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Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of Holcombe Grammar 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 the criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools @Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the 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 the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as a Level 1 Thinking School in 2019.

The focus for this second level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in seeking to achieve those aims. Evidence has been sought on teaching (and support) staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students 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 an Advanced Thinking School from Holcombe Grammar School (HGS) in the form of a Reflective Proforma with evidence links, extensively illustrating the continuing work the school is undertaking as a level 1 Thinking School together with how it has moved forward to meet the criteria for Advanced accreditation. School evidence includes students' work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, Principal reports, photographs, newsletters, project plans, video evidence, Drive Team documentation (Adult and Student Drive Teams), action plans, meetings minutes, learning walks observations, other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on continued development of the school on the basis of the level 2 criteria.

Starting point: the school context

HGS is a popular and successful average sized secondary school, and part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT).

The school was accredited as a Thinking School in 2019 and was rated as 'Good' in its most recent Ofsted inspection report.¹ The school has sustained its Thinking School development and has gone from strength to strength. HGS is a school where every individual is encouraged to achieve their personal best. The 'Aspire and Achieve Together' philosophy underpins its entire approach to education. Many students go on to Oxford, Cambridge, and other Russell Group universities. Those who choose not to go to university are supported into apprenticeships in prestigious organisations such as the BBC. In addition, the school has an excellent reputation for supporting students with Additional Educational Needs. HGS also has an excellent reputation for sporting success. These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all.²

¹ Thinking Schools accreditation report 2019 and School's website

² School's website

The school's cognitive education development journey has moved forward significantly since its level 1 accreditation in 2019. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place capturing the seven TSAT Principles of Teaching and Learning: Subject Knowledge, Explanations Questioning, Feedback to Feed Forward, Modelling, Metacognition and Metamemory. These elements have a firm foundation in robust research findings. Within this, Thinking Hats, Thinking Maps, Holcombe Habits (Habits of Mind) and Thinker's Keys are used to further operationalise the school's Thinking School vision.³

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on high aspiration and achievement for all students. What sets HGS aside from many schools, is its emphasis on *how* this is achieved. With reference to this, the school seeks to make learning active by developing children as creative, adaptable, and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.⁴ HGS has embedded thinking and meta-cognitive approaches in all aspects of school life in order to ensure that its aims and ethos are a reality.⁵

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. There is extensive evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subjects and teams, with all sections of staff participating in formal and informal staff training events and programmes. Using the TSAT Thinking Pathways model as a framework, there is ample evidence of effective dissemination of tools, but also a focus on differentiation. The Thinking School Lead co-ordinates a wealth of training and support. Cross Trust CPD has involved all five of the Drive Team delivering training sessions on Thinking Tools and metacognitive strategies. In addition, the Executive Business Manager has led Thinking Tools training for support staff not directly involved in teaching and learning with the aim of raising awareness of the impact Thinking Tools can have on adult life and work effectiveness. All new staff receive training in theory, pedagogy, and practical

³ Digital evidence

⁴ School's website and digital evidence

⁵ Ibid

approaches relating to Thinking. Early Career Teachers are supported via a bespoke mentoring system involving a colleague outside their subject area. There is an extensive and innovative range of resources and structures to further support the dissemination of Thinking School approaches such as the Holcombe Teaching and Learning Manual, Cognition Crew (a cross-Trust forum for discussing publications relating to Thinking), and Cognition Corner (a dedicated library section related to metacognitive literature).

More widely, there is evidence of innovative approaches being disseminated to local cluster and feeder schools. The Thinking Schools Lead has recently taken on the role of leading developments across 'hub' schools in the region and many other staff are actively involved in visits to local schools in order to provide guidance on resources and support with CPD. In addition, local dissemination of practice includes open evenings / mornings for prospective students and parents, Cognition Crew meetings for local schools, and MAT meetings (three times per year) where staff run workshops. Of particular note is the large number of staff involved in research-based work through NPQ and Masters courses.

