

Finding the genius in every child

Liz Lightfoot follows a new approach to teaching and learning

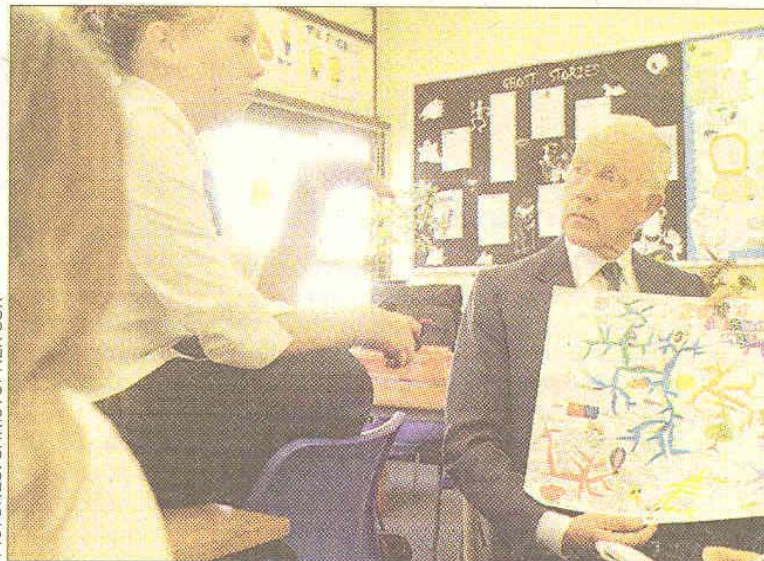
Tony Buzan, the psychologist and prolific author of books on memory and the human brain, crouches at the feet of Laura, 12, who had commandeered the teacher's chair.

Zoe, another pupil, gets up in disgust at the noisy boys messing about at her table and flounces across the room to join Sheridan, who is already on his third assignment.

Mr Buzan, who built his reputation on helping adults to improve their memory and thought processes, has recently turned his attention to the failings in our schools. I joined him on one of his regular visits to a struggling secondary modern.

He believes many teachers and parents make children feel dull and stupid by concentrating on what they do or don't know, instead of on their enormous capacity for self-improvement. He criticises rote learning for treating memory as if it were a "grey, linear skill" when in fact it is "multi-dimensional and colourful" and works best when people use the creative side of their brain as well as the rational.

Geniuses, he says, are made, not born, and any child can become one. Eighteen months ago he took up a challenge from a BBC documentary team that wanted to test his claims at Beechwood School in Slough, Berkshire. Julia Shepard, the head teacher, was seeking new approaches to teaching and learning. The programme makers wanted Mr Buzan to find a genius among six pupils who



PICTURES: CHRISTOPHER COX

Listen and learn: Tony Buzan helped turn round a failing school

teachers believed were wasting their potential by their disruptive behaviour.

Mrs Shepard allowed the cameras in because she saw it as an opportunity to work with Mr Buzan and test whether his methods could help her turn round a school that was failing when she arrived three years ago. Then only four per cent of pupils achieved five or more good GCSE passes. Last year it was eight per cent, and this year she has set a target of 24 per cent.

Mr Buzan was given seven sessions over six months with the children, who were clearly out of control when he arrived. When the programme was screened last month, he had failed to produce a genius but had greatly improved the behaviour, self-esteem and verbal reasoning of all six.

How much of that could be attributed to the "halo effect" of the children being made to



feel special by an inspirational teacher?

Mrs Shepard said the six benefited both from the learning devices and the attention they received from a successful man who believed in them. In particular, she praised his use of "mind maps", which are a way of organising information visually by using different coloured lines radiating from the centre to make a web of interconnected data and illustrations. The maps boosted the children's confidence because they enjoyed doing them.

Zoe Brown, 13, said the experience had changed her life. She was embarrassed when she watched the

programme and saw the way she used to behave. "I didn't want to do anything," she said. "We came to school to fight. We were told to be ourselves for the programme. But when I watched it, I didn't like what I saw.

"Now, if I see people fighting, I go over and tell them to stop because it's not worth it. If you don't get your GCSEs and A-levels, then you won't get a good job."

Laura Kyte, 12, said her behaviour had also improved and she worked much harder since.

Both girls said Mr Buzan had given them confidence but attributed their improvement to the techniques he taught them. To prove her point, Laura demonstrated her ability to "skim read" text quickly, and recited the pictures she uses to remember the numbers from one to 10.

Sheridan, one of eight children, said he no longer "fights all the time" and has discovered that he is quite good at schoolwork.

Mike Gaffin, their form tutor, said he now uses the mind-mapping technique himself. Some of the teachers, however, were unhappy about the decision to let the cameras into the school to film a few badly behaved pupils.

But Mrs Shepard said it was a useful experiment and that some of Mr Buzan's approaches had been introduced in the school.

"Traditional methods haven't worked here," she said. "Past failures have given us a mandate to try something new."