

**Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman on the application of Notting Hill Preparatory 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 criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools @Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the school community. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have 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 sustained progress Notting Hill Preparatory School has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community, following on from the previous accreditation in 2014.

The focus for this advanced level of accreditation will be on the presentation of evidence of how the school has continued to move forward in developing itself as an Advanced Thinking School. Evidence has been sought on teaching and support staff's skills as reflective practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and the continuing impact of teaching thinking 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 to staff, students and beyond; Evaluative Research of Thinking Skills; Professional Development of staff; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment. Notting Hill Preparatory School has utilised an Evidence Wheel

approach for presenting evidence, and this has been carefully assessed, along with the proforma.

Evidence includes examples of Lesson Study reports, meeting minutes, student work, and research reports, amongst many other forms of evidence. From the wide range of evidence provided, it is clear that the school has developed itself from its original accreditation, towards an Advanced Accredited Thinking School over the past few years.

### **The school context**

Notting Hill Preparatory School was created by a group of local parents in 2003, and Metacognition and Self-reflection have always been core pillars of the school's ethos, signified by the school's motto 'To think, to thrive'. The school was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2014, and has further developed the Thinking Ethos throughout the school. The school has undergone extensive changes in the past few years, with an additional school building, a new Head of School, and of course, the recent Covid pandemic.

It is clear from the evidence presented that Notting Hill Preparatory School has continued to develop a culture of thinking in the school and, as an Advanced Thinking School, their ethos is carried out at every opportunity, for instance via the school website, which very clearly displays the school's Thinking School ethos and provides excellent information about the journey as an Advanced Thinking School, tools used and how these benefit student learning.

### **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. As a well-established Thinking School, Notting Hill Preparatory School has developed as a model school for other schools considering becoming a Thinking School. The school has worked closely with Thinking Matters to establish and maintain contact with other Thinking Schools associated with Thinking Matters and as such, several visits have taken place, both with a national and international context. The school is very active within the Thinking Schools Hub, and presentations have been given in hub meetings and in the annual Thinking

Matters Conference. It is evident that the school is an important and valuable member of this Community of Excellence around Teaching Thinking.

Publications from members of the Drive Team about the school's work as a Thinking School and its benefits appeared in magazines, and as a school firmly rooted within the community, much work is done in creating and sustaining links with local schools. An example can be seen through the annual Critical Thinking Dinner, which involves parents, teachers and pupils, and the bursary scheme. The school also works with local charities and volunteering schemes for pupils. Importantly, the Thinking School ethos is carried out extensively throughout the school's website and brochures, and there is an extensive guide for parents on 'becoming a Thinking School parent', which clearly sets out the Thinking School ethos within the school, utilising the schools' 'Thinking School Toolkit', which is an example of excellent practice around dissemination of practice and ethos. Parents were also invited to a back-to-school evening, which very clearly signposted the Thinking School toolkit in the various subject areas.

In terms of dissemination to pupils, the school has embedded the use of Thinking Maps, P4C and Habits of Mind throughout the school, and examples of pupil work are provided as evidence. Over the years, a focus on Thinking Maps and the role of questioning for thinking have been added, and examples of use of Thinking Maps are presented from all year groups. Assemblies are used to discuss key aspects of Thinking Skills with pupils and examples of pupil work demonstrate an engagement with a range of thinking tools throughout. Most recently, the staff has engaged in professional development around mindfulness, to aid Year1 and Year 3 transitioning, and in general, to support pupil wellbeing, which seems highly appropriate given the current pandemic. Assemblies have been offered to students related to wellbeing and mindfulness and it is evident that this is a key focal point for the school. From the evidence provided, it is clear that *Thinking* and Thinking Skills are core components of the school's ethos, and this ethos is carried out wherever possible, to parents, staff, pupils and the wider community.

## **Evaluative research**

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff is seeking evidence of positive outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to develop whole-school learning. While it is recognised that a direct causal link between approaches to Teaching Thinking and student outcomes is often difficult to establish, the school engages in several assessment practices to establish the effects on pupil learning and self-concept. Given the recent focus on pupil wellbeing, a clear focus has been identified for Mindfulness and habits of Learning. Evidence has been provided of an excellent cycle of lesson study, demonstrating interesting questions raised, evidence gathered and plans for reporting. Staff teams, which include a member of the Drive Team have regular meetings, and Thinking Skills are featured clearly in the staff development and appraisal processes. Staff surveys have been used to evaluate staff's perceptions of Thinking Schools, and this could serve as a starting point for further embedding a shared language amongst staff around what it means to be a Thinking School.

To ensure the continuing development of staff within the whole school, a system of monitoring was implemented, to chart expertise in the form of CPD. An interesting note was added in relation to recognising where expertise had left the school; awareness of which, and planning around, is key for continuing development as a Thinking School. It is good to see the school's clear awareness and recognition of whole-school implementation strategies to sustain innovation and change – a notable example is the re-engagement with mindfulness, which was introduced in 2016, after which the focus dwindled, yet taken up again in light of the school's shift to support habits of learning and wellbeing post-lockdown. The school has not, in the past, used MALS, but is planning to use the PASS surveys, which seems an appropriate tool in light of the above-mentioned shift, and as Thinking Schools @Exeter, we would be interested in being informed about the outcomes of these tests as part of our wider research into the effects of Teaching Thinking in schools.

