Report by Dr Margo Greenwood on the application of Barton Court Grammar School to become an accredited Advanced Thinking School by the Cognitive Education Development Unit, University of Exeter.

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

Starting point: the Thinking School context

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. 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 internal subject areas. The school has developed and rolled out a range of tools that are used consistently across subjects in all year groups, as shown in lessons, displays, work produced by learners, pastoral activities, online and within meeting minutes.

Evidence also shows a commitment to sharing experience and practice in the community, such as an SLE programme (School to School Support) and Year 5 Thinking Schools projects in feeder primary schools. Promoting the Thinking School ethos to students, parents and visitors is considered through a ‘Thinking School Room’ at school events, and via training for parents and carers. By becoming a Thinking Hub school for Kent and Medway, this commitment is expanding further.

Dissemination is evident more widely, with examples such as presenting a workshop at the Thinking Schools International conference for the past three years.

Evaluative research

Action research has explored how thinking tools facilitate teacher’s planning and delivery to promote students’ learning, with findings feeding back into future planning and delivery. Action research has also explored how to facilitate activating learners as owners of their own learning. The school has gathered ongoing data that demonstrates that the use of the tools are fully embedded in the school system, and are having an impact on the whole community and the individuals within it.

There is evidence to show that teachers are sensitive to students’ development. This is mainly focused on cognitive and collaborative processes, with some focus on students’ developing attitudes, interest in the world around them, motivation, self-belief and optimism. Such development is captured through a wide range of assessment and evaluation tools. The PASS Survey was used to analyse how students perceive the school and their studies as well as themselves as learners. Findings influenced discussions around option choices and to support identified students with their learning and thinking skills.
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 that new members of staff are automatically trained in all the thinking tools used throughout the school, and are provided with a comprehensive thinking school guidance document. This includes trainee teachers from Christ Church University and School Direct students from the NHTSA/ATA Teaching alliances. New staff are also able to observe and discuss lessons conducted by more experienced practitioners in the school. The lead team are able to show where and how the school’s journey has progressed since accreditation as a Thinking School, incorporating new approaches to complement those already being used.

There is a robust Continuous Professional Development Programme, which is monitored through the METAL programme to inform quality and consistency.

For qualitative development, there are obvious indicators from planning that teachers at Barton Court Grammar School strive to make their lessons meaningful and relevant to their students, and at an appropriate level. Time is allocated at the end of lessons to reflect on what has been learnt and why this is important.

Differentiation

There is evidence of sensitivity to the individual needs of students across the ability range. Tools are used to encourage individuality and autonomy in problem-solving. Tasks and activities are organised in such a way as to enable all students to access their thinking tools and skills in order to participate well, including through the use of informative pages in Student Planners and a Thinking Page on the student portal. The school’s Gifted and Talented Programme supports advanced thinking skills.
Whole School assessment

Barton Court Grammar School clearly engages in the ongoing self-reflection that the cognitive approach to learning demands. There are various whole school assessment practices, including a detailed self-evaluation form, the Year 11 Team 60 strategy, and a pupil self-review after mock exams. There is critical reflection on the tools themselves and students’ responses to engaging with them. The Student Drive team meets with Directors of Thinking and Learning and the Staff Drive team to discuss new initiatives. Our Student Voice meets with Pastoral Leaders and the Deputy Head to discuss new initiatives and review current practices.

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. The University of 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 CEDU at a time to be mutually agreed.

- Evidence could be more explicit on how the school encourages past students and/or receiving schools to continue their students’ use of thinking skills.

- Clear plans of how to chart progress as a Thinking Hub school for Kent and Medway over the three year period need to be available.

- Further evidence could to be gathered to show that students can relate what they are doing to previous tasks and future demands, and that homework involving thinking skills is perceived by the students as serving a useful purpose.

- Evidence could be more explicit in showing how thinking tools have played a significant part in meeting the needs of children with general learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties, different cultural and language backgrounds, and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.
• Action research needs to describe how the data is analysed and the ethical considerations of undertaking the study.

Outcome

In conclusion, the application has provided sufficient evidence for accreditation and I therefore recommend that accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until July 2020.

Congratulations to Barton Court Grammar School for an outstanding achievement!

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