



## National Teacher Research Panel

engaging teacher expertise

This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2004, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp)

# How TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) helped to ensure rapid school improvement

## Aims of the Project

- To raise expectations and the levels of achievement of all pupils;
- To lift the self-esteem and motivation of both staff and pupils;
- To actively involve parents and governors in school development;
- To give ownership and to develop pupils' pride in their primary school; and
- To create a positive learning environment and a school culture which celebrates excellence throughout the whole school.

## Context

This action research project was undertaken in partnership with NACE (National Association for Able, Gifted and Talented Children). We began the action research project three years ago at Claremont primary school and it is still ongoing. The project involved all nine staff and six teaching assistants. A variety of strategies were used to improve many aspects of school life including the learning ethos, the teaching styles used, parental participation and TASC. I am constantly looking for new ways of improving the learning that takes place in the school and we are constantly refining the way that we use TASC to ensure that it continues to be effective, efficient and motivating to both pupils and staff.

## Summary of the main findings

- A positive learning environment was created through team planning and co-operation, evidenced by increased pupil motivation, reduction of inappropriate behaviour, and greater practical involvement of parents and governors.
- Co-ordinated lesson planning occurred throughout the school, with more informed diagnostic awareness and discussion of pupils' strengths, and greater flexibility in approaches to lesson planning.
- Pupils' work improved and was demonstrated in exhibitions and productions, with all pupils' achievements, from the 'least able' to the 'most able', celebrated.
- The school policy showed 'inclusion' with improved 'differentiation' across the full range of multiple abilities.

## Background

Claremont school has 210 pupils aged 4-11 years on roll. There are eight mixed-age classes: a class of reception and Year 1 pupils, two classes of Year 1/Year 2 pupils, two classes of Year 3/Year 4 pupils and three classes of Year 5/Year 6 pupils. The school catchment draws mainly from a low socio-economic area in a large housing estate in a small town. Approximately 10% of pupils are entitled to free school meals and 20% of pupils are on the Special Needs register. Prior to my appointment as Head, Ofsted had stated (1998) that the school had 'serious weaknesses' and had criticised the management team. The self-esteem and morale of both staff and pupils was low. There were incidents of inappropriate pupil behaviour, and little involvement by parents or governors in the day to day events of the school. The school building was in need of renovation and repair, little, if any, improvement having been done for many years. Classroom colours were drab, school furniture old and dilapidated, the whole school cluttered and untidy with years of debris which needed to be carried away in rubbish skips.

As the new headteacher, I set myself the long-term task of empowering staff, pupils and parents. Renovating the building provided an important initial and very practical opportunity for involving staff, pupils and parents in a great team effort to create a pleasant and exciting learning environment.

Funds were raised to renovate the school. Using colour charts, pupils conducted a survey to find out favourite colours for classrooms, they poured over catalogues to select favourite fabrics (within an agreed price range) for curtains and blinds. The children's decisions were accepted as final, and we now have a school covered in bright primary colours - the entrance hall being a startling lilac and blue! It is not an exaggeration to say that the children's attitude to school changed overnight. The renovated areas were free from graffiti, the pupils started to keep their classrooms clean and tidy, and the staff enjoyed a comfortable staffroom for the first time. Parents began to call into school informally to offer help when we needed it.

## Teaching processes and strategies

Having created a comfortable and exciting learning environment, we began some sustained action research to reflect on and to improve our whole school lesson planning, classroom delivery and pupil activities. We felt passionate about creating a learning environment which celebrated all children's achievements, allowed children to use a variety of learning styles, and to view their 'mistakes' as key learning points. We also wanted to introduce problem-solving and thinking skills to empower learners to think for themselves. We were introduced to the 'Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC) Framework, designed by Belle Wallace, during a training session. TASC provides a universal and flexible framework for the teaching of problem-solving and thinking skills across the curriculum (see Appendix). We decided to introduce TASC to the children through our half-termly history topics: 'The Greeks' with Years 5 and 6, 'World War 2' with Years 3 and 4, and 'Toys' with Key Stage 1.

