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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by New Horizons Primary School for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.**

**Starting point: the school context**

New Horizons Primary School (NHP) is a popular and successful larger than average primary school, and part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT), comprised of 19 schools (10 primary and 9 secondary). The school has a clear vision outlining its beliefs and how to achieve them. The overarching focus is on lifelong learning and holistic growth for all pupils regardless of starting points. 30%-40% of pupils begin school with lower-than-average starting points and the school serves a deprived inner-city area. The Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher are highly experienced in terms of Thinking School developments having led other schools to Advanced accreditation. NHP's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research that embraces knowledge / skills, deliberate practice (via Growth Mindset) and learning habits, memory, and schema development, and thinking tools. The TSAT 7 Principles of Teaching align well with this and includes:

- Subject Knowledge
- Explanations
- Questioning and Responding
- Feedback to Feedforward
- Modelling
- Metacognition
- Meta-memory

Together this acts to operationalise the school's mission and include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity and resilience and parental engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at NHP. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2019/20 and since then, NHP has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development. A number of foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded. Of particular note is the effective development of the Frame of Reference aligned to Thinking Maps. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster deep thinking for all pupils.<sup>2</sup>

NHP has a highly effective and well led Drive Team. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support provided by the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, Trust Thinking Lead, and the Thinking Skills Co-ordinator. Active Governor support is also prominent in the development process. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Pupils at NHP have an history of excellent pupil progress. This is extremely impressive given the high percentage of pupils beginning school with lower-than-average starting points. The school is relentless in pursuing high standards of achievement. However, it is lifelong holistic learning that is placed at the core of the educational provision at the school and not just the end result. Subject specific learning sits alongside wider dimensions such as the development of psychological wellbeing and dispositional growth. Underpinning this provision is a fully inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff, and the community.<sup>4</sup>

### **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Joanne McVicar (Thinking Skills Coordinator/Project Leader) evidencing the history of the school's

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<sup>1</sup> Reflective Proforma and Evidence Bundle

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Evidence Bundle.

cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its origin and also specifically since 2019/2020 when the focus moved towards Thinking Schools and embedding metacognitive strategies for learning. The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and includes links to a comprehensive evidence bundle together with website links, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. This structure is consistently applied across the TSAT family of schools and is a particular strength, providing consistency without undermining the specific contexts of the individual schools. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall development structure referencing six core elements: Thinking Skills, Visual Mapping, Collaborative Networking, Dispositional Development, Environmental Structure, and Reflective Questioning. In addition, the school's thinking approach is illustrated by thinking pathways that outline how specific tools map onto key thinking processes. Within each of these domains there is ample explanatory information and exemplar materials linked to the school's curriculum policy and development planning.

### **Thinking School Ethos and Culture**

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of NHP. Curriculum policy documents and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.<sup>5</sup>

NHP has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. Half-termly newsletters to parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Indeed, parents are invited to weekly assemblies to share in their children's thinking successes. They also get an opportunity to actually see their child's work via open mornings, book look sessions, topic events and parents' evenings. The high premium placed on celebration assemblies and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

displays further strengthen the Thinking School ethos and culture. As a consequence of these actions, the whole learning community is equipped to support children's learning.<sup>6</sup>

NHP has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus. The outstanding cross-trust collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout the member schools and also more widely. Through its connections with these stakeholders, NHP conveys a positive, caring, and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation. This is clearly evidenced.<sup>7</sup>

### **Senior Management and Whole School Commitment**

The Headteacher is high profile and gives full commitment to both the Thinking School ethos and the implementation of the cognitive development agenda. This has cascaded to leadership throughout the school and the strong senior leadership structure comprised of the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and Thinking Schools Co-ordinator stands as a model of excellent practice. The collaborative and integrated leadership model includes the TSAT Thinking Lead who has provided exemplary support and feedback based on a comprehensive audit of the key accreditation elements.<sup>8</sup>

The Governing Body are not only fully supportive of the school's commitment to cognitive education, but also demonstrate a good understanding of how this approach enables children to think through their curriculum in order to bring learning to life. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education, particularly through school visits where thinking skills are seen in action. Governor visits have a clear purpose, identify key questions, allow narrative feedback, and suggest future action. Of particular note is the involvement of the Chair of Governors in the audit of the school's readiness for accreditation. This stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback indicates a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

The Drive Team is comprised of a rich blend of staff and is very well structured and led. Communication is excellent as are planning processes including meetings and subsequent developmental actions. The introduction of the Children’s Thinking Drive Team with Thinking Ambassadors in each class is an excellent and innovative development. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.<sup>10</sup>

There is ample evidence to indicate that NHP is receptive to change and innovation. The parent half-term topic organiser and the high-quality Teaching and Learning policy are just two of many examples of this. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school’s vision and drive for improvement for a number of years in response to ensuring that the school had an explicit vision based upon inclusive educational values that would serve as the foundation for a strategic move forward.<sup>11</sup> A range of ways of scaffolding effective thinking and learning skills have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning visual tools, thinking dispositions, questioning for enquiry and retrieval practice.<sup>12</sup>

