

Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman on the application of Danescourt Primary School to be accredited as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Evidence base

The criteria for accreditation as an 'Advanced Thinking School' starts from the assumption that all criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools @Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the school community. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have now become so embedded that staff and students have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of cognitive education and its impact on both their individual learning and its potential contribution to society. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress Danescourt Primary School has made in its on-going journey as thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as an Accredited Thinking School.

The focus for this advanced level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in developing itself as an Advanced Thinking School. Evidence has been sought on teaching (and support) staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the pupils beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and their continuing impact on the community of the whole school and beyond. Five key areas for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School have been assessed: Dissemination of Practice; Evaluative Research; Professional Development; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as Advanced Thinking School from Danescourt Primary School in the form of an extensive and highly detailed proforma with a wealth of evidence presented on Google Drive, extensively evidencing the work the school is undertaking as a Thinking School. The powerful evidence includes examples of displays and posters, lesson plans, staff training materials, research reports and data along with many other forms of evidence. From the wide range of evidence provided, it is clear that the school has taken great steps as a Thinking School and is ready to be accredited as an Advanced Thinking School. The evidence provided clearly suggests that the school is leading the way for Thinking in Cardiff and beyond.

The school context

Danescourt Primary School is an English-Medium Primary School in Llandaff, Cardiff. The school has 474 pupils on roll and pupils enter the school with skills and understanding at or above the level that is expected for their age. The school has been a Thinking School for three years prior to the current accreditation and in those years, has established not only a strong foundation of Thinking Skills throughout the school, and has led strong professional learning in the Cardiff region and beyond. In 2016, OFSTED judged the school as 'good', with children making good progress in their learning.

Danescourt Primary School was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2016. The aim for the school has been to further develop and embed the school's culture of thinking in particular in relation to the new curriculum for Wales and to share their expertise and practice of thinking skills with other schools.

The school ethos is "Nurturing, Growing, Thriving" and this is underpinned by the aim to create an environment in which students develop good metacognitive skills and a positive attitude to learning. Thinking Skills and a Thinking Ethos are promoted throughout the school, with many examples found on displays, in school assemblies and in school reports. It is also good to see the evidence in the Home Learning tasks that Thinking Skills are being used and reinforced for children in their home learning during the Covid period.

Professional development

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical or functional, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative, focusing on the implementation, reflection and further development of thinking across the school. In terms of technical development, there is a well-established and extensive programme of training and sharing of practice in the school, and staff are trained in a number of thinking tools, including Habits of Mind, Thinking Maps, Philosophy for Children and Growth Mindset. Additional external training is routinely delivered to the school and new members of staff are trained in Thinking Tools by the Cognitive Lead. New staff members are also supported in their planning and delivery of thinking skills by Think Tank members, effectively scaffolding their lesson planning, while NQTs are given opportunities to observe lessons and to learn about the role of thinking in the school.

Staff development is a strong focus at Danescourt Primary School and in addition to the training programme developed for new staff, there is an extensive programme of staff development throughout the year. The school has initiated a programme of work related to the new curriculum in Wales and the school improvement plan strongly emphasises the development, practice and evaluation of thinking skills and thinking tools. There is good evidence of the use of Thinking Tools throughout the school and more importantly, there is good evidence of reflection and evaluation of the use of thinking tools, through the many cycles of action research and lesson study. It is good to see how the school has reflected on, and developed ways of integrating thinking skills with the new curriculum in Wales, taking a leading role in developing 21st century learning and helping to equip children for yet unknown futures. It will be interesting to see how the school develops their leading role in Wales, and to see how staff further embed Thinking Skills within the new curriculum, ideally becoming more and more sophisticated, reflective, and creative in the use of Thinking Tools and approaches.

The ongoing development of thinking tools and strategies is ensured by including clear targets for school improvement. A point for further consideration might be to develop and implement similarly clear targets for personal development for staff members in the school (including support staff).

