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
be creative and selective with what they subsequently choose to share.

As the children think about the starters and write in their books, I take the register, and when that is completed we spend a few minutes sharing the outcomes of our starter. I never cease to be amazed by the originality and creativity that as a result of these thinking skills stimulants. They can offer so much – the children's thinking provides a fantastic impetus with which to introduce any lesson that follows on a related topic.

The subject matter for a thinking-skills starter could be absolutely anything so long as it is appropriate to the age group and the children are able to follow and apply the instructions independently. Connecting the starters to current topics, outings, special school events, festivals or current affairs all help to make them relevant to the children's personal lives. We encourage them to make connections across the curriculum and to their own lives.

As soon as the children realise that anything is potential material for a starter, it begins to dawn on them that they too could think of one. This is a very powerful realisation and it gives children possession of their own learning. One challenge in my class is that every child will bring in at least one idea by the end of the year.

It is also very common for children to pursue starters in their own time and sometimes for months on end. As starters target all learning styles, there is always the possibility that a child may become engrossed in one particular challenge. It is so satisfying when children decide to work on it in their time, usually discovering aspects of the challenge that I had never considered. It makes them feel very special and they discuss many challenges at home. Anything that encourages the children to share their learning at home is invaluable.

Getting Ideas
This is a question that I get asked a lot! We are in the process of compiling a bank of starters into a book, but until then we are very happy to share the material we've worked with so far, on a personal level, with anyone who may be interested in them. The starters can be divided broadly into ten categories:

- Mathematical
- Musical
- Visual
- Philosophical
- Magical
- Photographic
- Scientific
- Literacy-based
- Creative
- Problem-based
- Created by children

Each category has its own appeal – a mix of starters avoids repetition, encourages different learning styles and so keeps children and teachers motivated.

Starters can last a year
One of the most interesting challenges for both teacher and children is the 'Four Fours' challenge where the children are asked to use four fours to produce every number from 1 to 20. They are allowed to use any mathematical operation they wish. Some children have found this challenge so rewarding and addictive that, having completed up to 20, they set about trying to achieve more and more numbers. One group of four boys got together after school over a period of months and eventually presented me with an A1
poster where all the numbers up to 100 had been completed! They had great fun using 4! [4x3x2x1] and various exponentials, including to the power of zero. This has since been superseded by another group who have managed up to 150. I cannot think of many other occasions when children have been so motivated to work as a team in consultation with adults and in their own time. This starter alone has contributed so much to the way the whole class view mathematics and it has served as a model of persistence and love of learning.

A similar enthusiasm was generated with a word association challenge:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>top</th>
<th>hat</th>
<th>wear</th>
<th>clothes, etc</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

To my amazement, some children could not stop and they are still going after several months. It has done wonders for their vocabulary, spelling, dictionary skills, and again, through this, they have discovered a renewed enthusiasm for learning.

I have been amazed by the thinking of KS1 children when asked to describe what these patterns could represent:

[Diagram of patterns]

The children's answers are so special, so original, a real insight to how they view the world and their experiences in it.

The wonderful thing about the starters is that one never knows which child will suddenly be inspired and get hooked on one – it is wonderful to observe a sudden unexpected interest from a child. It doesn’t stop at the child either. I have had several parents expressing addictive signs! The varied nature of the starters means that within a very short space of time, all children have experienced a personal favourite. Starters have been particularly successful with SEN and EAL children. They represent a very efficient way of giving the children and teachers an enjoyable taster of Thinking Skills, easing the way for other Thinking Skills initiatives to be incorporated into the daily routine (Staricoff and Rees, 2003).

They are truly magical in so many ways. They provide a fantastic way for children to communicate with older or younger children. Year 3 and Year 5 children recently shared the outcomes of 'professions that work at night'. Each class had ideas that the other hadn’t and the sharing proved to be the initiation of many more sharing moments. Year 5 and Year 1 were recently challenged to 'invent original lyrics to Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'. Seeing the children performing these to each other was a real joy.

Starters are doing wonders for the children's self esteem and for their ability to become responsible individuals with a love of learning, which just happens to be our school's core purpose statement! I could not recommend them strongly enough and we would love to share any views, opinions or suggestions that may have been sparked by the experiences described here.