There is a specific organic Change Management Plan designed to secure the wide-spread use of thinking tools across the school. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational and designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development.<sup>13</sup> Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

### **Learning and Teaching**

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of NHP. Indeed, the recent feedback from the TSAT Thinking Lead viewed thinking as a ‘golden thread’ throughout the school. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. For example,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Reflective Proforma School Website and Evidence Bundle

Thinking Maps are fully embedded including the highly effective application of the Frame of Reference. Further, Thinking Hats are used for reflection throughout the school. Excellent support and resources such as the Thinking Toolkit ensures that staff and pupils develop thinking approaches effectively. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple and clear' approach. In this regard, the Drive Team meetings typically focus on what works best, for whom and how. This, aligned to excellent leadership and communication, ensures that good practice is shared judiciously with all staff to develop their classroom impact. There is a universal staff belief in the importance of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking and that all pupils are capable of making progress. This further supports the school's commitment to cognitive education. This clearly demonstrates how it is one of the school's main aims.<sup>14</sup>

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the 7 Principles of Teaching at its core. Specific research-informed elements include neuroscience, neuroplasticity, Growth Mindset, metacognition, memory and schema development, motivation, feedback, and deliberate practice as its foundation. This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose, coherence, and impact. The emphasis placed on the learning environment is also clearly illustrated in the evidence provided by the school. These elements, combined with NHP's commitment to the development of psychological well-being, have resulted in learning and teaching that is focused on the holistic development of every child.<sup>15</sup>

The school has heavily invested in character development and children are awarded certificates for exhibiting effective learning habits. Recent learning and teaching developments have included the inclusion of retrieval practice elements. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are not only nurtured but are also given the practical opportunities to flourish. Effective use of displays enriches the learning environment by encouraging a common language for learning and fostering self-regulation of thinking and learning. Of particular note is the interactive quality of displays where children are encouraged to interact with the content by selecting a particular focus for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

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their learning. Where feasible, the school has personalised and contextualised visual displays to aid consistency, recognition, and application of Thinking Skills. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through displays of high-quality pieces of work. NHP has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of elements such as cognitive load has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.<sup>16</sup>

## **Training**

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. The highly trained Thinking Schools co-ordinator and Drive Team has undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.<sup>17</sup> There is an ongoing and differentiated training programme in place, aimed at the development of expertise in a range of cognitive tools, strategies, and resources for established and newly appointed staff. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that centres on core elements such as Ganges 7 principles of a good lesson and Claxton's split screen teaching. The development of meta-memory is also a key feature. This dovetails well with the overarching 'Six Starting Points' and the 'Thinking Pathways' integral to the TSAT vision and model. There is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking and staff are research engaged. Specific projects include how to further develop and build reflection skills. Parents are fully informed of the Thinking Schools ethos, which features prominently on the website and in the school's communications. Staff are encouraged to work collaboratively across the trust and to provide mutual support through the development of thinking generally and also through particular foci such as questioning and retrieval. Good practice is shared widely, and lesson observations are used extensively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual support. Moving forward, this would benefit from the further extension of a practitioner research to embrace the SPARE model of evaluative action research and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Bundle

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

## Assessment and Outcomes

Alternative and complimentary forms of assessment spanning the formative, summative and ipsative domains are routinely used to examine the development of cognitive skills, and how these are related to learning outcomes in the wider sense have been implemented. These include MALS, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils. Assessments, including attendance and behaviour, indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. Behaviour incidents have seen a marked reduction and 'the big' pupil voice survey indicates that 99% of pupils enjoy the Express curriculum and associated dispositional developments. Outcomes for KS2 are above national averages indicating that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of learning. The future development of the 'Be Your Best Self Journal' (BYBS) will undoubtedly add to this rich source of feedback by placing pupils at the heart of this process. A future development area may well include the use of baseline and subsequent growth indicators via both quantitative and qualitative data sources. NHP demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. NHP demonstrates a healthy 'data informed' (rather than data led) approach to assessment to avoid assessment becoming the master of the curriculum rather than the servant.<sup>19</sup>

The school is clear that the focus on cognitive development through a whole school consistent approach to learning has improved children's attitudes, improved their enjoyment, developed their independence, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress.<sup>20</sup> There is qualitative data from staff, pupils, parents and Governors about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils and are associated with academic outcomes and improved motivation.

