

**Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman on the application of The Portsmouth Academy to be accredited as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.**

The Reflective Pro-Forma with links to public documentation on the website provided evidence of progress in maintaining the school as an Advanced Thinking School – level two criteria.

**Starting point: The Thinking School context**

The Portsmouth Academy was first accredited as a Level 1 Thinking School in 2016 and is now seeking Level 2 accreditation. The criteria for accreditation as an 'Advanced Thinking School' starts from the assumption that all criteria for the first level of accreditation by the University of Exeter's Cognitive Education Development Unit 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.

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. The Portsmouth Academy has provided an in-depth and reflective portfolio, along with substantive evidence in a password protected area of the website. 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.

## **Dissemination of practice**

There is clear evidence of sharing practice and experience across curriculum areas within the school. The school use a school-wide programme of Thinking Skills, focusing in particular on Thinking Maps, Thinking Keys, Six Hats and Cort tools, and Habits of Mind throughout lessons and around the school. There is clear evidence of extensive dissemination of practice to students, with wall displays throughout the school, and outstanding examples of student work in all subject areas. Thinking Skills are fully embedded in the school's teaching and learning ethos, which is clearly visible in the standard of student work. This is helped by the fact that many of the school's current students are readily equipped with a Thinking Vocabulary, as they arrive from feeder schools that are also Thinking Schools. The common language of Thinking is clearly evidenced in much of the student work presented in the portfolio and this is reinforced throughout the child's journey through the school, in classes, assemblies and personal development sessions. For 2019-2020 the Personal Development curriculum has been expanded to include the teaching of neuroscience to all students, alongside the student planners and other tools, to support the development of student dispositions. In addition, the school has launched a programme of self-reflection for students, which will enable students to use a variety of thinking tools to create a 'Thinking Journal' throughout the year.

Parents receive information about the school being a Thinking School at the beginning of the school year in Year 7, and reference is made to parents of Thinking Tools in verbal and written reports, although there seems to be little further practical information about the various thinking tools available for parents on the website, should they want more information about these. Having said this, the Thinking Schools Trust ethos is communicated clearly to parents and to the school's governors and understanding and awareness seems to be growing.

Since the school is a member of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust, there are extensive links with other schools in the trust, as well as with the Portsmouth Teaching School Alliance. Social media is used to share Thinking Schools specific information and news and visitors, both from within the TSAT and local schools, as well as visitors from overseas have been visiting the school. Staff from the school has participated in the TSI Conference on Thinking Skills and the Principal participated in a local conference on thinking skills and inclusion. In sum, there is

ample evidence of shared practice within the portfolio, and further dissemination of Thinking Skills practices, in particular among local schools is greatly encouraged, as The Portsmouth Academy has much excellent practice to share in a wider context.

### **Evaluative research**

The Portsmouth Academy has undergone large transformations recently, in particular the move from a girls-only school to a co-educational school, which has, in part, fuelled the need for a systematic programme of school-wide evaluation. It is clear from the portfolio that evaluative research is used to excellent effect in the school. For example, MALS has been administered bi-annually to a random group of 20 students in each year group, complemented with focus group interviews and reflection sheets. This extensive data set has informed the school about student attitudes and perceptions and has helped to plan future practice based on predictions that can be made confidently, based on the range of data. There is clear evidence in the portfolio of not only the systematic gathering of data, but of reflective and in-depth engagement and discussion with and of the data, both in terms of possible remedial action, as well as a clear reflection on possible explanations of the findings. This is highly commendable and signifies a strong ethos of reflective practice.

Teaching staff in the school has consistently engaged in Action Research, with a variety of topics, including developing students' independent learning and metacognition skills, behaviour in maths, and self-assessment and evaluation in history. Students are also routinely asked for their input in evaluations, for instance about their own habits of mind, which then form a basis of future practice. It is interesting to note that there are established plans to involve students more in school-wide evaluations, with clear evidence of understanding the importance and power of adding a student voice to the evaluation of Thinking Tools, providing the school not only with an insight into student perceptions, but also with a way of involving students at a deeper level into the planning, implementation and evaluation of thinking skills in the curriculum.

School-wide data in relation to attainment has indicated a steady increase in students reaching age-expected standards across the school since initial accreditation as a Thinking School. Ofsted last inspected the school in 2017, when it was judged to be Excellent and Good,

a huge step up from being placed under special measures in 2012. Students now achieve well-above the local and national average in core subjects and the percentages have increased impressively in each subject over the past few years, showing real progress in student attainment. Together with the data discussed above, these excellent results provide a good indicator of the benefit of a Thinking School ethos and are testament to the consistent hard work put in by both staff and pupils in this regard, something that was also noted explicitly by OFSTED in their inspection report.