Dissemination of practice

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking Schools practice and experiences across subject areas within the school and with others. The proforma lists evidence of sharing practice within the school, and across subject areas. There are many examples provided of dissemination of thinking skills and practice to pupils, both in class and in their home learning materials. In addition, Thinking Skills are integral in school improvement and staff communication. Staff development sessions routinely focus on Thinking Skills and Thinking Tools, including The Learning Pit and Thinking Frames.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are regular staff development sessions, and all staff develop performance management targets related to thinking. In addition, the school has made considerable effort in disseminating the Thinking Ethos to pupils and parents. There are many displays exemplifying Thinking Skills throughout the school and family assemblies help to reinforce the common language of thinking used across the school. Pupils are actively encouraged to take ownership of their learning by leading assemblies and the Learning Forum, which includes pupils from across the school, meets on a regular basis to discuss pupil learning. In addition, school reports focus clearly on Thinking Skills and there has been a strong programme of raising awareness of Thinking Skills to pupils, in the form of Thinking Frames, which help pupils to understand and identify their thinking. There is good evidence of dissemination of practice to parents, through parent leaflets, workshops and assemblies.

The school is a leading Thinking School in the region and as such, they play an important role in the development of pedagogy and ethos in a wide range of schools. The school's expertise around Thinking Skills and Thinking Ethos has been disseminated at staff development meetings and conferences around Cardiff and further afield, and the school also regularly receives visitors from other schools, both from the UK and abroad. These activities clearly indicate the school's leading role as a Thinking School within Wales, and I have no doubt it will further develop and enhance this role within the context of the development and implementation of the new curriculum in Wales. An area for development and leadership for the school could be in relation to Digital

Thinking Skills, in particular in light of the current drive for technology-supported learning and the role of technology in 21st century learning.

Evaluative research

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff is seeking evidence of positive outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to develop whole-school learning. There is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school, from self-reflection tools for pupils and questionnaires for staff to evaluate attitudes and effects of thinking, to Action Research utilising the PASS assessment to evaluate pupil attitudes to self and school. The evidence gained in the latter project led to a stronger focus on resilience, in particular in mathematics in the school and further staff development in this area.

Staff also engages in cycles of lesson study, for example around the role of Habits of Mind in supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils, after data suggested that more could be done to develop a caring and respectful ethos in the school. Several interventions were developed, including a new behaviour system, and staff use a number of Thinking Tools to develop emotional wellbeing in their class. Lesson observations were used to identify good practice and further professional development sessions were organised to further disseminate the findings and best practice and data suggests that the approach has an impact on student self-regulative behaviour, low-level classroom disruption and pupil engagement in lessons.

The proforma provides excellent evidence that the school engages in systematic evaluation of school data in relation to their development as a Thinking School. Projects such as the use of Thinking Frames to support writing, thinking skills to support parental engagement and the role of TASC to develop peer assessment are clear examples of how systematic evaluation across the school (and in collaboration with other schools) can lead to effective new teaching practices. The projects each set out clear research questions, success criteria and timeframes, and data is gathered to provide clear evidence of the effectiveness of the research. This continued focus in the school on Action Research and Lesson Study is a very strong aspect of the school's portfolio of

work around Thinking Skills, enabling the school leadership and the teachers to make informed decisions about school development and school improvement, as well as teaching practice within the school. There is also no doubt that this approach enhances the resilience of the school as a 'thinking organisation', providing the school with a steady and strong foundation to further develop and implement the new curriculum for Wales.

Differentiation

This area of accreditation includes the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem-solving. One of the main pillars of learning at Danescourt Primary School is Habits of Mind and throughout their school life, students are supported in developing their resilience, metacognition and self-regulation. Student attitudes to learning is a topic that is investigated and explored extensively in the school, and strong links are being made to student wellbeing. An action Research project was initiated to investigate and develop student voice and decision making, and this project led to a clear focus on student resilience. It would be good to further develop the role of student voice, and to provide students with opportunities to reflect on the learning process and to develop self-awareness, for instance by asking them to choose their own thinking tools, to keep a thinking logbook or diary or to be flexible in what tools students can use. This may help to encourage students to progress according to their individual needs and to develop autonomy.