On a local level, HGS works closely with parents to further disseminate Thinking School approaches via creative mechanisms such as the Parent Thinking Guide publication. Open days allow the local community to come into the school and see the thinking approaches in action via displays, student work, assemblies and student behaviour. On a regional level, HGS works with schools across the Chatham Hub to share excellent practice. Nationally, HGS provides CPD across the Trust to include schools in Kent and Medway, Portsmouth, and Devon. In addition, the school host visits from schools across the country to share the benefits of Thinking Tools. A recent visit involved the illustration of how the Thinking Ambassadors (Student Drive Team) work to disseminate learning. More internationally, HGS has links and dissemination activity with schools in Canada and Spain. The school has also been involved in conference presentations such as the TSAT National Conference and the ASCL national conference for Headteachers. Publication contributions include the cross-Trust magazine and Chartered College publication. There is a clear and effective programme of dissemination

across the whole multi-academy, the Thinking Schools network, regionally, nationally, and internationally which includes contributions to conferences and publications.⁶

Evaluative research

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff are seeking evidence of the positive impact and outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to drive whole school learning and improvement. Based on the evidence of Level 1 and level 2 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. This includes specific consideration of the process and impact of initiatives on the learning and development of students. HGS utilises a range of data collection tools including the Student Voice Thinking Tools Questionnaire and PASS Test with associated follow up. The school has moved away from performance management towards a model of Professional Growth. This has given rise to Action Research projects. Four teachers are currently undertaking the new NPQs. In addition, 29 teachers have completed NPQ courses and 14 have completed Masters studies. Specific examples of Action Research projects include a focus on teaching vocabulary via etymology and decoding strategies. Findings from a Masters dissertation have directly influenced the work of the HGS Drive Team in the areas of parental engagement together with informing CPD practice in the form of informing the pace and style of dissemination practices. Specific evaluative processes include both quantitative and qualitative mechanisms such as Q Matrix, Reflective Journals, Student Voice, Surveys, and the innovative 'Be Your Best Self' (BYBS) Journal. Evidence is presented that demonstrates the ongoing collection of data related to Thinking Skills across the school, in particular with respect to how well Thinking Skills are embedded within the school system and what the impact is on students and staff. It is clear that there are effective strategies in place across subject areas that encourage and support evaluation and reflective practice of learning and teaching approaches and impact.⁷

⁶ Reflective proforma and digital evidence

⁷ Reflective Proforma and digital evidence

HGS has fully embraced digital learning. A Digital Learning Ambassador has been appointed to the Drive Team to work with staff to ensure that Thinking, Meta-cognition and the Seven Principles of Teaching and Learning underpin the digital offer to students. The Adult Thinking Drive Team and Student Thinking Drive Team provide a skilful and rich representation of expertise from across the school so that new ideas for teaching and learning are explored, researched and, if successful, fed back to the wider staff body. Furthermore, Thinking Skills and dispositional development are part of ongoing evaluations of student progress, providing further evidence of the ongoing evaluation of Thinking Skills approaches throughout the school. It is important to note in this respect, that students are routinely consulted about what the Thinking Tools mean to them. Another important factor within the continuous evaluation of the outcomes of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking, is the evidence of the development of student resilience and self-reflection, as well as a sense of shared responsibility towards one another, as demonstrated through the BYBS Journals which forms an intrinsic part of the school's dispositional development strand. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at HGS.⁸

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.

In terms of technical development, it is clear from the school development planning that new members of staff are routinely training in Thinking Skills. There is an excellent Trust Induction programme in place and ensures that professional development opportunities are consistent and well embedded in the culture of the entire trust. The focus at HGS is staff ownership of developments through a highly effective lesson study cycle. The recent focus has been on the application of retrieval practices in the classroom. Termly QA via learning walks and reflective audits using Thinking Hats inform an 'organic' action plan, specifically designed to respond to the changing needs as the year progresses. Judicious ongoing evaluative research builds

⁸ Ibid

individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. The Drive Team has regular focussed meetings with clear development action points that further feed into CPD linked to priorities. HGS provides a range of innovative bespoke resources for staff in order to operationalise the priorities. These excellent resources are supplemented by modelled examples so staff can actually see how they might apply what they have learned in their own classrooms. Student feedback plays an intrinsic part on development planning and is used to triangulate reflections, plans and actions. The focus is on developing teachers as mediators of learning and CPD is clearly aligned to this by developing the skill and craft of every teacher. This has allowed the school to focus not so much on the use of specific Thinking Tools, but to provide a strong background and rationale for Thinking across subject areas, which demonstrates an excellent understanding and awareness of Thinking as a pedagogic strategy throughout the school.

