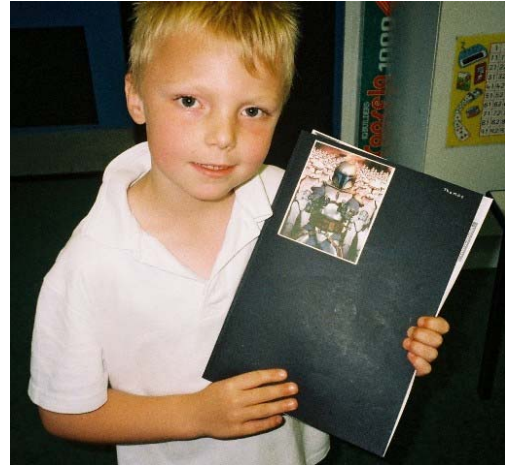


Thomas's story: "Let's do maths for two hours!"

Thomas's reputation preceded him when I arrived at his school as a specialist teacher for the *Every Child Counts* programme. Teaching and support staff would stop me and ask, with a degree of relish, whether I had taught him yet. He was known, not for being disruptive or otherwise badly-behaved, but for his extreme dreaminess and inability to focus on or engage with whatever the adults thought he should. The first time I observed him in a maths lesson, a practical lesson on weighing with a carousel of activities, he spent most of the time unobtrusively absorbed with an action figure around the edges of the classroom.



Thomas was recognised by the school as underachieving in both numeracy and literacy. In January 2008, before the start of the intervention programme, he was assessed as working at national curriculum level 1B in numeracy – not on track to achieve nationally expected levels in the summer.

From the start, Thomas responded well to one-to-one intervention. He was charmingly eccentric with a wicked sense of humour. I formed a close relationship with him and felt privileged to be privy to the world of his imagination, often such a vivid and exciting world it did not seem surprising that he chose to live in it so much of the time! Thomas proved to be an active learner who needed to share control over what he learnt and how he learnt it. He would insist I took equal terms in any game or activity I set up, and could be quite bossy in making sure I closed my eyes and didn't peep while he rearranged cards or hid items in a box. His progress in maths was astonishing, although whether my intervention unlocked a key or gave him the confidence to share and develop what he had been working out in his head anyway I'm not sure.



He took an obvious delight in impressing me with his developing ability to answer "hard" questions and became very scornful of anything he considered too easy. He showed an impressive capacity for abstract and logical thought, soon working at above average levels (national curriculum level 3) in place value, for example. He clearly derived great satisfaction from the patterns and structures inherent in number. The photograph shows his love of order – he is proudly presenting a set of carefully arranged vehicles, having been asked to group them in such a way as to allow quick and efficient counting.

Where Thomas struggled was with the language of maths, particularly in ‘word’ problems. But by encouraging him to articulate his thinking (and he, of course, would make me articulate mine in the interests of fairness!) I was able to help him improve his ability to tackle such problems and to explain exactly where his difficulty lay. For example, in a practical problem involving bears and picnic baskets, he responded to the question “How many more baskets do you need to give the bears one each?” by explaining that he didn’t know the meaning of “each”.

Thomas loved his maths sessions and commented with increasing confidence on his ability to do the work. He suggested before one session that we do maths for two hours! At the end of our 12 weeks of teaching sessions he was reassessed at national curriculum level 2A, ahead of many children his age. I felt our learning had been reciprocal and that between us we had unearthed a genuine and impressive mathematician.