The excellent pupil progress results indicate impressive achievement growth. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive achievement trend and demonstrates transparency and aspiration for further improvement.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Evidence Bundle

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

## **Evaluation of Programmes**

There is a continual review of the range of cognitive tools, strategies and resources employed, with specific reference to their impact on pupils' meta-cognition and the transfer of skills, strategies and learning behaviours. This makes use of the SPARE wheel model of illuminative evaluation on which the Thinking School approach is based. The SPARE model would benefit from wider dissemination at all levels (from leadership to individual teachers) in order to further foster a 'researching professional' culture. The SPARE model can be easily aligned to the Ofsted curriculum focus on Intent, Implementation, and Impact areas. Through a collaborative approach to leadership, the Drive Team have established a culture of thinking and school improvement built on regular opportunities for staff to discuss the process and efficacy of cognitive education and how it can be maintained and improved. There is a genuine feel that 'this is the way we do things around here'. The SEF is an organic collaborative, document and the pupil voice features prominently in the evaluative process. Learning walks make use of thinking tools such as Thinking Hats. There is a clear evaluative focus on developing the transfer of thinking skills and strategies and the collaborative nature of learning walks is a model of excellent practice. It is clear that NHP has future Advanced Accreditation in its sights, and this reflects the ongoing ambition to develop an exceptional whole school approach to the teaching of thinking.

## **Ownership**

There is no doubt that NHP has made a full commitment to developing and embedding cognitive education throughout the school. From the initial introduction of cognitive tools and practices, the school has carefully and judiciously expanded their repertoire of cognitive pedagogy. There is evidence that the school is beginning to distil and integrate these practices both in how they are used together and in the way they have become part of the thinking culture throughout the school and across roles and ages. Through the careful and progressive introduction of cognitive tools and CPD geared towards developing teachers as skilled mediators of learning, linked to the school's vision and values, the school has laid a strong foundation that ensures the whole school approach to the teaching of thinking flourishes. The BYBS Journal was introduced for 2022/23 together with the 7 Principles of Teaching and Learning. The Learning Heroes initiative has also recently been implemented to support children's learning and dispositional development. Together, these combine to effectively

promote the educational growth of all children by providing them with ownership over their own development.

NHP is a truly inspirational educational community. It has carefully developed and nurtured its core values so that they permeate throughout the entire school and beyond. Staff and children think deeply about what they do, and levels of collaboration are exceptional. NHP places a high premium on being research informed in terms of their ongoing development. This not only embraces external publications but also internal action research-based projects. As a result of this high-quality educational provision, all children achieve the highest holistic standards. This has not been at the expense of psychological well-being and the school community interact such that this element flourishes.

### **Conclusion**

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that New Horizons Primary School meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School and demonstrates a true commitment to the continued development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until October 2025.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base, clearly organised around the evaluation rubric, that provided the lens through which the excellent practice could be viewed.

### **Further Recommendations**

I conclude my evaluation with some suggestions as to how the school could continue to develop as a Thinking School to inform a development visit to aid action planning. This might include:

- Further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best by fine-tuning the already best practice. This combination of training will secure a balance of internal self-improvement with an external freshness and perspective. This requires getting

underneath cognitive tools and dispositional development to identify the underlying meta-cognitive processes that enhance children's learning and thinking.

- Further integrate thinking processes with questioning, visual tools, dispositional development, deliberate practice routines (geared towards further developing Growth Mindset), assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This should take the form of an overview for how these elements are integrated. This would enable teachers and leaders to have a clear overview of metacognitive development as a whole.
- Further extend lesson observations to include key indicators of learning and thinking processes. These need to be simple, clearly observable and made explicit to all staff. The work of Project Zero (Harvard University) is a particularly useful source in this respect. These indicators of thinking development can be utilised both formatively (ideal in 'real time') in order for teachers to provide feedback at the point of need, and summatively so that teachers and leaders can monitor and evaluate impact.
- Add the internal use of effect sizes at an individual teacher, team, and whole school level to further strengthen the quantitative robustness of data in order to supplement high quality qualitative data. This will allow impact comparisons of meta-cognitive strategies and feedback with the work of The Sutton Trust and John Hattie. The key evaluative questions are 'What works best?', 'For whom?' and 'How?'. A multi-method approach to data may serve to get to the heart of these questions and focus group interviews are particularly effective in generating efficient data to supplement outcome and survey data.
- Move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. Shift 1 is to move from a self-evaluation processes that produce objectives to ones that generate research questions of the style 'How can we/I improve...?'. Shift 2 is to ensure that all staff sustain the 'open door' philosophy and remain open to evaluating their own impact in an honest and self-critical way. Shift 3 means providing opportunities for best practice impact to be made public. To gain accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School, researching professionals are expected to offer articles relating to best practice to publications such as the school's magazine, local newspapers, the school website, and professional

publications. Other forums where impact can be made public are leader/teacher learning communities and action research seminars. The SPARE model of evaluative action research is a useful framework through which to apply evaluative research at all levels of leadership and classroom practice and could easily be applied to the Intent, Implementation, and Impact approach to curriculum development (Ofsted) given the alignment of PAR to Intent, Implementation, and Impact. The addition of the Setting (S) and Evaluation (E) would enhance current practice without having to re-invent it.

- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of NHP. In particular, the extension of practitioner research through wider dissemination of the SPARE model of illuminative evaluation may provide a vehicle for further contextualising cognitive approaches to find out what works best, for whom and how.



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**On behalf of Dr Judith Kleine-Staarman, Director of Thinking Schools @Exeter**

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