

# Thinking Schools - Thinking Children

Newsletter 3

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## From Outsider to Insider

The challenge of a new Deputy Headship was accompanied by the exciting opportunity to become a part of Norfolk's "Thinking Schools" project.

Two years ago I was part of a similar local initiative in the London Borough of Ealing. Schools in Ealing were trained on aspects of Accelerated Learning and our school was provided with INSET on aspects of brain gym, Howard Gardner's Eight Learning Styles and mind mapping. I found the whole experience innovative and refreshing. Therefore, the chance to pick up where I left off as a part of one of the eighty schools in Norfolk invited to participate was a real challenge.

On my arrival at Barnham Broom for my first conference in November 2001 I wasn't at all sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised! I don't think I had fully realised the enormity of this project compared to my own experiences until I went through those double doors. Never before had I been to an educational conference where everybody was so hungry and passionate for an initiative. I was amongst teachers, deputies, classroom assistants, SENCOs and headteachers all buzzing and demonstrating aspects of brain gym, mind mapping, sign posts, circle time, metacognition and the like.

The workshops were equally interesting and gave individual schools a chance to share their own experiences and take away ideas from others. At Nelson First School we decided to look at "Positive Language" and worked hard discussing and refining as a whole staff the techniques and tables that we would use to record this information. As we enter the final months of our own project and begin to gather and collate information for the final report, only then does the success and sustaining importance of this project begin to become clear.

In the current climate motivation and self-esteem are very important factors in the teaching profession. Norfolk's attempt to raise standards of achievement by broadening children's learning experiences through the "Thinking Schools" project has I believe, encouraged teachers to be more positive about their own achievements. I feel it is a valuable learning tool for everyone in education for the future.

**Selene Harris, Deputy Head Nelson First School**

Please email your ideas/articles about work in schools, children's comments, etc. to [joy.smiley.edu@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:joy.smiley.edu@norfolk.gov.uk)



# My Journey on the Hogwarth Express

**“All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier.”** J K Rowling. 1997

I can relate to Harry's feelings of uncertainty on the platform when I think of action research. It has certainly been a journey of several paths but rest assured there is light at the end of the tunnel!

As a whole school we started out by thinking about different learning styles, left and right brain dominance and INSET about Circle time. This has had an amazing impact on the whole curriculum and the children's learning. Their individual strengths have been highlighted to access their thinking and skills are being taught to try to address their weaknesses. This in itself had raised the children's achievements as their needs are becoming clearly focused upon. Planning has taken on a new approach with the sorting hat organising Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic activities. Teachers have also been given the vocabulary to support their professional decisions.

This was a great starting point for our action research but we did need a visit from our adviser to focus our minds. The aims of our school concentrate on the child and encourage children to develop as individuals who can think for themselves. Sessions such as Philosophy have been on the timetable for many years, giving the children a way into using their brains for reflective activity. To compliment this, Contextual Drama has been included, giving the children opportunities to be creative, to question, reason and evaluate their thinking. With all this going on plus the introduction of our thinking skills training, it was very difficult to know where we were going. The fact that we didn't have the answer to our questioning was bothering us, but, to make matters worse, we didn't have a question for our research! With some guidance from Roger Eagle (alias Dumbledore) we turned an important corner as we came up with our area of focus.

Since then the path of discovery has been illuminating. In the plenary sessions of both Literacy and Numeracy we aim to use our questioning techniques to encourage children to think about their learning. Assessment for

the teacher has also become far easier because there is time to listen to the children expressing their thinking. As a teacher I can hear my class cheer when we do Drama and Circle time because it gives them opportunities to share their ideas and to value their discussion and debate. I can see full participation as children feel confident to share their thoughts and, underpinning all this, their self-esteem has increased so they have the courage to spread their wings.

In the actual Drama



sessions, the children's enquiring minds have pondered on whether mother bear should always make the porridge. They have gathered together to establish a neighbourhood watch scheme for the bear community and discussed Stranger Danger with Goldilocks.

Drama has given them an experience to express their metacognition\* and made an impact on behaviour and curriculum development. In the daily life of the school the children are cooperating more and taking responsibility for their own behaviour. The curriculum has also improved as more links are being re-established between different subjects for example between Literacy and Drama and History and Drama.



# Lane Clark Seminar

The seminar and workshops which Lane and Ed ran had a huge effect on us as fairly newly qualified teachers. We have been actively involved in thinking skills as a school, an area which both of us strongly believe is essential for the social, academic and personal development of children and teaches.

