

Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman on the application from All Faiths Children's Academy for re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Evidence Base

The re-accreditation as a 'Thinking School' starts from the assumption that the criteria for accreditation by the University of Exeter's 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 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 All Faiths Children's Academy has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as an Accredited Advanced Thinking School.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission from the Thinking Skills Co-ordinator, Charlotte Venter, and evidence of a Thinking School has been drawn from the Reflective Proforma and the additional links provided by the school on the school's website. A wide range of evidence was presented, including student work, action plans, MALS data, meeting minutes, feedback and statements from stakeholders, and much more. The focus for this advanced level of evaluation will be on the presentation of evidence of how the school has moved forward in developing itself as an Advanced Thinking School. Evidence has been sought on teaching and support staff's skills as reflective practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and the continuing impact of teaching thinking 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 to staff, students and beyond; Evaluative Research of Thinking Skills; Professional Development of staff; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

Starting point: the school context

All Faiths Children's Academy is a smaller-than-average sized Primary school, with 217 pupils which includes the Nursery. The school converted to Academy status in June 2012 and is a founding member of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust, which now includes 10 Primary and 7 Secondary schools. The proportion of students for whom All Faiths Children's Academy receives pupil premium funding is over double the national average and the proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs is almost double the national average. The proportion of pupils who are identified as needing SEN support or having an Educational Health Care Plan is also well above the national average. The academy currently provides specialist provision for 14 deaf pupils. The school was accredited as an Advanced Thinking School in 2018, and a number of possible development suggestions were identified, including:

- To revisit, further refine and develop David Hyerle's Thinking Maps across the curriculum and across the school, focusing on the thinking process rather than the name of the map, and ensuring accuracy and precision in the application of all eight maps;
- To continue to develop the metacognitive frame of reference for every Thinking Map, and the idea of 'taking it off the map' so the map becomes the processing tool and not the end product;
- To continue to develop the focus on Habits of Mind and consider Carol Dweck's work on the Growth Mindset as key positive learning behaviours;
- To further develop Action Research initiatives (staff and pupils) including an ongoing rigorous and focused approach to Lesson Study.
- To further develop the use of MALS to analyse children's academic self-concept;

- To continue to capture and share existing best practice, both within school and more widely, and begin to work towards Advanced Thinking School Recognition

In the evidence provided, it is clear that the school has taken on board several of these development points, as the Growth Mindset approach is now more fully integrated into the school's practice, and there has been extensive work on developing meta-awareness around the use of Thinking Maps, both with teachers and pupils, which has helped to shift the focus from the map to the thinking process.

Thinking School ethos and culture

The evidence provided in the Reflective Proforma and through links to the website demonstrate a sustained commitment to the Thinking School ethos and it is clear that Thinking Skills are fully embedded within the culture of All Faiths Children's Academy. The school carries out this ethos at every opportunity, with extensive information on their website and clear references to being a Thinking School on the school's Facebook page. The school makes extensive use of a variety of thinking tools and approaches, including Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Habits of Mind, Growth Mindset, and there is also a strong focus on questioning and P4C. The school has an explicit thinking strategy running through all they do, which includes new staff training, an extensive programme of CPD, continuous evaluation of tools, assessment of pupil learning and thinking, and strategies to give differentiated support for pupils. Displays around the school as well as social media, the school website and newsletters are used to reinforce key skills and attitudes and celebrate the achievements of pupils regarding key Thinking Skills.

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 with others, both internally, between staff and students as well as externally, with other schools and practitioners. As a founding member of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust, the school is very (pro)active in disseminating their practice within the Trust, which provides a strong and coherent framework within which (mutual) support is sought and given.

Partnership activity is extensive within the Trust and staff at All Faiths Children's Academy regularly share their best practice, which helps to develop a consistent approach to thinking across the Trust. Social media is used extensively to disseminate practice more widely, though I would encourage the school to actively seek other forums in which impact can be made, for instance through professional publications, nation-wide teacher/learner communities of practice or (action) research seminars.

Staff consistently use Thinking Tools in their planning of lessons and pupils and parents are fully included within the Thinking School ethos of the school. Parental support has become even more important during the lockdown period, and the school has developed effective ways of engaging parents using a variety of digital tools, helping to inform and connect with parents and encourage parental support.

All new staff, including TAs, receive extensive training and a thorough induction in the Thinking School ethos, and the various thinking tools that the school uses. The NAPE model serves as a structured professional development and growth model, with the aim of encouraging staff to be reflective practitioners, who consistently develop their own thinking journey.

The school has two enthusiastic and proactive Drive Teams; a small Staff Drive Team and a school-wide Pupil Drive Team. The Staff Drive Team plays a very active role in the consistent implementation and embedding of thinking tools and strategies across the school, as well as the dissemination of best practice beyond the school. Each member of the Staff Drive Team has specific responsibilities, reflecting their experience, role within the school and individual skill set. The Pupil Drive Team strongly reflects the school's focus on pupil voice, independence and empowerment, and is instrumental in advocating the school's thinking ethos. In addition, school governors are well-informed about the schools approaches to cognitive education.

Evaluative research

Evidence of evaluative research aims to demonstrate the ways in which thinking tools are embedded in the school and are having an impact on the whole school community. The portfolio of evidence points to evidence around student learning, their attitudes to learning and to evidence of community and collaborative development. Pupil work is evaluated in terms of children's meta-awareness of thinking tools, for instance through the use of the 'Be your best self-Journals' which provide weekly opportunities for pupils to reflect on their use of thinking tools, academic performance and behaviour.

