

Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of Cedar 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 accreditation as a level 1 Thinking School in 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 Cedar Children's Academy (CCA) in the form of a Reflective Proforma, 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, School Improvement Partner (SIP) report, photographs, newsletters, Performance Management documentation, Level One Accreditation Staff Year Group Evaluations, 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

Cedar Children's Academy (CCA) is a popular and successful larger than average primary school (650 on roll), situated within the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT), comprised of 18 schools (10 primary and 8 secondary). CCA joined TSAT in July 2016 and received Level One Thinking School accreditation in May 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. CCA's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research and embraces knowledge / skills, learning habits, memory and schema development, and thinking tools. CCA's curriculum acts to operationalise the school's mission and include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity and resilience and parental engagement.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at CCA. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and CCA is rightly proud to be one of only three schools in Medway to be awarded the Carnegie Centre of Excellence Mental Health Award for Schools. Of the 650 pupils on roll, 54% are boys, 46% are girls, 12% are classed as having SEN support, 10% have EAL and 24% of pupils are eligible for the Pupil Premium. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2016 and since then, CCA has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and curriculum development aligned to the key attributes it seeks to develop and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.²

CCA 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. The Drive Team members have to express their interest in becoming a member of the team and then the final team is selected by SLT based on having a variety of experience and key stages driving thinking forward. 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 Headteacher and Governors. Governors are and active and integral part of the leadership of the school and Thinking Schools developments are discussed at each Governor's meeting. 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 Student Drive Team, and this reflects the school's commitment to securing an active student

¹ School's website

² Ibid

voice in school developments. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

Pupils at CCA have an 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 CCA 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 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. Again, this has a clear focus and includes Transition, Meta-Memory and 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. Another good example of a themed approach being taken is the focus on retrieval in the classroom. Throughout, runs a thread of emphasis on enabling others to use meta-cognitive 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 CCA. These include weekly briefings, training videos and 'Expert Groups'. There is a 'researching professional' culture and some staff are applying their NPQML development to specific research projects. An example of this is a collaborative project across Medway where the use of the FANTASTIC lenses has

³ Ibid

⁴ School's website

⁵ Ibid

been applied to improve children's writing and use of language. CCA has extended its influence nationally by working with schools within Portsmouth and Plymouth. This is part of an extended influence where the TSAT CEO and members of the executive team support educational leaders on a national scale.⁶

CCA's curriculum is internationally informed, with the aim of developing children as global citizens. The use of 'big questions' and subsequent discussion work and debate is an excellent example of this. In addition, the school takes an active part in international challenges such as the I-Walk and Walk for Amal. This has enabled children to gain a 'real world' awareness of global issues. A variety of staff have presented at trust conferences. Again, this takes a researching professional approach. A recent 'Making Connections' conference with a focus on cognitive education, retrieval techniques and meta-memory is an excellent example of this. CCA is a regular contributor to a variety of publications. 'Thinking Thursdays' uses social media to showcase the use of thinking skills. Children are actively engaged in publications and the creation and publication of the book 'The 6 Seeds of Cedar' is a wonderful example, where the habits of mind are explained in the style of Dr Seuss. The TSAT newsletter provides another far-reaching forum for sharing practice and CCA 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 (Think Ahead and NPQML), specific evaluative processes include both quantitative and qualitative mechanisms such as Q Matrix, Reflective Journals, Pupil Voice, Surveys, and the innovative 'Be Your Best Self' (BYBS) journal. Specific cognitive foci include self-selection of thinking tools, flexible thinking (breadth, depth and exploration), understanding of using thinking tools in different contexts, and questioning linked to Bloom's Taxonomy. Social foci embrace collaborative skill development, reduction of bullying, development of citizenship skills, shared dialogue and discussion, and the development of listening skills. Emotional foci blend together attitude development, opportunities to develop persistence and self-confidence, and development of collective pride through shared reflection and celebration.

⁶ School Website and Reflective Proforma

⁷ Reflective Proforma

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 BYBS journals which forms an intrinsic part of the school's dispositional development strand. This is celebrated through assemblies and a bespoke Habits of Mind Champions rewards scheme which shows clear evidence of engaging pupils in their own personal development. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at CCA.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 CCA 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. Staff development questionnaires build individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. For example, this has led to a current focus on Thinking Keys as this emerged as a common

⁸ School Website and Reflective Proforma

⁹ Ibid

aspect in need of development. 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, retrieval, CPD geared towards level 2 accreditation (building on level 1 development points). This is underpinned by a 'Thinking Policy', which is central to a wider Teaching and Learning Policy, comprising of 7 core principles accepted as having a high impact of teaching and learning. These principles include subject knowledge, explanations, questioning and responding, feedback to feedforward, modelling, metacognition and memory. Lesson observation reflection sheets adopt a Thinking Hats format in order to retain a strong reflective element. In addition, there is an established process of training certification to promote high standards. 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, CCA has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. School Based Support Plans are a good example of the importance the school places on personalisation. 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

¹⁰ Ibid

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 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 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 BYBS journal, 'Quiz' tasks and Growth Mindset displays are illustrative of this particular element. 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. Pupils are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them. Thinking Hats are used as a framework for self-assessment, planning and feedback and Thinking Keys add to this. The BAR Thinking Key is an excellent example of this self-assessment application. Student Drive Team questionnaires link with a wider Pupil Voice questionnaire to further add to the richness of innovative assessment approaches. The assessment and evaluative information is 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 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 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 CCA, which include a wide variety of stakeholders. This

¹¹ School Website and Reflective Proforma

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 CCA'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.
- 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.
- Further develop evaluative research to continue the development of staff as researching professionals through the 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

¹² School Website and Reflective Proforma

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 CCA. 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. CCA 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 CCA 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.

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 March 2025. Congratulations to Cedar Children's Academy for an exceptional achievement!



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