The key teaching and learning strategies we were trying to introduce using the TASC Framework were:

### **Gather and Organise**

We planned broad history topics, but left the fine planning until we had gathered from the children what they already knew about the topic. Then they could extend their knowledge through their project enquiry and avoid repetition of what they already knew. We started from the premise that this was the key to differentiation. We would teach the children how to do a collective 'memory search' and how to organise what they already knew into mind maps. The next important stage was to encourage the children to propose questions they would like to explore, with staff extending pupils' thinking by making suggestions that they might find exciting to research. We wanted to present the 'big picture' of possibilities, yet make selections of topics that would be feasible and practical to explore in the time frame of half a term.

### **Identify the task**

We discussed and guided the children in their selection of which aspect of the topic they wanted to explore, but believed it to be important that the children had ownership of what they wanted to do. Whole afternoons were used and the topic was spread over six weeks, thus giving time for pupils to work in depth and breadth.

### **Generate**

Once we had chosen the topics, we generated ideas about how we could find out the information we needed and how we would present our findings. We allowed the children to present their topic in any way they wanted - aware that we were encouraging them to express their thinking across the range of multiple abilities.

### **Decide and Implement**

The pupils decided who they would work with and how they would share the tasks between the group. They planned their research and their presentation and started work.

### **Evaluate and Communicate**

The pupils presented their work to each other and there was intensive small group and class discussion on the success of each project, and how the project could be improved. The children organised the presentation of their projects for the whole school, parents and governors.

### **Learn from experience**

This is a vital phase of the TASC Framework as it is the stage for reflection, consolidation and forward planning for pupils, teachers and parents.

## Findings

We had examples of pupils' work showing high levels of achievement, evidence of increased motivation, and perseverance with a task. At the end of the projects, the pupils had acquired and were demonstrating skills of independent enquiry learning with confidence and ease. Their intrinsic motivation to learn had improved substantially and parents enquired about how we had 'turned the children on to learning'. Pupils were working in their own time during the school day at break and lunchtime; parents reported that the pupils were working on their projects at home. The children revelled in the ownership of their projects and were proud of what they had accomplished. The final exhibition of their work was a whole school celebration.

### Comments made by the children in their reflection on the experience:

*'I love going to school now - I like working on a group project - I enjoyed choosing what I wanted to work on'.*

*'I like having some time to really work at something - the school exhibition was fabulous'.*

*'I never knew that history could be so much fun'.*

### Comments made by teachers in their reflection on the experience:

*'The children researched and worked with such enthusiasm!'*

*'We became aware that some children needed more structure and guidance at first because they were not used to working in such an open-ended way. We needed to assess the degree of structure that was necessary and then to withdraw our support as the children gained confidence'.*

*'The children's behaviour improved all round'.*

*'The TASC Wheel gives the children a structure for the stages of their thinking. We can use it flexibly - sometimes using the whole Wheel, sometimes referring to a particular section when there is a need'.*

*'The higher ability children flew, but the lower ability children needed more support although with guidance they could also make decisions for themselves'.*

*'Gathering and Organising what children already know is a powerful way to assess prior learning. And then detailed planning is more relevant'.*

*'We need now to look at long-term plans and see how we can incorporate the TASC framework and thinking strategies across the curriculum'.*

*'We need to look for cross-curricular links and integrate learning objectives. For example, we can use History to develop Literacy, Numeracy, ICT, Art and Music, Movement and Science. History is also a perfect subject to develop Personal and Social Education'.*

### Comments made by parents and governors in their reflection on the experience:

*'This is a fantastic display! I never thought the children could do this sort of work'.*

