RAIS-ing aspirations by teaching thinking?

James Nottingham reports on a successful project that is raising the aspirations of young people in Berwick-upon-Tweed by developing thinking skills in local schools

When 60 teachers were asked whether they thought that developing their pupils' thinking skills raised the aspirations of those pupils, 87 per cent said yes, 10 per cent said possibly and the remaining three per cent said no. When asked for a reason to support their argument, some of the replies were:

'I was initially unsure about how effective thinking skills strategies would prove to be in class but have been amazed at how it encourages children to think about what they have learned, and at what a positive effect it has had on the enthusiasm for other work.'

(First school class teacher)

'My daughter has enjoyed doing philosophy in school so much that she is already starting to talk about going to university; there hadn't been a mention of this before.'

(High school teacher and mother of an eight-year-old)

'By teaching thinking my aspirations have increased – I now expect more from my lessons and from the children in my class.'

(Middle school teacher)

Now, perhaps this sample of teachers was not truly representative of the teaching profession in England. For a start they all teach in schools in Berwick-upon-Tweed, not a reason in itself to suppose that these teachers were unrepresentative. But in Berwick over the last nine months a special project has been running that aims to help teachers, parents and the local business community to raise

the aspirations of the young people in the area through, among other things, teaching thinking skills in all 22 schools. That probably affected the responses slightly. One other possible factor was that all the teachers interviewed were on a course run by this special project – The Berwick RAIS Project – entitled *Developing Thinking Skills in the Classroom* (a course that takes each teacher 15 hours of their after-school time to complete). If this leaves you questioning the validity of the study then you are not alone, but it *has* served its purpose: the two teachers who said, *"No, teaching thinking skills does not raise aspirations"*, have been dropped from the course!

The Berwick RAIS Project (the R.A.I.S. standing for Raising Aspirations In Schools) began four years ago when it was identified that many of the children and young adults in Berwick suffered from low educational aspirations and self-esteem. By September 2000 a successful bid had been made to One North East for £250,000 worth of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB5) money and two Teaching and Learning Consultants, Michael Henry and James Nottingham, were in post.

After a brief setting-up period that included visits to all 22 schools to beg or borrow (no stealing was involved) furniture and office equipment, the RAIS Project office opened in a forgotten corner of the centrally located Community Centre. From there, plans were made for world domination, or at least the best way to raise the aspirations of the young people in the Berwick area, in the belief that higher aspirations form a key building block in both the drive to improve educational standards and in young people choosing a healthy lifestyle.

The Berwick RAIS Project – A short history

Berwick-upon-Tweed is the most northern town in England. Between the 12th and the 15th century, the town changed hands between the Scottish and the English 13 times before finally settling in England's hands in 1482. Today, Berwick is a popular destination for tourists who come, among other things, to enjoy the magnificent sea views and to walk along the impressive Elizabethan Walls that surround the old town.

Yet despite the stunning surroundings, it is felt that many of the young people in Berwick suffer from low aspirations – as identified by the Berwick Partnership of Schools at their annual conference four years ago. Using a data-tracking system to highlight areas of underachievement it was concluded that one of the key areas of weakness was low educational aspiration, evident through a number of factors, not least of which was the low number of students continuing education beyond the age of 16.

Since Berwick Schools are part of Northumberland County Council's Education Directorate they are split into a three-tier system: First (3- to 9-year-olds), Middle (9- to 13-year-olds) and High (13- to 18-year-olds). Thus, the Berwick Partnership of Schools consists of 16 First Schools, 4 Middle Schools, 1 High School and 1 Special School (for pupils with multiple learning difficulties). They are spread over a 250 square mile area covering the northernmost parts of the county.

The Headteachers of these 22 schools felt that they needed to address the issue of low educational aspiration and so set up a Project Steering Group chaired by Elizabeth Brown, Headteacher of the Grove Special School in Berwick, and Bill Humphrey, a Senior Adviser with Northumberland County Council's Education Directorate. This Steering Group had the task of putting together a bid to raise enough money to fund a special project to Raise Aspirations In Schools (RAIS). Eventually, in July 2000, just less than £250, 000 was secured from the Government's Single Regeneration Budget (SRB5) via One North East – with an expectation that an equal amount of money, in kind, would be given by the Berwick Schools' Partnership.

By September 2000 two Teaching and Learning Consultants were appointed – Michael Henry and James Nottingham. Before then Mike had been the Headteacher of Belford Middle School where a trial project to develop young people's self-esteem had been based. James was working as a thinking skills consultant introducing teachers across the UK to many of the *Thinking for Learning* initiatives such as *Thinking Through Humanities*, and *Philosophy for Children*.