Notting Hill Preparatory School utilises an extensive programme of evaluation across the school, and there is good evidence of evaluating outcomes, development and wellbeing of staff and pupils.

## **Professional development**

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, indicated by the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative, demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators in the development of a Thinking Ethos in the school and beyond. In terms of technical development, new staff receive training in the use of thinking tools and strategies related to these and are provided with extensive information about the school's Thinking Ethos. Teachers from other schools are invited to visit the school to help introduce and support new thinking tools, and this programme of work is extended to parents, who are also offered extensive information about the approaches to thinking used in the school. Staff are kept up to date throughout the year with an extensive programme of professional development, which is monitored and evaluated both formally and informally.

Staff seem well-supported in their professional development and it is clear that the programme of support and enrichment has led to a high level of knowledge, expertise and skills around Thinking Skills. This strongly contribute to the school's Thinking Ethos, by ensuring a common language of thinking throughout the school. There is extensive evidence of novel and in-depth use of thinking tools which demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of staff around the role and function of the various thinking tools used within the school. There is evidence of engagement with a range of literature around pedagogy and education, which is an interesting sign that staff is up to date with the latest 'thinking about thinking'.

In some submitted documents, the issue of providing enough time for staff development, collaboration, and embedding change in practice was mentioned. It seems important that the school continues to ensure that staff is supported, both formally and informally, to systematically implement, evaluate and, perhaps most importantly, share best practice.

## **Differentiation**

This area of accreditation includes an evaluation of the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups and the way in which the school harnesses the strengths of Teaching Thinking for ensuring the individual needs of all pupils are met. This

also includes a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem solving. Notting Hill Preparatory School is not a selective school, and a sizable percentage of pupils each year are identified as having a mild to medium specific learning need. It is therefore not surprising that differentiation is high on the agenda for the school, with extensive evidence of teachers adapting a range of Thinking Tools for pupil's individual needs. The documents submitted demonstrate clear evidence of planning, use and evaluation of Thinking Skills in relation to pupils' individual needs, for instance through adaptive targeted questioning and adaptive use of other Thinking Tools, such as Thinking Maps.

A very interesting aspect around harnessing the strengths of Teaching Thinking to ensure the needs of all pupils are met, can be found in the school's reflective stance with regard to recognising its responsibility as a school located in a diverse community. The activities around Black History Month and other examples around developing inclusive and anti-racist practices are exemplary and a clear example of how a Thinking School ethos needs to include a strong recognition of inclusion, diversity and equality.

### **Whole School assessment**

This aspect of the accreditation relates to pupils' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' and peer formative assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Some of this has already been mentioned under previous sections, but in general, it is evident that Notting Hill Preparatory School engages in a continuing formal and informal programme of critical evaluations of thinking skills, teaching and dissemination practices, in relation to both pupil achievement and student wellbeing. In the past years, the school seems to have developed into a reflective community of practice, in which areas of development are clearly set out, and evidence is systematically gathered to evaluate whether targets are met. Evidence is also presented of the awareness and knowledge of staff of cognitive and psychological processes that underpin many of the Thinking Tools used by the school, which allow staff to adapt various Thinking Tools the school's specific context and needs. Examples of this are the important role of metacognition in the school's pedagogy, an

excellent understanding of Habits of Mind and excellent adaptive use of questioning techniques and pupil dialogue.

### **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 support visit from a member of our team at a time to be mutually agreed.

- To consider developing a more extensive framework of reflective practice, developing teachers as reflective and researching professionals. The school might do this through enhanced use of the Lesson Study approach or by developing and supporting Action Research for staff. As a research-led accreditation organisation, we would be happy to support staff in developing Action Research.
- Building onto the excellent work already done on inclusion, to consider the role of pupils as stakeholders within the Thinking School, further developing pupil's engagement with Thinking Skills, not only as 'users', but also as 'participant developers'.
- To further develop the initiatives within the school on equality, diversity and inclusion, for instance by focusing on dialogic approaches to teaching, which would fit very well with the Philosophy for Children and questioning programmes of work already in place in the school. For info, at Thinking Schools @Exeter, a research project currently takes place around how teachers (can) use cultural community domains and identities in their teaching of thinking, and we welcome teachers to participate in this project. Please do not hesitate to contact us, should you want more information.

## **Outcome**

Notting Hill Preparatory School was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2014 and the school has gone from strength to strength since. The substantive evidence provided creates a very clear picture of Notting Hill Preparatory School as a school where Thinking Skills are at the heart of the school and where the Thinking Ethos can be found in all aspects of school life. All pupils are encouraged to develop as thinkers and Teaching Thinking is 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 March 2024. Congratulations to Notting Hill Preparatory School for an outstanding achievement!



**Dr Judith Kleine Staarman**

**Thinking Schools @Exeter  
Graduate School of Education  
College of Social Sciences and International Studies  
University of Exeter**

**March 2021**