

DEVELOPING A THINKING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT! BY Karen Pembroke, Chelmer Valley High School

This short account tells the story of how I aimed to gain a fuller understanding of the potential of Thinking Skills. I did this as part of an action research investigation in which I introduced a thinking skills programme within Key Stage 3 curriculum of the secondary mixed comprehensive in which I work.

As part of my Masters in Education at Cambridge University I had investigated a series of Thinking Skill interventions within two subject areas English and History (*Karen can you say which ones?*) to gain a greater understanding of staff and pupils awareness of thinking skills. I also wanted to explore whether opportunities for higher order Thinking Skills could be developed in my school. As it was an Action Research based intervention I used teacher collaborators and a mixed method approach: surveys, questionnaires, interviews, work samples, reflection diaries and observations.

The main findings from my research were the need to develop a language of learning which develops a shared understanding throughout the school. This needed to include a consensus as to whether skills are thought of as being in a hierarchical order or not. While many scholars had written about Thinking Skills, the implementation, outcomes, taxonomies and frameworks (both theoretical and empirical) appeared to be inconsistent in the teaching context. I was particularly interested at discovering more about the implications for the aspects of the learning environment such as teachers' support, use of learning styles and opportunities for pupils to work with others was important. There had also been some evidence that pupils would appreciate a pupil-friendly approach which involved negotiating with them the ways in which thinking skills were embedded within their curriculum: i.e. an infusion approach in which subjects all teach the same skills within their lessons, but across the whole curriculum. In this context I was keen to learn if these skills are transferrable so that pupils could take the thinking skills they had acquired and could apply them in different subjects.

I continued after my research to believe that our school environment needs to be one of challenge, not knowledge retention and this has allowed an exploratory set of interventions to be evaluated and findings presented for introducing Thinking Skills into the school. Inset was delivered by myself to teachers about Thinking Skills and how they can be incorporated into different departments. This also included making a web based resource within our school where teachers can share good practice by saving lesson plans and resources for others to then tailor to their own classes needs. Schemes of work across many subjects now include Thinking Skill activities or whole lessons dedicated to a particular skill. Year 7 even had curriculum days whereby the new Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills were taught as stand alone lessons in the hope that these would compliment the department's infusion of Thinking Skills into lessons. Pupil friendly level descriptors have also been used and the idea of putting the skills into a hierarchy for now has been avoided.

My next steps in sharing my research is planned at the next Governors meeting so that they can learn gain an insight into the potential of an infused thinking skills approach. It is hoped this will help governors consider how we can incorporate the findings to benefit the whole school, because as yet not all departments are fully on board. This will be my future task to ensure that Thinking Skills has a place in every classroom and subject to provide pupils with skills which the 21st century demands.

Key Questions:

Are staff and pupil perceptions the same?

Is a shared language useful for both staff and pupils?

Do all pupils get to reach the higher order thinking skills within your own school?

Are these skills hierarchical?

Do the skills need to be hierarchical?

Are there opportunities for all to learn these skills?

Book references to help with looking into Thinking Skills:

Bloom, B S. and Krathwohl, D.R. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals, by a committee of college and university examiners*. Handbook 1: Cognitive domain, New York: Longmans.

Denscombe, M. (2007) *The good research guide – for small-scale social research projects*. London: Open University Press McGraw Hill Education.

Elliott, J. (1991) *Developing teachers and teaching - Action research for educational change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Fisher R. (2005) *Teaching children to think*. London: Nelson Thornes Ltd.

McGuinness, C. (1999). 'From Thinking Skills to Thinking Classrooms: a Review and Evaluation of Approaches for Developing Learners.' *Thinking* (DfEE Research Report 115). London: DfEE.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-researchers*. 2nd ed. Oxford .Blackwell Publishing

Useful websites:

Qualifications and curriculum Development agency -

<http://www.qcda.gov.uk/1841.aspx>

National Curriculum - <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-3-and-4/skills/plts/index.aspx>

Leading in Learning -

<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/97990>