

# Something TO think about

Children can get lost in thought if it is unfamiliar territory. So make sure it's a road more frequently travelled, says **Will Ryan...**

**Teacher:** What are you doing? You're not paying attention.

**Pupil:** Please, sir, I am thinking.

**Teacher:** Well don't think in my lesson.

The above may make you smile, but it reflects the reality that some teachers open children's minds to the power of thinking and others do not. However, this is the time when we need, more than ever, to develop our learners as thinkers. Our pupils recognise that they will have significant problems to solve in the future. Theirs will be the generation that resolves what to do when oil runs out, how to solve global warming and how to live harmoniously in a rapidly changing society. The good news is that they will resolve these problems. All we have to do is teach them to be successful thinkers.

The best teachers make children think and create inspirational responses. They know that the mind is like elastic and, when stretched, it is capable of brilliance. Our challenge as educationalists is to create the thinkers of tomorrow.

## Add sparkle to lessons

Our best teachers create classrooms where thinking is the norm, and they do it in both small ways that add sparkle and intrigue to individual lessons, and also in huge ways that can make a significant difference. But for now let's look at the small ways.

Too much teaching is dominated by 'is' language, such as  $4 \times 3$  is 12. Instead of this, try using 'could be' language. So using the example above,  $4 \times 3$  could be a baker's dozen with one missing, half of 24, or the number of disciples. The answers are limitless, whilst still confirming the answer is 12.

Now let's move into some bigger thinking. Children are idealists who love fairness. Margaret

Mead once famously said, "Never doubt the capacity of a small group of people to change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." The following story shows how a group of small people changed the world. Primary pupils should be encouraged to think big and bring their thinking to a conclusion.

The children in Nick's Y5 class were not necessarily looking forward to their topic on the Ancient Egyptians. It had been taught as a historical topic in this year group ever since the advent of the National Curriculum in 1988 and therefore had become somewhat predictable. Just before the study was about to commence, the class got the news that the children's play area outside school was to be scrapped. This was not surprising. It had become a target for vandalism and an area where drug abuse prevailed. The school had been informed that the site of the playground was to be used for a new Municipal Locality Office and that new entrances needed to be made to the school site.

It was around 4:45pm and Nick turned off his laptop computer after working on his literacy plans which related to letter writing for a purpose. He looked out of the window and that is when the idea of using the playground hit him. He felt angered because that site was supposed to be for the benefit of children and thought it should remain so. Those reflective thoughts led to a sudden change of thinking. In a stroke, the Egyptians were ditched



## Think it over

### GET CHILDREN'S MENTAL GEARS WORKING OVERTIME...

Another idea for promoting thinking within the classroom is Ian Gilbert's *Little Book of Thunks* (Crown House, 2007). A thunk is the noise the brain makes when it has to work hard. The book poses such questions as: ■ Is there more happiness than sadness in the world?

■ If all the books are borrowed from the library, is it still a library? ■ If I go in the newsagents and read a comic from cover to cover and leave without buying it, have I stolen it? I have seen teachers use the book in many ways. You could try introducing the question during a circle time early in the week but then leave the question on a large piece of paper with chunky felt tip pens so the children could keep responding as their thinking gets deeper and deeper.

and a project involving a campaign to build a brand new play area was put into full swing.

The children wrote letters expressing concerns to the council, newspapers and local radio stations. They set up petitions. They consulted with parents and other children about what a new play area could look like. They asked the police about how a new play area could be made safe at night. They asked if they could speak with students at the secondary school about helping to look after the site. They created their own website and set about creating their own media campaign. The local council elections were imminent and they set out to make it a campaign issue for local residents.


### Crunch time

Then the children were informed that a group of councillors would meet with the children and consider implementing their plans. Nick drew the class together and told them they could either be poised for success or they could lose their battle and the play area would be lost forever. He said they had to prepare a watertight argument whereby they could answer any question they were given with well-reasoned thinking. It was at this point he introduced the idea of Edward de Bono's Thinking Hats. This is a process that helps people to take different approaches to thinking through wearing six mythical different coloured hats. By putting on a specific hat the wearer engages in a form of mental role-play. (There are many websites which will provide you with information about the hats and how they can be used)

Prior to the visit of the council members, the children also spent time collecting other people's views. This allowed the children to develop objectivity and empathy. Where people were concerned about the problems of the play area being misused it allowed children to offer counter views and when local citizens stressed the need for the new locality offices, it allowed them to suggest other possible sites.

Three members of the local council duly arrived along with two local government officers and members of the press. They listened carefully to the proposals but that was the last they saw of the delegation, until of course Nick and his class officially opened a new safe and secure play area six months later.

So now have a think for yourself. Maybe there is a part of your school or community that you and your pupils are dissatisfied with. Is there a similar project for you to unleash? I do hope so because neuroscientists tell us that the brain is not designed for building up banks of knowledge but for getting things done quickly and fluidly in situations that matter, and the need has never been greater.



Will Ryan is a highly acclaimed speaker on issues related to primary education. His new book *Inspirational Teachers Inspirational Learners* was published on March 11th (Crown House Publishing, 2011).