

Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of The Victory 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 accreditation as a level 1 Thinking School in March 2018.

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 The Victory Academy (TVA) in the form of a Reflective Proforma supplemented by a dedicated Thinking School section on the website, extensively evidencing 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 pupil's work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, photographs, newsletters, Performance Management documentation, Thinking Logbooks, lesson observation feedback, assembly programme and CPD schedule, amongst other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear

that the school clearly exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria and has fully embraced the recommendations from the previous accreditation report. Therefore, 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

The Victory Academy (TVA) is a popular and successful average-sized secondary school (1170 on roll), situated within the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT), comprised of 18 schools (10 primary and 8 secondary). TVA joined TSAT in 2015 and received Level One Thinking School accreditation in March 2018. The school has a clear vision of the attributes that it wants all children to develop and is relentless in its pursuit of this vision. The overarching focus is on lifelong learning and holistic growth for all pupils regardless of starting points. TVA's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by a clear intent comprising of developing academic challenge and cultural capital, together with recognising diversity. By approaching the curriculum in this way, TVA seeks to instil the three core 'Victory Values' (Pride in self, others and the community; Respect for self and others; Belief in self and others). TVA's curriculum acts to operationalise the school's mission of 'Aspire, Endeavour and Achieve'. TVA has been recognised formally as a model of best practice in many areas. Gaining the prestigious Arts Mark Platinum award (held by less than 1% of schools nationally) is one such example of this.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at TVA and the school is explicit in its drive to fully prepare all pupils for the next stage in their lifelong learning journey. The school places a high premium on working in close partnership with parents with the mission to overcome barriers to achievement via the creation of an inclusive and caring environment. Pupils enter the school with low prior attainment and the school is situated in an area of high economic and social deprivation. The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds, however the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above the national average. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and / or disabilities is above the national average and there are much higher numbers of disadvantaged pupils compared to the national figures. The school moved out of 'Requires Improvement' in its last Ofsted inspection and secured an impressive 'Good' in all areas in 2017. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2015 and since then, TVA has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and curriculum development

¹ School's website and Reflective proforma

aligned to the key attributes it seeks to develop and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.²

TVA has a highly effective and well led Drive Team which has been pivotal in the securing the development and embedding of Thinking Tools across the school. The rich blend of members and the rigour applied to the way they work is an outstanding feature. There is a rigorous application process for staff who wish to join the Drive Team and the range of expertise across the team is impressive and includes assessment for learning, behaviour for learning, thinking skills, questioning, frame of reference, CoRT1 tools, memory skills, Philosophy for Children and Thinking Maps. The Compass Room provides a rich source of best practice and creative ideas for staff to engage with. Inevitably the team members change due to staff members leaving but new members undergo the same rigorous selection process. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support provided by the Principal and Governors. Governors are an active and integral part of the leadership of the school and Thinking Schools developments are part of Governor training. Further, the Chair of Governors has written a statement showing the clear support of the Trust and the Board's for the Thinking Schools approach. In addition to the Staff Drive Team, there is also a Pupil Drive Team (Thinking Cadets), and this reflects the school's commitment to securing an active student voice in school developments. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

Pupils at TVA have a recent history of high achieving in a holistic sense and so the school has an enviable reputation in this regard. 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 team embracing children, parents, staff, and the community.⁴

It is clear that TVA has an exceptional commitment to its continued development as a Thinking School, both in terms of ethos and pedagogy.

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

² Ibid

³ School's website

⁴ School's website and Reflective Proforma

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. More widely, there is evidence of innovative approaches being disseminated to local cluster and feeder schools beyond the TSAT family and also clear links and dissemination internationally. TVA is currently working with a school in Zambia to support them in developing metacognitive strategies. Again, this has a clear focus and includes a range of Thinking Tools. There is a clear and effective programme of dissemination across the whole multi-academy trust and the Thinking Schools network which includes contributions to publications. Parents are viewed as an important element in sharing good practice and they are kept fully informed of metacognitive developments. Throughout, runs a thread of emphasis on enabling others to use metacognitive strategies in different school environments. This awareness of context is an excellent example of best practice in terms of dissemination.⁵

There are numerous mechanisms in place in order to drive collaborative developments at TVA. These include weekly briefings, training videos and 'Expert Groups'. There is a 'researching professional' culture and some staff are applying their national qualifications development to specific research projects using Action Research methodology. Visits from local schools beyond the TSAT family is part of routine practice and in addition TVA is working with the DfE nationally to support schools who face a persistent Requires Improvement Ofsted grading.⁶

