistic Performance* start to our afternoons. These performances can involve children playing musical instruments, performing a play, a song or a dance. We have found that these sessions create a very positive and relaxed atmosphere and set the tone for the rest of the afternoon. They also provide a wonderful vehicle for the children to develop their self-esteem and confidence when performing in front of an audience of peers. As all of these artistic talents are absent from my repertoire, the children feel even more special. It is their time to shine.

- *'I enjoy doing these. It gives us a chance to show our talents. It's so relaxing after lunchtime play'* (Natasha)
- *'Dancing makes me us much more confident'* (Ella, Lily)
- *'The other children really inspire me perform'* (Larry)

From a teacher's point of view there is nothing more wonderful than to sit, relax and enjoy the dedication with which the children approach these performances.

### Thinking days turn into terms

We view thinking skills as a way of life, enabling us to maximise our enthusiasm for learning in whatever we are doing. The children feel equipped with an extra set of friendly tools, which very quickly become second nature to them. They feel empowered by the extra responsibility that thinking skills gives them in terms of their learning and by the range of alternative approaches which are suddenly available to them when tackling their work.

### Some things have to be taught

By spending a few minutes performing specific learning-styles exercises and defining all the various learning styles, the children can very quickly choose their preferred learning style(s). By being aware of these, the children can steer teaching and hence their learning. A recent comment illustrates this very well: *'Mr S, can you draw what you have just explained as I am more of a visual learner'*.

Teaching the children to Mind Map has enormous benefits. It may take one or two sessions to explain but it then becomes a skill that they have for life. Through Mind Mapping the children are able to organise their thinking about a topic, person, place, or concept in a visual way, which invariably leads them to make connections that they wouldn't have thought of otherwise. The hierarchical nature of the branches of the Mind Maps also allows them to rank their connections. MindMaps involve minimal writing and are icon-based, making them an ideal tool for

# Publication Preview

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