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Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Barton Court Grammar School for the purpose of re-accreditation 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 accreditations as a level 1 and level 2 Thinking School.

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 Barton Court Grammar School (BCGS) 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 continued to move forward as a level 2 Thinking School. School evidence includes students' work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, Executive Headteacher / Headteacher reports, photographs, newsletters, project plans, 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

BCGS is a popular and successful average sized secondary school, and the lead school in the Barton Court Academy Trust (BCAT).

The school has a long history of Thinking School development and accreditation and has been at the core of the Thinking School movement since 2012/13.¹ The school has sustained its Thinking School development superbly and has gone from strength to strength by continually refreshing its focus and building progressively on its initiatives. BCGS is a school where every individual is encouraged to achieve excellence and this is captured well in its ethos statement: 'Support, Inspire, Challenge to Achieve'. BCGS is rated 'Good' by Ofsted and is clearly a school that prides itself in achieving and maintaining the highest educational standards. In addition, the school has an excellent reputation for supporting students through its inclusive pastoral system together with an outstanding extra-curricular offering. These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all.²

The school's cognitive education development journey has moved forward unswervingly since its previous accreditations. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place capturing a range of metacognitive elements such as Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Habits of Mind, Thinkers' keys, CoRT, Thinking Routines and P4C. These elements have a firm

¹ School's website

² Ibid

foundation in robust research findings and reflect the school's evidence-informed approach. Best practice is shared judiciously, and staff develop as researching professionals within a reflective practitioner approach.³

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on excellence for all students. What sets BCGS 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 BCGS 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. As a 'Hub Thinking School', BCGS is a highly influential educational organisation at a local, regional, national, and international level.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. Dissemination of practice is an integral part of the culture of the school and a huge range of mechanisms have been established in order to fulfil this such as Thinking Frames workshops, parental workshops, cross-school conferences, contributions to magazines and professional journals, collaboration with universities, coaching/leadership programmes, and hosting national and international visits. Of particular note is the full inclusion of students and Governors in the leadership and championing of developments. Indeed, there is a dedicated Thinking Schools section in the school's formal development plan. The Thinking School Lead co-ordinates a wealth of training and support. Cross Trust CPD has involved the Drive Team delivering training sessions on Thinking Tools and metacognitive strategies. New tools are introduced to staff skilfully via development days and equally skilfully to students via enrichment days. The Student Drive Team is highly influential and meet once a term together with organising four Thinking Schools projects per year. Events such as hosting national and

³ School's website, reflective proforma and digital evidence

⁴ School's website and digital evidence

⁵ Ibid

international visits further extend the reach of BCGS's influence and elements such as developing new Thinking Tools illustrate the commitment of the school to drive and extend beyond established practice. All new staff receive training in theory, pedagogy, and practical approaches relating to Thinking. There is an extensive and innovative range of resources and structures to further support the dissemination of Thinking School approaches and students are pivotal to disseminating best practice, particularly the Student Thinking Team.

More widely, there is evidence of innovative approaches being disseminated to local cluster and feeder schools and more widely. This has enabled many schools to navigate their way through the Thinking Schools journey. BCGS has fully embraced the use of technology and social media as a key element in the continued focus on sharing practice. Regionally, BCGS takes the lead in developments across the trust and more widely. Nationally, BCGS is a 'Hub Thinking School' and has influenced many other schools in a variety of contexts and sectors via training, visits, and webinars. The school has also been involved in national and international conference presentations and has recently been awarded the prestigious International School Award as a result of a sustained focus on building international partnerships. There is a clear and effective programme of dissemination across the whole multi-academy trust, the Thinking Schools network, regionally, nationally, and internationally which reflects an exemplary commitment to the development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking.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. Evaluative research is so well embedded that it is a fundamental part of the professional culture at BCGS. Curriculum leaders have had systematic and comprehensive Action Research training. This has subsequently been further extended to all teachers. Research outcomes are judiciously collated and used as a

⁶ Reflective proforma and digital evidence

springboard for school development. The SPARE model of evaluative research is used throughout the school and BCAT as a whole. BCGS utilises a range of data collection tools including classroom artefacts, teacher feedback, peer and self-assessments, Student Thinking/Learning Journals, questionnaires/surveys, and Focus Groups. The proactive involvement of the Student Voice in this respect ensures that research has an inductive as well as deductive dimension. MALS and PASS inventories are used formatively to inform and evaluate the impact of research-based interventions. This thriving research-based ethos has encouraged staff to engage with research as a fundamental basis for teaching.