A variety of staff have presented at trust conferences. Again, this takes a researching professional approach. The TSAT newsletter provides another far-reaching forum for sharing practice and TVA regularly contributes to this.⁷

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 (Action Research via

⁵ Ibid

⁶ School Website and Reflective Proforma

⁷ Reflective Proforma

formal and informal structures), specific evaluative processes include both quantitative and qualitative mechanisms such as Q Matrix, Logbooks, Pupil Voice, and Surveys. Specific cognitive foci include self-selection of thinking tools, stretch and challenge, understanding of using thinking tools in different contexts, and questioning. Structured evaluative research projects include those undertaken as part of National Professional Qualifications and the Chartered Teacher Programme. 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 pupils and staff. Of particular note is the careful consideration of the specific context of the school and the needs of the individual pupil. 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.⁸

The Staff Drive Team and Pupil 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 pupils 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 pupil resilience and self-reflection, as well as a sense of shared responsibility towards one another, as demonstrated through the Logbooks which forms an intrinsic part of the school's focus on metacognitive growth. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at TVA.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 TVA is staff ownership of developments through a highly effective lesson study cycle. The school's professional development culture has

⁸ School Website and Reflective Proforma

⁹ School's Website

moved away from Performance Management towards Professional Growth. This includes a differentiated approach to CPD so that more experienced staff can self-regulate their development. There are clear training themes within this new structure and include objective setting, giving and receiving feedback, having challenging conversations, and questioning/listening skills. Ongoing reflections/feedback inform the school's development journey. Staff feedback builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. The Pupil Voice plays an intrinsic part on development planning and is used to triangulate reflections, plans and actions. Specific technical development processes include trust induction, CoRT Tools (extensive evidence of the use of Plus, Minus, Interesting across the school), CPD geared towards level 2 accreditation (building on level 1 development points). The focus on Thinking Mastery is of particular note as this is geared towards both pupil and staff development. The use of Mastery Journals to track development is an excellent model of self-reflective metacognitive growth. 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.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 pupils' approaches to problem-solving. Through thorough and on-going dialogue with pupils, 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, TVA has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond

¹⁰ Ibid

a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. A variety of Thinking Tools are used adaptively, to suit the abilities of different pupils, 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. 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 pupils are clear about the demands placed on them. This means that Thinking Strategies underpin the personal learning targets and behavioural goals of all pupils. The use of peer mentoring to support a differentiated approach is an excellent model and places the pupils at the heart of the learning process. The Pupil 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 pupils' 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 Thinkers Logbook, observations and questionnaires are illustrative of this particular element. Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff through the emphasis of developing as a researching professional. Plus, Minus, Interesting (PMI) is used extensively for staff self-evaluation and is supplemented by a staff Be Your Best Self (BYBS) development journal. There is a clear focus on judicious CPD geared towards making the best use of assessment. Staff approach curriculum developments via action research projects that focus on key questions relating to taking thinking approach in this respect. Pupils are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them. CoRT tools are used as a framework for self-assessment, planning and feedback and Thinking Keys add to this. Thinking Cadet questionnaires link with a wider Pupil Voice questionnaire to further add to the richness of innovative assessment approaches. 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 pupil feedback has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the pupils' perspective. This goes beyond using assessment as a summative indicator towards

¹¹ School Website and Reflective Proforma

using it as a formative tool to support and enhance pupils' learning. At each juncture, the aim of the school is to secure its inclusive ethos, embrace diversity 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. 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 TVA, 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

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 develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why, 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 would benefit from an overview for how these elements are integrated and could build on the TVA'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.
- Consider focusing 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

¹² School Website and Reflective Proforma

Zero (Harvard University) is a particularly useful source in this respect (see Making Thinking Visible by Ron Ritchart).

- 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 to continue the development of staff as researching professionals through extending the offer of articles relating to best practice to professional publications. Other forums where impact can be made public are leader/teacher learning communities, action research seminars and conferences. The SPARE model of evaluative action research is a useful framework through which to apply this 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 TVA. 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. TVA is well placed to be a centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking and radiate best practice out to infant, primary and secondary schools in the Trust and beyond. The pursuit of level 2 re-accreditation would support this ongoing vision.

Outcome

The substantive evidence provided by TVA 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. The school and TSAT has a very visible and strong ethos, in which all pupils are encouraged to develop as articulate, critical, creative, and reflective thinkers, and it is evident from the examples provided, that Thinking Schools approaches are central to the holistic development of all pupils. TVA is a fully inclusive beacon of metacognitive excellence fully embracing of diversity and the needs of all children.

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 The Victory Academy for an exceptional achievement!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Walters', written in a cursive style.

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

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