Marcelo Staricoff is thinking skills curriculum leader at Westbury Park Primary School, Bristol.

A view from the Headteacher

Children come to school each morning having experienced a whole range of differing activities and emotions between waking up and entering the classroom. Some of these teachers can control, the majority are beyond our influence. Yet all of these children are entering the same classroom to face the same planned series of lessons. The challenge for the teacher is to provide the means for all the children to benefit from the learning activities planned for the day. It is vital that children get off to a purposeful start so that they are ready to achieve the learning objectives that lay ahead of them.

Knowing that the first activity facing them will be a thinking skill starter provides the children with the security of routine. Yet within that routine the children still have that element of mystery and surprise – not actually knowing what the challenge within the thinking skills starter will be. The starter becomes a common starting point for the children while registers are taken and before they are engaged with the day's combination of curriculum areas. The children have responded so positively to the way their school day now begins – 'get my brain working', 'switch my brain on' and 'your brain feels like it's just woken up' are all comments from the children, which indicate that they are now prepared for the rest of the day's learning.

Whether or not the thinking skills starters have specific links with subjects the children will study later that day is not the important issue; the thinking skills starters contribute to the holistic approach the staff at Westbury Park School have adopted towards teaching and learning. There is a greater emphasis on the way children learn in addition to how they are taught and what they are taught. This approach has helped teachers see the National Curriculum and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies more as a framework for future learning and less as a cage. The thinking skills starters help the children to think in more flexible and creative ways.

Alan Rees

Editors questions

- Although the Morning Starters can be used to introduce other lessons, their strength seems to depend on stimulating children to follow their own thinking where it leads. How can this process be supported in schools?
- Is it possible that a challenge creating excitement and complex thinking in the Morning Starter environment described in the article could be boring and undemanding if presented in a different way or for a different purpose? What is it that makes the Morning Starter challenges work?
What children say about Morning Starters

- They are fun and make feel happy and ready for the rest of the day. Jack
- They are a really good influence on your thinking. Charlie
- They are really good fun and challenging and they make me as ready as I can be. Rory
- When I come in I try to relax with the music that’s on and get my brain working for the other lessons. Liam
- They make me feel welcome and confident to create a new piece of knowledge. If I created a MindMap of the starters, it would be huge! Rhodri
- They make me feel relaxed for the rest of the day and they switch my brain on. They never stop! James
- They make me feel wonderful – a magical start to the day. Calum
- They help me a lot with my learning. I love the way they are so challenging. Ella
- They are really challenging and they give me a lot of confidence for my work. They stretch your brain in all sorts of ways and they make you feel good about what you’ve done. Jasmine
- When I get my book out, I try to think things that are in my imagination. Simon
- They wind me up like a clockwork mouse so I buzz through the rest of the day. Nicole
- It’s a fun way to start the day and after your brain feels like it’s just woken up and it’s fun because it’s challenging. Natalie
- They are brilliant for focusing my concentration and they prepare me for the rest of the day ahead. They make me feel like my brain has switched on. Hugo
- The best bit is that you can go on and on with them. I really enjoy doing them. Hannah
- They are fun and they make me warm up for other lessons at school. Paige
- They make me feel revved up for the day. I want to skip time to get to the next one. We are allowed to bring our own ones in! Ollie
- They can never stop. They get right into my brain! Ben
- They make me feel calm if I’m cross. They make me feel good and happy. Katherine
- Monday morning makes me feel happy because it is a new week to learn more thinking skills. Charlotte
- They make me think about what I have to do, they are great fun. I like it when we share our ideas with everybody else. Alice
- They make me think, warm me up, they make me feel happy. Duncan
- They get my brain going and thinking. I can’t wait for tomorrow’s! Oliver
- They warm up my brain, like in games – after I’ve done them they make me feel I can achieve a lot more than I could before. Millie
- They wake me up and keep my brain active Kate.
- They make me feel ready to start to work hard and do my best. Fleur

What teachers say about Morning Starters

- It really develops their creativity. They can never wait for the next one. I find it fascinating that the outcomes are so personal, regardless of age and ability. Nicola Hadfield, Year 3 teacher
- The visual starters are perfect for young children – fun, creative and non-threatening. Eleni Charalambous and Vicky Duggan, Year 1 Teachers