The recent International Conference on Thinking in Belfast was a great success, with some of the very big names in education…Bob Schwartz, Art Costa, David Perkins, Edward De Bono, all making strong appearances.

Three issues seemed to prevail though; the first was the overwhelming emphasis on dispositions towards learning being the key determinants in whether children are successful learners or not. There might be programmes which are successful in getting children thinking at higher levels, but their sustainability – and their reach to less academically able children – will depend on how developed children’s learning dispositions or habits of mind are. It was also recognized that children’s dispositions are the most resistant to direct teaching. How hard it is to teach curiosity, concentration and precision if they are not endowed in children at home!

This does not mean that dispositions cannot be taught explicitly and instrumentally, but that existing conventional structures and forms of teaching and learning do not provide the right context for addressing deep-seated and unconstructive psychological routines and self-perceptions.

The conference found no magic bullet to sort these out, but a combination of strategies and values could help: these consisted of student participation in setting their own learning goals and study programmes, an orientation of the teacher towards accepting that some missing skills or habits of mind are the cause of learning problems rather than any permanent disabilities and an explicit emphasis on the thinking skills and routines children need to deploy to be successful. In every course of study children have to be urged to think about their thinking processes. Metacognition!

Visible Thinking was the programme most in evidence at the conference on the best way to deliver this metacognition. We have an article by one of its founding figures, Lotta Norell in Sweden. What is attractive about this programme is that it is easily integrated into the curriculum and at the same time gets children thinking about their thinking in a systematic way. Ron Ritchard, a senior researcher on Harvard University’s Project Zero said that research into schools undertaking the Visible Thinking programme had shown a general improvement in grade scores and an un-predicted improvement in writing. We will be publishing much more about Visible Thinking in the future.

One of the most exciting talks at the conference, attended by only three eminent professors, a student and a publisher, was a research study by Kate O’Hanlon on the implementation of Reuven Feuerstein’s Instrumental Enrichment. We carry an article on the research in this issue. The low attendance at her seminar shows how much the work of Feuerstein has lost recognition whilst those who have adopted his insights has grown. It was one of the few studies which addressed that most worrying group… the school failures. It followed over a long period of time children entering secondary school in the troubled border counties of Northern Ireland who were more than two years behind on their reading ages, and would normally have been considered non-exam children. They were given a programme of Instrumental Enrichment and went on to receive excellent GCSE results. Their out-performance of the control group was nothing less than stunning.

What is interesting about this study is that Northern Ireland as a whole dropped the non-curriculum based programme of Instrumental Enrichment, as did England, in favour of an ‘infusion’ approach. What was wrong about this decision was not the support for Infusion but the fact that an effective non-curricula skills programme was ruled out of court.

A similar type of exclusionary educational extremism has been in evidence over grammar and the study of language. It has been ruled out of court by the creative writing and literature people running NATE. As Mary Mason pointed out in the last issue in a way which resonates so much with Kate O’Hanlon’s study and the stress on Metacongition at the conference, it is the children who do not come from well-educated middle-class and academically influenced familial cultures who need explicit teaching on thinking, and how to consciously use the academic language they are forced to swim in at school, the most.