Whole School assessment

This aspect of the accreditation relates to pupils' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' and peer formative assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff on their own professional practice and development. Overall, it is clear that there are continuous formal and informal critical evaluations of issues within the school and there is good evidence of evaluation and critical reflection of Thinking Tools in relation to processes and outcomes in the school. An example of this is the ways in which the school

investigated the role of Habits of Mind for supporting emotional wellbeing of the pupils. There are extensive rounds of formal research within the school, in the form of Action Research and a range of both qualitative and quantitative data from staff and students is gathered and analysed at a regular basis. Action Research cycles begin with effective school improvement planning and clear steps and success criteria are identified. Recommendations and findings are then effectively implemented in the school. In addition, the SPARE wheel is used in a highly effective manner to help prepare the school for the new curriculum in Wales. This is obviously a huge challenge for any school, but Danescourt Primary School is demonstrating excellent planning, implementation, and evaluation strategies, using the SPARE wheel as a guide. There are a multitude of related initiatives, aimed at leadership, staff, pupils, and parents, to help develop a shared ethos, language, and new pedagogic principles to embed the four purposes of the new curriculum into the school. Thinking tools are used effectively to help to develop thinking around these, and it is good to see a strong element of pupil voice and parental engagement in this. There is clear evidence that the four purposes are routinely used to plan learning activities, and these have been translated very effectively in home-learning tasks during the COVID pandemic. While this is a hugely challenging time for any school, it is clear that Danescourt Primary has taken this challenge head-on, and its staff has demonstrated a level of flexibility and preparedness that is highly commendable. The proforma is an excellent example of how whole-school approaches to thinking can enable schools to become resilient and reflective organisations that keep high quality learning and teaching at the heart of what they do, despite everything that is going on around them. This is highly impressive!

Points for further consideration

The submitted evidence has enabled the accreditor to identify the following areas for further consideration during the 3-year period of accreditation. Thinking Schools @Exeter would welcome your response to these points and whether they might provide the focus of the support visit from a member of our team at a time to be mutually agreed.

- To consider how to embed technology into the teaching and learning in a way that enables technology to be used effectively for developing thinking.
- To consider staff to develop their own clear targets for professional development, utilising thinking skills and tools as a way to develop staff's capacity for reflective practice. While the school is demonstrating resilience as an organisation, it is important that individual staff members feel equally well-prepared, agile and have the confidence to tackle both the new curriculum and new ways of learning and teaching. Having a clear professional development plan that staff have ownership of, might help in achieving this.
- In addition to the points above, while there is clear evidence of the strong involvement of the School Leadership, Cognitive Lead and of course many individual teachers in the planning, implementation and evaluation of approaches to thinking in the school, clear evidence of a Drive Team (involving staff members from around the school) will enable the excellent thinking ethos that exists now, to continue beyond individuals. Please note that the school may have such a team/ structure in place, but the proforma did not clearly demonstrate this.
- To further develop the role of pupils and pupil voice in the school's decision-making processes, including decisions about approaches to thinking, learning and perhaps teaching. To further develop confident thinkers, who can adapt their own learning to new situations, who use meta-cognitive strategies effectively in all contexts and who disseminate the thinking ethos beyond the school.

Outcome

Danescourt Primary School was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2016p, and it has gone from strength to strength since. It is clear that the School leadership team and the Cognitive Lead has supported staff and pupils in developing a strong ethos of thinking around the school. There has been an extensive programme of staff development, evaluation and dissemination and the school is a clear example of how a strong focus on developing a shared ethos and identity around thinking can help schools to become

resilient, yet adaptive and flexible in periods of great change. The application has provided comprehensive and compelling evidence for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School, until October 2023. Congratulations to Danescourt School for an outstanding achievement and I look forward to hearing more from the school as it continues its strong leadership in the new curriculum in Wales.



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