Research at BCGS has clear, succinct parameters outlining what is being studied, who is being studied, together with associated core research questions. Of particular note is the deliberate alignment of practitioner research with the work of Donald Schon. This is an excellent example of the school's commitment to delivering reflective practitioner research excellence. Findings from research have directly influenced the work of the BCGS Drive Team and staff across the school, and the cycle of Lesson Study feeds into the process well. Indeed, the Cycle of Lesson Study is clearly set out and based on firm educational and research-based principles. The inclusion of high-quality qualitative elements is particularly innovative. Again, the student voice is pivotal, and the innovative Student Thinking/Learning Journal is a good example of this. 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

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

⁷ Reflective proforma and digital evidence

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 Student Thinking/Learning 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 BCGS.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 via a bespoke and extensive induction programme. Staff Development Days provide an ongoing vehicle for professional development and BCGS is very clear about what best practice looks like. The innovative illustrative document 'Excellence in Teaching and Learning Over Time' is just one exemplary example of the richness of the school's professional resource bank. Another resource example is the 'Trust Thinking Tools Gallery', an interactive platform for sharing what works best. The 'Thursday Show Case' and 'Staff Survival Thinking Guide' further add to the richness of professional resources. BCGS has an outstanding ongoing commitment to developing all teachers as mediators of learning and responds actively to external recommendations. A recent example of this is the introduction of Thinking Routines to provide a task-based environment for the teaching of thinking.

There is a highly effective lesson study cycle (as already mentioned). This has a research and impact emphasis so that practice is informed by robust evidence. Collaboration is firmly embedded throughout the school and 'Deep Dives' inform curricular developments with the Staff Voice and Student Voice driving this process. Judicious ongoing evaluative research builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. This is an area of particular expertise and one rarely seen to this extent. The Drive Team has regular focussed meetings with clear development action points that further feed into CPD

⁸ Ibid

linked to priorities. Student feedback plays an intrinsic part on development planning and is used to triangulate reflections, plans and actions. Mentoring and Coaching are integral to the professional growth of all staff. 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. BCGS links well with universities to ensure that higher education partnership work supports the school's development. 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, such that the school's developmental influence is far reaching. 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 individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. There is a prevailing culture of actively encouraging autonomy and individuality across the school. As a result, the use of thinking tools meets the needs of all children including those with general learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties, specific gifts/talents, different

⁹ Ibid

cultural/language backgrounds, social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. As such, BCGS has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. Teachers are skilful at mediating the learning needs of all children and all staff gain differentiation expertise via an excellent bespoke CPD programme targeting this particular aspect. Specific evidence of exemplary differentiation practice includes differentiation on Maths starter activities, Retrieval homework tasks, Computer Science A Level revision and a range of MFL activities. 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 such that all students are encouraged to develop individuality and autonomy. Student support is also highly personalised and adds significant value to the educational provision at BCGS. 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. 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 MALS and PASS together with the Student Thinking/Learning Journal are illustrative of this particular element. These mechanisms are 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. MALS has also been used collaboratively with researchers from Cambridge University in order to maintain a research informed development model. This is inclusive of a range of elements in order to more clearly mitigate barriers to learning and improve achievement further. Self-assessment is highly developed, and students

¹⁰ Ibid

routinely reflect upon their own learning and progress. The Senior Director of Teaching and Learning has completed a NPQSL project based on retrieval practice and both the qualitative and quantitative impact is high. The school's praise and reward system are highly effective in terms of students demonstrating high quality application of thinking tools. Behaviour data is used very effectively to systematically monitor consistency in this respect. 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.

Overall, it is clear that alternative and complimentary forms of assessment are noticeably impacting on positive learning outcomes to include examination results, metacognitive capacity, dispositional development, and psychological wellbeing. Indeed, BCGS has gained the Kent School Award for Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing in recognition of exemplary holistic educational practice and impact. There are continuous formal and informal critical evaluations of Thinking Skills, Approaches and Tools taking place throughout BCGS, 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

BCGS has responded superbly 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 BCGS's models already in place and act as a means of providing a concise overview.
- 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.
- Continue to 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, as demonstrated by BCGS, 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 BCGS. In particular, the extension of practitioner research through continued dissemination of the SPARE model of illuminative evaluation as a vehicle for further contextualising cognitive approaches to find out 'What works best?', 'For whom?', 'Under what circumstances?', 'How?' and 'Why?'. Indeed, these are key research questions that can feed into the Evaluation section of the SPARE model.

Outcome

The substantive evidence provided by BCGS creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. BCGS is undoubtedly a world-leading flagship school in terms of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. As an educational community, BCGS is exemplary and its influence is far reaching. The school and the trust are superbly led, and this cascades down throughout the organisation due to explicit core values. Students, staff, Governors and stakeholders think deeply about how to continually develop as holistic lifelong learners. Levels of collaboration are exceptional and BCGS is committed fully to being a thinking/learning organisation. The school has embraced research and evidence informed practice such that it is a beacon of metacognitive excellence for others to emulate.

In conclusion, the application has provided compelling and comprehensive evidence for accreditation, and I therefore recommend that re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until January 2026. Congratulations to Barton Court Grammar School for an exceptional achievement!



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January 2023