The Key Outcomes of the RAIS Project, which is funded initially for three years, are intended to be:

1. Raised Aspirations of Young People in the Berwick Area
   As evidenced by an increased further education and training stay-on rate at 16
2. Raised Standards in Educational Achievement
   As evidenced in National Standard Attainment Tasks (SATs) and GCSE results
3. Healthier Lifestyles
   As evidenced by a reduction in the use of emergency contraception, improved mental health and child health statistics
4. A Decrease in Reported Drug Usage
   As evidenced by fewer cautions amongst children of school age

Though the Berwick RAIS Project has been in operation for just a year now it is already developing into a successful initiative: more than half of the 200 teachers in the area have attended extended training courses, more often than not in their own time, to develop thinking skills in schools; almost all of the teaching assistants and nursery nurses have attended similar courses; 500 children and young people have had direct contact with the Project; and many parents are beginning to attend recently-developed workshops to learn new ways of boosting their youngsters' confidence and self-esteem. As a result, terms such as *Thinking Skills, Enquiry,* and *Debriefing* are fast becoming a part of everyday teaching in the Berwick schools.

Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner (Harvard University) conducted research which suggested that we are all intelligent in different ways. These intelligences might be labelled as: Interpersonal (relationships with others); Intrapersonal (understanding oneself); Linguistic (use of language); Mathematical/Logical (ability to solve logic/maths problems); Visual/Spatial (visual memory and spatial awareness); Kinaesthetic (dexterity); Musical (response to music); and Naturalist (understanding nature), together with a ninth 'intelligence' that has been suggested recently: Spiritual Intelligence.

The significance of this theory to education is that if students have not developed their mathematical/logical, and their linguistic, intelligences then traditional schooling in this country may well be failing them, since it is these intelligences that are tested regularly. Very few school exams test, say, one's interpersonal intelligence! Yet, it is the interpersonal intelligence that many feel is one of the keys to a happy life.

The thinking skills that are being developed in Berwick come from a mix of the national and local initiatives in which the two consultants have experience. Much of the work originates from ideas developed by a group of teachers known as the Northumberland Thinking Skills Network, led strongly by a Senior Adviser in the County, Mel Rockett. Together with support from Newcastle University, this group has been developing thinking skills in the humanities (history, geography, and RE) since 1995. Additionally, some of the ideas from the *Accelerated Learning* series, principally written by Alistair Smith, are being used. Perhaps, though, the biggest influence on the RAIS Project comes from the *Philosophy for Children* programme, initially developed by Professor Matthew Lipman in the USA in the 1970s and developed further in the UK by a small educational charity known as SAPERE (*Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education*) chaired by Roger Sutcliffe.

Much has been written about *Philosophy for Children* (P4C) in this magazine but, very briefly, it is a method of teaching that involves children in whole-class discussion on philosophical issues, based on the idea that children construct knowledge and reasoning capabilities within a *Community of Enquiry*. Children set the agenda for the discussions by asking questions that appeal to them, ensuring that what is discussed is appropriate to their needs and abilities and that student questions are valued. Recent Ofsted reports on two schools using P4C as a whole-school approach noted the impact on children's moral and social development and on their speaking and listening skills, as well as their capacity to become independent thinkers.

The Berwick RAIS Project has made philosophy a key focus in the belief that not only does it develop students' critical and creative thinking but that, arguably more than many of the other thinking skills initiatives, it develops caring thinking and deals with the affective side of learning. This affective development often results in, for example, a decrease in bullying and an improvement in pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relationships, as well as noticeable gains in personal self-esteem.

On a day-to-day basis the two teaching and learning consultants split their time between working in schools alongside teachers; running evening training sessions for school staff; providing parent workshops and parent's evenings; offering an education perspective to local business and community committees; developing new initiatives and community courses; strengthening the links between the county council's education directorate and local schools; working with the local borough council to provide new opportunities for the young people of Berwick; and exploring possibilities for further fund-raising so that the RAIS Project might be extended beyond the initial three years.

Some of the higher-profile initiatives that the RAIS Project has started include: developing the use of *Philosophy for Children* with three- and four-year-olds in a local nursery;

training a record number of teachers and teaching assistants in the use of philosophy in the classroom; strengthening the links between the four middle schools and the one high school in the area so that the transition for pupils is more effective and less nerve-racking for all concerned; and developing three new initiatives known respectively as *RAIS Learning Days, RAIS Confident Kids*, and *Developing Thinking Skills in the Classroom Level 1*.

RAIS Learning Days

Many of the younger children in the Berwick Partnership Schools had their first contact with the Berwick RAIS Project in the form of a RAIS Learning Day. Though an important outcome was an exciting, stimulating and hard-working day for the children, the key focus of these days was, and continues to be, to introduce the class teacher to many of the thinking skills ideas in their own classroom so that they can be sure that the RAIS initiative isn't just a good theory but that it actually works in practice.

Each *RAIS Learning Day* involves both consultants working with a class developing maps from memory, *Philosophy for Children*, spelling techniques using the three forms of learning – visual, audio and kinaesthetic – and memory games, together with work based upon Howard Gardner's idea of Multiple Intelligences. At the end of the day the children and their teacher each receive a Thinking Certificate, which they very often display proudly at the parents' evening that follows each RAIS Day. The parents' evenings are seen as an important way of involving and informing parents by giving advice on ways to build upon the children's new skills.