There is strong evidence of the continued focus of staff on the development of their own knowledge and understanding of Thinking and Thinking Skills approaches in general. Thinking Skills approaches are continually evaluated throughout the school and staff are routinely asked to reflect on their use of Thinking Tools. This again provides strong evidence that the use of Thinking Skills and the language around Thinking is strongly embedded within the school, the teaching practice and its overall Ethos. It is clear, from the evidence provided relating to staff induction, that new staff are immediately made aware of this ethos and practice. Importantly, staff are given the time and resources to train and to work with colleagues through cycles of lesson observations.⁹

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. Through thorough and on-going dialogue with students, teachers are able to mediate learning such that learning is geared towards the needs of all students at an

⁹ Ibid

individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. As such, HGS has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. Thinking tools are used for Student Voice Questionnaires, behaviour reflections and a range of other processes geared towards enabling all students to progress effectively with their learning. A variety of Thinking Tools are used adaptively, to suit the abilities of different students, for instance, through the engagement of pupils in taking responsibility for their own development as lifelong learners, skilfully achieved through mediated teaching. Progression is clearly mapped via The 7 Principles of Teaching and Learning and all students are encouraged to develop individuality and autonomy. Termly QA reflections support the curriculum provision and resources are carefully differentiated in order to enable all children to access tasks and displays are used actively to promote discussion related to the identification of thinking processes. AfL strategies are used in alignment with a common cognitive language such that students are clear about the demands placed on them. This means that Thinking Strategies underpin the personal learning targets and behavioural goals of all students. The Student Voice is a strong part of the learning culture of the school and means that teachers can identify what works best, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why.¹⁰

Whole School assessment

This aspect of the accreditation relates to students' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' performance via assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Peer and self-assessment are embedded in the culture of the school such that these qualities are nurtured and flourish. The formative use of PASS together with the BYBS Journal are illustrative of this particular element. PASS is used very effectively and analysis of sub-groups is undertaken. Overall, this data indicates that students have a high level of satisfaction with school and also have high levels of confidence in learning. Where scores fall short, mentoring and interventions are implemented to secure the very best learning for all children. Curriculum developments such as Feedback to Feedforward and AfL are embedded

¹⁰ Ibid

in the work of the school and a range of assessment tools are used effectively. These include student planners for Growth Mindset reflection, learning walks, Thinking Tools needs assessment and a Student Voice Thinking Tools Questionnaire. The BYBS Journal is again a valuable part of the self-reflection process. Other self-evaluative processes compliment PASS well and include a range of meta-cognitive surveys. Thinking tools such as Thinking Maps and Thinking Hats are also used effectively for assessment and evaluation purposes.

Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff through the emphasis of developing as a researching professional. Staff approach curriculum developments via action research projects that focus on key questions relating to taking thinking approach in this respect. Students are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them. The assessment and evaluative information are shared school-wide in order to strengthen the consistency of effective teaching and learning strategies. A clear line of student feedback via the Student Voice has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the children's perspective. This goes beyond using assessment as a summative indicator towards using it as a formative tool to support and enhance student's learning. At each juncture the aim of the school is to secure full and effective learning for all students. Staff are encouraged to reflect on the use of Thinking Tools and strategies and evidence demonstrates continuous reflection on the implementations, use, and impact of Thinking Tools. Termly QA, and continuous formative evaluation fully meets the criteria for 'Evaluative Research' and the whole leadership team have been highly influential in embedding this aspect.

Overall, it is clear that there are continuous formal and informal critical evaluations of Thinking Skills, Approaches and Tools taking place throughout HGS, which include a wide variety of stakeholders. This is a clear indicator of the way in which a culture of thinking is fully embedded within the school.¹¹

¹¹ Reflective proforma and digital evidence

Points for further consideration

HGS has responded well to the points for further consideration suggested in the previous accreditation report. The developments relating to evaluative research is a good example of this and action research is an intrinsic part of professional growth. I conclude my evaluation with some suggestions as to how the school could continue to develop as a Thinking School and possibly inform a development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- Further integrate thinking processes with questioning, visual tools, dispositional development, thinking routines, assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This would benefit from an overview for how these elements are integrated and could build on the HGS's models already in place and act as a means of providing a concise overview. Thinking Schools@Exeter is well placed to support this via a bespoke workshop.
- 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.
- Further develop evaluative research and align action research to the SPARE model. 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 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.
- Continue to use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of HGS. 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, under what circumstances, how and why.

Outcome

The substantive evidence provided by HGS creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. Thinking Skills are fully embedded in the culture of the school such that HGS is a collaborative educational community. The dissemination of best practice across the school and beyond positions HGS as a beacon of metacognitive excellence where best practice is nurtured so that children develop as holistic lifelong learners. The focus on the professional growth of staff is exceptional.

In conclusion, the application has provided compelling and comprehensive evidence for accreditation, and I therefore recommend that accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until September 2025. Congratulations to Holcombe Grammar School for an exceptional achievement!



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

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