*'The children are really excited and motivated, and didn't want to stop!'*

*'They are really interested in history for the first time'.*

*'The children could explain the thinking strategies they were using'.*

*'The pupils really remembered what they had learned'.*

*'They have wonderful ideas - much better than we could do!'*

*'For the first time, David has looked forward to going to school'.*

## Research methods

The research method followed the TASC Framework which incorporated the classic spiral action research model: Identify the problem(s), trial a possible solution(s), monitor results, evaluate and assess, reflect and learn from experience, consolidate success, re-assess the problem(s), and extend possible solution(s). The development process depended on detailed observation of pupils with frequent twilight meetings to share observations and to discuss issues that arose from classroom practice. The evidence collected was a mixture of qualitative reflective assessment and quantitative evidence derived from pupils' work.

## Conclusion

The initial success of the TASC projects has inspired us to extend the TASC Framework across the curriculum. This does not mean that we have abandoned other styles of teaching and learning such as practice, memorising, teaching from the front, demonstration, individual activities; but we, and the children, are more aware of our teaching and learning activities. We are more confident in deciding how much intervention we need to provide to support and structure pupils' learning and how much independence we can allow pupils in pursuing their own enquiry.

We have also realised that we have a great deal of flexibility within the national curriculum to 'mix and match' learning objectives and timetable arrangements. If we concentrate on cutting out unnecessary repetition, and audit what the children already know, then we 'save' valuable time and this is particularly important with regard to more able children.

The whole school and classroom ethos was important to establishing a creative learning environment. We needed to create a sound framework for discipline and expected behaviour, and then we could allow pupils increasing autonomy as they gained confidence and maturity. However, in allowing pupils to take greater ownership of their learning, we saw an improvement in classroom and whole school ethos almost overnight.

We decided that we needed to know more about the children's range of abilities and learning styles. So we organised a 'circus' of activities which took place over a week. All children participated in a series of activities across the full range of multiple abilities. This provided us with an initial snapshot of pupils' strengths and weaknesses. This initial assessment will be refined and extended throughout the year. The week of activities also made us more aware of the wide range of activities we can introduce across the curriculum.

The action research is ongoing and takes time and effort, but the results, as far as developing a school that empowers both staff and pupils, and celebrates excellence across the full range of multiple abilities, are both satisfying and rewarding.

## Further reading

The following books provide practical ideas for working with the TASC Framework to teach problem-solving and thinking skills. All ideas have been created and trialled in classrooms by teachers:

Belle Wallace (2001) *Teaching Thinking Skills Across the Primary Curriculum: A practical approach for all abilities*. David Fulton Publishers. A NACE/Fulton Publication.

Belle Wallace (2002) *Teaching Thinking Skills Across the Middle Years: A practical approach for children aged 9-14*. David Fulton Publishers. A NACE/Fulton Publication.

Belle Wallace (2002) *Teaching Thinking Skills Across the Early Years: a practical approach for children aged 4-7*. David Fulton Publishers. A NACE/Fulton Publication.

Belle Wallace (2003) *Using History to Develop Thinking Skills at Key Stage 2*. David Fulton Publishers. A NACE/Fulton Publication.

Belle Wallace and June Maker (In press) *Thinking Skills and Problem Solving- an Inclusive Approach Across the Full Range of Human Abilities*. David Fulton Publishers. A NACE/Fulton Publication.

## Author and contact details

Simon Chandler is Headteacher at Claremont Primary School and is concerned to develop a school curriculum which is inclusive but differentiated. He believes that the school ethos is reflected in the whole school environment.

Belle Wallace is a national and international researcher and consultant on the development of problem-solving and Thinking Skills across the curriculum. She is President of NACE (National Association for Able, Gifted and Talented Children), and Editor of the tri-annual journal *Gifted Education International*. Her major work worldwide has been to develop educational programmes for disadvantaged children.

Claremont is a pseudonym: full name and address of school supplied in confidence to possible co-researchers.