The school has extensive practices to develop children's social/collaborative and emotional/affective attitudes and skills, as well as their self-concept. MALS data has been collected for 5 years and indicates consistent upward trends, that is, until the covid pandemic. It is clear that the pandemic has impacted children's self-efficacy, and it is very good to see the ways in which the school is approaching the analysis of the latest results. There is evidence of some excellent reflection, while making good use of research in trying to understand the results, and evidence of work happening across the school to help children who are at risk.

Whole school staff development has recently focused on P4C as an approach to develop discussion, reflection and democracy in the school, which is an excellent way of developing a more dialogic curriculum. While informal observations are used throughout the school, lesson study cycles, or systematic observation and reflection cycles could really help to further develop this practice and to all staff to work collaboratively on a shared set of research questions.

A member of the Drive Team (Beth Welstead) has undertaken systematic qualitative research, aimed at using thinking maps and thinking hats in order to promote reading and language engagement with severely and profound Deaf students. This is a key area in which the school has developed specific and sound knowledge and understanding, and I would strongly encourage the further dissemination of this important and interesting work; something we would, as a university-based organisation, be happy and well-placed to support.

Professional development

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative, demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators of the thinking tools that are applied. The staff development programme is strongly focused on deepening the teacher's and TAs knowledge and understanding of thinking skills. All staff are given extensive training in the use of the tools, and more experienced staff receive further training to develop their meta-awareness of thinking skills, for instance around metacognition. The CPD programme is informed by the School Development Plan and greatly benefits from the support from colleagues within the Trust. Personalised training is available for staff, for instance in the form of Action Research projects or staff development programmes provided within the Trust. In general, the evidence points to an extensive and systematic programme of staff development, focusing not only on the use of thinking tools, but strongly on the rationales and psychological and educational underpinnings of these tools and associated practice. An important consideration in this would be to ensure that staff feel supported, rather than burdened or directed by the professional development opportunities, and it would be interesting to see whether the professional development opportunities lead to stronger or more positive perceptions of professional identity of staff.

Differentiation

The evidence sought under this header should demonstrate sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in the school, across the ability range; to enable every child to draw upon their thinking tools and skills to participate at their optimum level. In addition, evidence is sought to show how thinking tools are used to meet the diverse needs of children, including those with general or specific learning difficulties. The evidence provided demonstrates interesting use of thinking hats and maps to help children with behavioural issues and around creative thinking, clearly differentiated between various age groups. There are clear examples of the ways in which thinking tools have been adapted to meet the diverse needs of children, for instance in maths. In addition, the work undertaken around the use of thinking tools with children who are severely or profoundly deaf is exemplary in this respect and provides a

strong example of how thinking tools can help to structure children's thinking to support them with developing grammatical skills, vocabulary and language acquisition.

Whole School assessment

The SPARE Wheel model has been used to identify key areas of development as a self-improving school and focuses on the way in which staff is supported to develop, implement, and reflect on best practice. Informal observations and peer coaching will be used to disseminate and share good practice and data is collected from all stakeholders to continuously evaluate the use of thinking tools. Thinking tools are used extensively to collect pupil's perspectives and are equally used as reflection and support tools by staff throughout the school. The evidence provided clearly points to All Faiths Children's Academy being a learning organisation, in which there is a strong focus on self-reflection on pupil, individual staff and school level.

Ownership

As mentioned previously, use of a variety of thinking tools and approaches is completely embedded into the culture of the school, giving the school a consistent methodology to teaching which underpins and pervades everything the school does. There is excellent evidence that staff and children not only use the tools but are able to adapt tools and approaches to suit their own needs and aims. It is clear that the children are consistently encouraged to reflect on their thinking processes, and their ideas to improve and change are taken up by the school. The student drive team consists of pupils across year groups, who advocate and support the use of thinking tools, and amend tools to support their academic achievement and mental health. Another example of this is in the use of Thinking Maps, where there has been clear development from use of the maps, to developing pupil's meta-awareness of maps and working towards helping pupils choose maps that they feel are most appropriate to help them with their learning. There is a clear commitment throughout the school to ensuring that the thinking tools and approaches are used in ways that are meaningful for pupils and staff.

Further recommendations

I would like to conclude my evaluation with some ways in which the school could continue to develop and refine their practice as they move forward. This might include:

- To further develop a focus on the role of dialogue in the classroom, by a sustained emphasis on higher order questioning and the development of Dialogic Teaching and Learning throughout the school, perhaps based around the, already used, P4C approach and the schools current focus on questioning.
- The above-mentioned focus on the role of dialogue can also help to promote collaborative or group thinking, which in turn could tie in with the school's focus on student wellbeing and social and emotional development.
- To further disseminate and share the good practice in the school through partnership activities in the region and beyond
- To disseminate the findings from research undertaken by school staff and to continue engaging in research to support evidence-based practice, in particular, but not exclusively around using Thinking Skills for supporting children with diverse educational needs and inclusive education.

Conclusion

The wide range of evidence submitted across evaluation categories, impressive use of school-wide evaluation practices and extensive evidence of a Thinking School ethos throughout, confirms that All Faiths Children's Academy meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter to be accredited as an Advanced Thinking School. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until March 2025.

I would like to thank the Thinking Schools coordinator and both the Staff and Student Drive Teams for their sustained commitment to the Thinking School ethos and for submitting a comprehensive evidence base. I would welcome a development and support visit to discuss continued development of the school targets and to support the school in their continuing journey as an Advanced Thinking School.

Congratulations to All Faiths Children's Academy for an outstanding achievement!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Kleine Staarman', written over a horizontal line.

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