

**Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of Newbridge Junior School 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 the University of Exeter's 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 accreditation as a Level 1 Thinking School in 2017.

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 Newbridge Junior School 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, MALS surveys, 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.

### **The school context**

Newbridge Junior School is part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT). TSAT has seen its family of schools increase over the last three years from 11 schools to 17.<sup>1</sup> It is a larger than average mixed non-selective school in Portsmouth, Hampshire. The school is highly inclusive of all children, regardless of background, and of particular note is the high % of children eligible for free school meals in the last six years (46% compared to a national figure 24.3%).<sup>2</sup> In 2017, Ofsted judged the school as continuing to be 'Good', with marked improvements in achievement (particularly boys) and attendance. Ofsted go on to comment on the friendly and happy environment and also refer to the high levels of pupil and parent satisfaction with the education provided by the school.<sup>3</sup>

The school was accredited as a Level 1 school in 2017. Subsequently, the aim for the school has been to further embed Thinking Tools and Dispositional qualities, with a particular focus on meta-cognitive strategies and principles. Newbridge Junior School reflects the core aims and values of TSAT and apply them skilfully in its own unique context. The school makes this explicit on their website by saying Our 'Thinking School' approach is consistent with the aims below and helps to ensure that:

Pupils in TSAT are supported to think for themselves, through the development of a thorough understanding of purposeful thinking tools that they can use to aid and monitor their own progress.

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<sup>1</sup> TSAT Website

<sup>2</sup> DFE Website

<sup>3</sup> Ofsted Report October 2017

Staff in TSAT are encouraged to think accurately and reflectively about their practice and understand a range of thinking tools that can be used to support student motivation and progress'.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that Newbridge Junior School has continued to develop 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. This includes self and peer assessment, Assessment for Learning (AfL), sharing of blogs and research articles, Teaching Assistants (TA) training, and Newsletters. There is also evidence of innovative approaches to dissemination being in place at Newbridge Junior School. Swivl (a platform for sharing video examples of teaching approaches) and 'Thinking Clinics' are excellent examples of this dimension and serve to illustrate the supportive ethos of continuing professional development (CPD). More widely, through links with other schools. There is a clear and effective programme of dissemination across the whole multi-academy trust which includes the TSAT magazine. In addition, Newbridge Junior School leads the Portsmouth Primary Thinking Hub. This is a group of schools taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking who meet regularly. These meetings culminate in the production of a bulletin in order to further share good practice. Newbridge staff have also presented at national conferences. In relation to this, Jack Jones used thinking maps to illustrate how they could be effectively used for monitoring pupil progress, and Maria Hughes took the dispositional development principles of Habits of Mind and applied them to the development of the Primary Pathway for EAL. Newbridge Junior School, receives requests for school to school support from a variety of schools outside the TSAT aimed at developing thinking

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<sup>4</sup> School Website

approaches via curriculum development and pedagogical approaches. This is illustrative of the high-quality developmental provision and impact at Newbridge.<sup>5</sup>

Newbridge Junior School is actively pursuing international links via Twitter. The idea behind this is to develop a network of collaboration on a global scale with other Thinking Schools. This is an exciting move, and one that the school is more than ready to take on with its proven record of strong leadership of disseminating good practice in relation to Thinking Schools.<sup>6</sup>

### **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 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. This includes specific consideration of the impact of initiatives on the learning and development of pupils. Specific evaluative activities are centred around metamemory and retrieval practice, progression of learning across phases, self-assessment practices to monitor impact of thinking tools, international collaboration via skype, Teach Meets across the Portsmouth Thinking Hub, staff Masters level action research projects, and continued development of metacognitive strategies self-regulated by pupils. 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.<sup>7</sup>

The 'Thinking at Newbridge' lead is ably supported by the deputy thinking lead and drive team. Together, they provide a skilful representation of expertise from across the school so that new ideas for teaching and learning are explored, researched and, if successful, fed back

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<sup>5</sup> School Website and Reflective Proforma

<sup>6</sup> School Website

<sup>7</sup> School Development Circle Map

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 Habits of Mind tracking data which forms an intrinsic part of the school's dispositional reward scheme. This is celebrated through assemblies and a bespoke 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 Newbridge.<sup>8</sup>

### **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. The focus at Newbridge is staff ownership of developments through a highly effective lesson study cycle. This is a four stage annual cycle and has been running for three years. Topics for development are carefully considered as part of an initial team meeting to ensure developments are tailored to the specific teaching contexts. The improvements in the quality of peer and self-assessment have arisen out of this high-quality professional development and illustrates the high premium placed on developing reflective researching professionals. This has allowed the school to focus not so much on the use of specific Thinking Tools, but 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.

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<sup>8</sup> School Website and Reflective Proforma

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 and performance management 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. The use of innovative resources like Swivl (a form of video technology) has allowed the school to further extend capacity in this respect and to share best practice widely.<sup>9</sup>

### **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, Newbridge has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond 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. A recently challenging cohort of year 6 students has not deflected the school's resolve to provide the best educational experiences for the children in its charge. This shows real commitment to the ethos of cognitive education. 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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> School Website and Reflective Proforma

<sup>10</sup> School Website and Reflective Proforma

## **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 AfL principles is 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. The MALS is used judiciously as a supplementary form of assessment and evaluation. The results of which are subject to skilful interpretation in order to help guide the next stages in pupils' learning and development. This evaluative information is shared school-wide in order to strengthen the consistency of effective teaching and learning strategies. This clear line of pupil feedback has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the pupils' perspective. This goes beyond using the MALS 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 Newbridge, 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 school.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> School Website and Reflective Proforma

### **Points for further consideration**

The submitted evidence has enabled the accreditor to identify 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.

- Further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best by rationalising 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.
- 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 development planning. Development planning should have a clear focus on meta-cognitive development, feedback and developing teachers as effective mediators of learning.
- Focus lesson observations on key indicators of learning and thinking processes. These need to be simple, clearly observable and made explicit to all staff.
- 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.
- Extend the ethos of evaluative research to foster the development of staff as researching professionals. Try to move from a self-evaluation processes that produce objectives to ones that generate research questions of the style 'How can we/I improve...?'. The SPARE model of evaluative action research is a useful framework through which to apply this.
- Consider developing a systematic research study of Thinking Skills, involving teachers, pupils and external stakeholders, ideally leading to publication.

- Continue to share the excellent cognitive education expertise and experience of Newbridge Junior School with local schools and build the development of thinking into transition work through 'The Bridge'.

### **Outcome**

The substantive evidence provided by Newbridge Junior School 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 Skills approaches are central to student learning and development.

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 October 2022. Congratulations to Newbridge Junior School for an exceptional achievement!



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

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