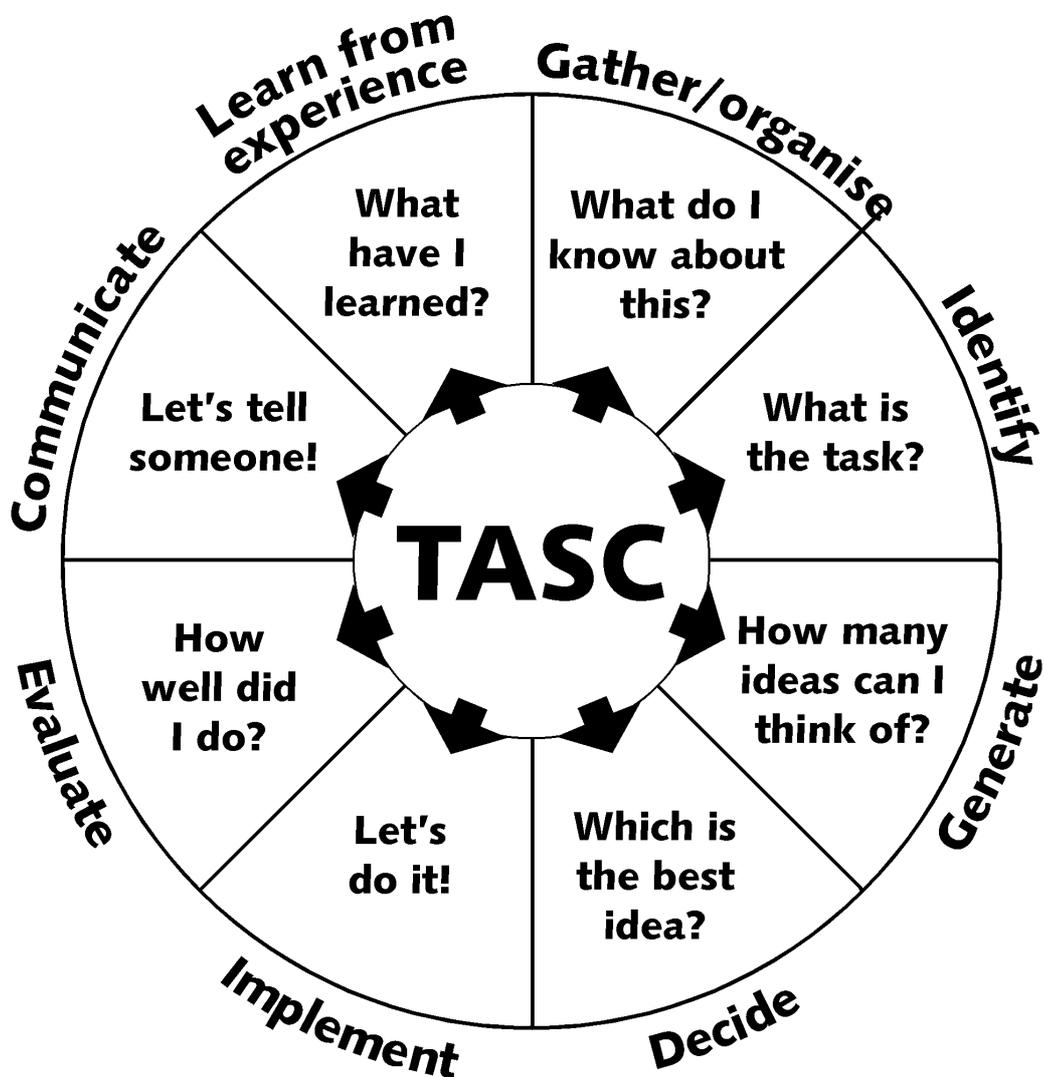
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This paper is presented in partnership with NACE (National Association for Able Children in Education)

# TASC: Thinking Actively in a Social Context

## The TASC Problem-solving Wheel



Belle Wallace 2000