

Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of New Horizons Children's Academy 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 ongoing journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous re-accreditation as a level 1 Thinking School in 2021.

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 New Horizons Children's Academy (NHCA) 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, Headteacher reports, photographs, newsletters, Performance Management / Professional Growth documentation, video evidence, Drive Team documentation (Adult and Pupil Drive Teams), action plans, Governor meetings minutes, learning

walks observations, amongst 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

NHCA is a popular and successful larger than average three-form entry primary school and nursery, and part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust.

Opened in 2014, the school was accredited as a Thinking School in 2017,¹ the school has gained additional accreditation through the SEND Inclusion Award in 2019;² the first school in Kent to gain this award. These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all.

The school's cognitive education development journey can be traced back to 2014 where its vision and values were launched to provide a springboard for improvement. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place capturing the three main areas of Visual Tools for Thinking, Developing Dispositions for Thinking and Developing Questioning for Enquiry.³ Following initial accreditation as a Thinking School in 2017, NHCA gained re-accreditation in May 2021. A selection of areas for possible development aimed towards advanced accreditation were highlighted as outlined below:

- 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, 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 and could build on the TSAT Toolkit model.

¹ Thinking Schools accreditation report 2017

² School's website

³ Digital evidence bundle

- Focus lesson observations on 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.
- 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.
- 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 process 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 this at all levels of leadership and classroom practice.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of NHCA. 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 and for whom.⁴

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on high aspiration and achievement for all children. What sets NHCA aside from many schools, is its emphasis on *how* this is achieved. With reference to this, the school seeks to make learning irresistible by developing children as creative, adaptable, and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.⁵ NHCA 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.⁶

⁴ Thinking Schools accreditation report 2021

⁵ School's website

⁶ Ibid

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 provides a wealth of training and support including drop-in surgeries. This is supplemented by a 'Thinking Buddy' scheme where a representative from the Adult Drive Team provides bespoke support to develop practice. Of particular note is the introduction of Action Research Triads with a clear developmental focus (currently the use of memory techniques within lessons).

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.

On a national level, NHCA works with schools in Plymouth and Portsmouth and has piloted 'Carousel Learning', an online platform for low stakes quizzes. In relation to this, the Teaching and Learning Lead has been part of a webinar to share this nationally with a particular focus on memory. More internationally, NHCA is working with the Assistant Head of a school in China on using meta-cognitive language aligned to Thinking Tools. Staff from NHCA regularly speak and run workshops at trust conferences and the Teaching and Learning Lead has been asked to speak at Research-Ed Surrey in addition to being part of a webinar relating to retrieval practice, assessment and 'Carousel Learning'. In-house publications such as Gardener's World (trust newsletter) and the fortnightly Teaching and Learning Bulletin provide an effective forum for sharing ideas and practice and more widely NHCA has provided articles for the Chartered College of Teaching 'Impact Journal'. NHCA is also part of a research group for a new book on Retrieval Practice. 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.⁷

⁷ Reflective proforma and digital evidence bundle

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 pupils. In addition to evidence of 'formal' engagement in Evaluative Research (NPQML, NPQSL, 'Think Ahead' programmes and Chartered Teacher training), 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. The past academic year's focus, and the focus for the next three years, has been on 'Teaching to Remember'. This is designed to refocus the curriculum in light of knowledge gleaned through research on memory and cognitive load. There are many examples of staff engaging in evaluative action research including collaborative research with Greenwich University. 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. Of particular note is the careful consideration of the specific context of the school and the needs of the individual student. 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. The Thinking Teaching and Learning (TTL) lead is pivotal to the co-ordinated approach to evaluative research, and this is a model of excellent leadership practice.⁸

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. This is celebrated through assemblies and bespoke rewards schemes such as the 'Golden Tie

⁸ Reflective Proforma and digital evidence bundle

Award' and 'Achievement Alley'. 'Habit Heroes' is another excellent example of how NHCA places the students at the heart of learning. This involves two members of a class being identified as dispositional role models. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at NHCA.⁹

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 NHCA is staff ownership of developments through a highly effective lesson study cycle. Annual reflections inform an 'organic' action plan, specifically designed to respond to the changing needs as the year progresses. Judicious ongoing evaluative research builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. For example, this has led to a current focus on meta-memory leading to the 'Teaching to Remember' initiative. This has subsequently been linked to the science of memory with accompanying resources including guidance on retrieval and meta-memory. 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

⁹ Ibid

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.¹⁰

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 individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. As such, NHCA has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. The Thinking Hats format is used for behaviour reflections, individual student reviews and SEND support plans. School Based Support Plans. 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. Thinking tools progression is clearly mapped out so that the development of children is scaffolded. Behaviour 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. Questioning 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. Deep-Dive monitoring forms ensure that teaching meets the needs of all students and the BYBS Journal is an excellent vehicle for ongoing feedback. 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.¹¹

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 the MALS together with the BYBS Journal are illustrative of this

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

particular element. MALS is used very effectively and analysis of sub-groups is undertaken. Overall, this data indicates that children's perception of themselves as learners has improved. Where scores fall short, mentoring and interventions are implemented to secure the very best learning for all children. Curriculum innovations such as 'Thinking Inclusively' allow children to explore themselves as learners through examining factors that promote growth mindset and independent learning. The BYBS Journal is again a valuable part of the self-reflection process. Other self-evaluative processes compliment MALS 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 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 its inclusive ethos and ensure that no child is held back. 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. Annual, and continuous formative evaluation fully meets the criteria for 'Evaluative Research' and the drive 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 NHCA, which include a wide variety of stakeholders. This is a clear indicator of the way in which a culture of thinking has developed within the school. Thinking is the way things are done around the whole school community and its partnerships.¹²

Points for further consideration

NHCA 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

¹² Reflective proforma and digital evidence bundle

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 NHCA'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 NHCA. 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 NHCA creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. It is clear that Thinking Skills are fully integrated in teaching, assessment, and evaluation as well as in staff development. NHCA has a wonderful thinking culture where children develop as holistic lifelong learners and staff develop as researching professionals. This combination places NHCA at the forefront of educational excellence.

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 July 2025. Congratulations to New Horizons Children's Academy for an exceptional achievement!



Dr Dave Walters

**Thinking Schools @Exeter
Graduate School of Education
College of Social Sciences and International Studies
University of Exeter**

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

July 2022