### **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, a strong programme of staff development is in place throughout the school, which is rooted in the Thinking School ethos. New staff engages in a programme of induction that provides a strong foundation into Thinking Skills and approaches to thinking. In addition, the school is organising bi-weekly 'Truly Great Teaching' briefings in which all staff have the opportunity to share their best practice and strategies. The evidence includes examples from a range of subject areas on a wide range of topics, including the use of various thinking tools and higher order questioning. Newly qualified staff at The Portsmouth Academy have a dedicated CPD plan based around action research and recently, a number of staff have begun to use the SWIVL lesson observation system as part of their professional development, both as a way of observing their own practice and to share good practice with colleagues. Further plans are in place to integrate the observation tool more systematically in the school's coaching system. Further use of the SWIVL observation system could be extremely valuable, both in terms of professional development and as a research tool to use in Lesson Study or Action Research projects.

Staff also engages in Cognition Crew meetings, alongside other members of the Trust. These meetings provide an opportunity to critically engage with and discuss a (recent) research report or paper, thus developing the knowledge base of the staff in terms of evidence-based practice. Topics have included 'cognitive load' and 'feedback' and evidence suggests in-

depth engagement with the ideas and subsequent changes in teaching practice. It would be interesting to see how these ideas are shared amongst wider Portsmouth Academy staff and to consider organising similar in-school workshops, perhaps alongside a Lesson Study cycle or Action Research project. This will not only help to continue developing ways in which the research can be shared more widely, but also to develop robust ways of linking the various topics that teachers are focusing on with teaching thinking across the school.

### **Differentiation**

Differentiation is one of the strengths of The Portsmouth Academy, with 8% of pupils receiving SEN support and 20% of pupils who have English as an additional language. The progress of children with EAL and AMA is outstanding and there are well-established processes throughout the school for working with a range of abilities. Children are set in mixed ability groupings in all subject except English, Maths and Science, in order to develop a sense of community and provide students with a safe environment in which to develop their Habits of Excellence. Motivational Mapping, to link students' motivations to their pastoral and academic needs, is used to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations of students, which would allow for more effective differentiation in lesson planning for staff.

A variety of Thinking Tools is used in lessons to scaffold student learning and, importantly, students are confident in using the Thinking Tools effectively to help scaffold their own learning. The evidence includes some excellent examples of the use of various thinking tools to plan and support writing and questioning, not only supporting effective differentiation across a range of abilities, but also indicating an excellent self-directed learning approach from students.

### **Whole School assessment**

The Portsmouth Academy clearly engages in extensive and ongoing self-reflection that being an Advanced Thinking School demands. The SPARE wheel pro-forma, together with the portfolio evidence has identified a robust framework for planning and evaluation across the school and clear indicators of measuring the effects of teaching approaches in a variety of ways. It is clear that assessing responses to innovations and change is at the forefront of

thinking at The Portsmouth Academy, and a variety of appropriate, school-wide measurement tools have been developed to assess changes within the school.

The school uses and has developed a range of qualitative and quantitative measures and makes sure to address a variety of stakeholders, including students. There are strong initiatives to further include student voice in the evaluation of approaches and there is a strong focus on developing collaborative practice across staff. The use of data across to school to evaluate effectiveness is impressive, indicating a very strong understanding of how a variety of measurements and data can help to form robust, evidence-based practice. I am particularly impressed by the evidence indicating a continuing process of in-depth, critical and considerate reflection and engagement with the range of data; not only from the school leadership, but the Drive Team and individual staff members across subjects.

#### **Points for further consideration**

I would suggest the following areas for further consideration during the 3-year period of accreditation. Thinking Schools @Exeter would welcome your response to these points and whether they might provide the focus of the moderation and support visit from a member of our team at a time to be mutually agreed.

- To further develop opportunities for increasing student voice and pupil contribution to evaluation, perhaps by considering students as research partners in Action Research studies.
- To actively develop further the school's leading role in the local community and wider afield, focusing not only on partner and feeder schools but presenting themselves confidently as a lead school on Teaching Thinking in the region.
- To further develop the underlying knowledge-base of teachers, to help develop understanding of how and why various thinking tools support student learning and to support teachers to confidently adapt tools and approaches for a variety of situations. This can be done using Lesson Study and/or focused themes discussions around key topics, supported by recent literature around these topics (including, for instance,

metacognition, dialogue, collaborative learning, self-regulated learning, and motivation, amongst others).

- To further expand the use of observation tools in staff development. Observation tools such as SWIVL can be used in Action Research projects, Lesson Study and collaborative team teaching projects.

### **Outcome**

In conclusion, the application has provided extensive evidence for accreditation and I therefore recommend that accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until February 2023. Congratulations to The Portsmouth Academy for an outstanding achievement!



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