RAIS Confident Kids

Substantial research across the world suggests that, in comparison to the influence of parents and carers, schools have very little impact upon a child's self-esteem. Recognising this, the RAIS Project has begun to deliver parent workshops at each school aimed at helping parents/carers to better understand the impact upon their child of

Learning through visual, auditory and kinaesthetic methods

Some of us learn best visually – that is by seeing something written down, seeing a picture, or visualising in our mind whatever it is that we are trying to learn (Visual learners). Others learn best by hearing the information (Auditory learners); yet others learn best by doing something – whether that's trying the new skill, writing down the new fact, or doodling as they learn (Kinaesthetic learners). Most of us use any of the three methods at different times depending on the context, but generally speaking we all have a preferred way of learning. The significance of this for education is that, though the split of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learners across the population as a whole is fairly even, traditional schooling tends to teach auditory learners more effectively (it's easier for the teacher to talk through the new learning than it is to get all 30 children to 'do' the learning through drama, dance, physical manipulation of objects, or other dextrous activities). Bearing this in mind, then, it comes as no surprise that the large majority of children on special needs registers learn best kinaesthetically (which is why many of the so-called SEN children can't wait for the next PE, art or drama lesson).

The challenge for everyone in education is to redress the balance and attempt to create lessons that cater for all three learning styles as equally as possible.

During a RAIS Learning Day with first school children, this theory is applied to learning a new spelling: by first listening to the pronunciation of the word and spelling it out a number of times to get the 'sound' of the word (Auditory learners); then writing down the word and splitting it into smaller chunks, highlighting the most difficult part(s) in a bright colour (Visual learners); then 'writing' the word in the air, chunk by chunk, using the child's arm stretched out in front of him/her self (Kinaesthetic learners). Finally, using all three methods: with closed eyes and using an imaginary wand, 'burning' the word onto an imaginary board about 12 inches above and to the left of the eyes whilst calling out each letter.

Maps from memory

One of the many thinking skills techniques, developed by the Northumberland Thinking Skills group in conjunction with the Education Department at Newcastle University, is 'Maps From Memory'. This involves a class of children being split into groups of four and asking each group to reproduce the map that the teacher has in his/her possession. The challenge, however, is that each child in the group may only look at the map for 20 seconds! Once everyone has had one look each, the groups are prompted to develop a strategy, if they haven't already done so, such as splitting the areas of responsibility up (each child looking at just one quarter of the map, or one colour) before being given a second bite of the cherry. (I used this phrase in a class of eight-year-olds recently: " You'll all be given a second bite of the cherry" prompting the reply from a despondent girl: "But I don't like cherries!") This strategy, along with so many of the other strategies developed in Northumberland, invariably invokes an enthusiastic response, enhances motivation, and develops group work and learning strategies.

self-talk, and the raising of confidence, self-esteem and expectations. In all cases the reaction from workshop attendees has been very positive, though the common problem of attracting the parents of children with particularly low self-esteem has yet to be overcome, despite some progress being made.

Developing thinking skills in the classroom – Level 1

The Berwick RAIS Project piloted this 15-hour course in the first six months of the project with more than 30 teaching staff attending in their after-school time. The course introduced teachers and teaching assistants to a wide range

of practical strategies for teaching thinking skills in the classroom, with an expectation that some of these strategies were trialled in school. Each participant completed at least three trials, one of which was evaluated by a RAIS Consultant, after which he or she was presented with a Level 1 certificate (the Level 2 and 3 certificates being offered in conjunction with Newcastle University and Northumberland LEA). The course was so successful that it is to be replicated within and beyond Northumberland and will be run again in Berwick in the new academic year.

Evaluating the RAIS project

In September 2000 a cross-section of the students in the Berwick Partnership Schools completed a Self-Esteem Survey right at the start of the RAIS Project. The actual questionnaire was purchased from Keele University, which, although expensive, provided a very useful breakdown of the findings, as well as compared each school with national averages. The intention is that this process will be repeated in July 2003 at the end of phase one of the Project in the hope that more rigorous analysis may be achieved.

For now though, the Berwick RAIS Project can rely only on the thoughts of the people with whom the project is involved. However, when the local students, teachers, parents and business people are saying that the RAIS Project is having a positive impact upon the raising of aspirations then why wait for concrete evidence to say it's working?! In fact, in light of the 'success' of the project in Berwick, funding has been awarded to another cluster of schools in Northumberland to develop their own RAIS Project in the hope that they too can *Raise Aspirations In Schools* through the development of thinking skills.

James Nottingham is a Teaching and Learning Consultant with the Berwick RAIS Project. In his spare time he runs *Philosophy for Children* courses. Visit *www.thinkingcap.org.uk* for further details.