The three day sessions were each extremely well organised and dynamically presented with plenty of reference to real life experiences. We respected and appreciated the fact that Lane had familiarised herself with Curriculum 2000 and could regularly 'flag up' significant links and opportunities to integrate her approach across the key stages.

Despite our enthusiasm we have been unable to introduce Lane's teaching approach across the school, as we had intended, due to the copyright restrictions which were regularly referred to during the training. We have to question the value of using something in our own classrooms if it cannot be used as a whole school approach.

With this in mind we have introduced elements from the experience that particularly lent themselves to our classrooms:

- Lane suggested that having one computer is not a problem if it is set up as part of a set of tables, allowing several children access to the computer at the same time by rotating seats after they have had their turn. This has been tried, tested and rubber stamped!
- Each child has free access to water because they have their own bottle on their table to

drink as they need it. Research has shown that a hydrated mind is more effective when learning.

- 'Muddy in muck' is an interesting concept, where the child is exposed to a multi sensory carousel of experiences to immerse them in a new topic. We have used this approach to guide our planning and to help children with different learning styles access knowledge otherwise difficult for them to internalise.
- Lane and Ed encouraged us to take on the approach of 'PMI' - plus, minus and interesting ideas. This has been tried in our classrooms, and proved successful, as had the concept of mind mapping. Some of the year one children have been taught the skills of mind mapping, and have used this skill during the literacy hour to improve their story writing.
- 'With privilege comes responsibility' is a phrase which we refer to in our classes. It is useful during discussion times and PSHE sessions, particularly if incidents require dealing with.

Lane's catchphrase - 'So you think you know? So what?' encapsulates her unique teaching method, and is something that we should all be asking ourselves when planning, teaching and evaluating. What are we wanting children to learn? Are we educating them for our past or their future?

Elizabeth Andrews, Sharon Reynolds  
Homefield School

There are still lots more action steps to take and evidence to gather. As time goes on it will be interesting to see how the children's comments develop. There are still times of concern but I remind myself not to go crazy.

**"The good thinker can take his time, he can tolerate uncertainty, he can stand not knowing. The poor thinker can't stand not knowing: it drives him crazy."**

John Holt. 1983

To all those embarking in action research about thinking skills, if you find yourself standing on the platform looking for a chance to jump on the Express, never fear, for out of the forbidden forest your Nimbus Two Thousand will appear and then we can share our ideas together as we try and catch that golden Snitch in children's minds.

Gemma Baker, Hempnall School Drama Queen  
(to the muggle world, English Coordinator)

\* I really enjoyed the last conference, can't you tell?



# Woodside First School

## Woodland Expedition

On the second day of school at the beginning of the Autumn term the entire school set off for a day in the woods. It was a beautifully sunny, dry day and there was great excitement in every coach. We were visiting Thetford Forest Park for a day of woodland activities aimed at giving every child a fun filled, multi-sensory, auditory, visual and kinesthetic experience that would be real food for thought.

Over many years of teaching at Woodside we had been working to raise standards in thinking, speaking and listening through a variety initiatives e.g. creating exciting role play areas, regular circle time and philosophy sessions, drama and, more recently, brain gym exercises. All these had contributed to steadily improving standards. However, all the staff felt that many children

were still under achieving as a result of the very narrow and limited range of their real life experiences. Talking about their holiday activities revealed that a large proportion of children's lives extended no further than the street, the local shops, the park and possibly the their nan's or their dad's houses. Our whole school trip to the woods made sure that every child had one exciting, interesting, stimulating day to expand their horizons. Furthermore, we were able to control the types of activities, the quality of the language used and the questions asked to ensure the experiences were relevant, appropriate and valuable.



Back at school everywhere was a hive of activity as our experiences led to enthusiastic work in every area of the curriculum. We created a woods in the dining hall, with the help of a few carpet roll tubes. We drew, collaged, painted, sculpted and printed. We made up stories, poems, dance and music. We talked, wrote, acted, counted, calculated and sang. We even roped in the families to enter a 'Family Woodland Book or Story Competition'. The finale was a Woodland Event, when every child in the school and nursery performed in a concert, competition entries were exhibited and games and stalls were set up throughout the school.



The idea for our whole school outing to the woods originated during a lunch time discussion amongst staff while attending the Trevor Hawes day on 'Optimal Learning' in January 2001. Much of his talk is still reverberating around school, influencing our everyday work in the classroom. Many ideas will take time to truly incorporate into our teaching and learning, but our visit to the woods was fun for everybody involved and got us all thinking together. I recommend it!

**Penny Steward**  
**Woodside First & Nursery School**