

Putting thinking at the heart of learning...

Patrick Affley, headteacher at Christ the King Catholic Primary in Cardiff, explains why his school chose to become a Thinking School and what this label means.

With increasing value placed upon independent and cooperative learning, many schools are exploring ways to weave creativity and cognitive development into the fabric of everyday school life. We tackled this by becoming a Thinking School, an educational community in which all members share a common commitment to think reflectively, critically and creatively about everything that takes place.

We initially began our journey in a bid to provide our more able and talented pupils with appropriate, challenging opportunities. During this time, our school undertook several action research projects which gave insight into our teaching and the strategies that we could use to enhance our pupils' learning. We were keen to ensure that any strategies we developed were inclusive and benefited all pupils. We also wanted our pupils to become more engaged and involved in their own learning.

Although our findings were translated into classroom practice, our approach was too haphazard; we had plenty of ideas but no cohesive practice. Instead of having generic strategies that could be applied across the curriculum, we found that different strategies were being used in different classes and situated in different subject domains. As a result, our aims and plans were not realised; we may have felt that we were engaged in developing thinking to improve effective learning, but in reality we were tinkering about at the edges.

What we needed was a whole-school approach, with a shared understanding on why we were using a particular strategy. It was at this point that we came across Thinking Schools International and the training on David Hyerle's eight Thinking Maps. Here was a dynamic tool based on a clear conceptual framework, that could be used by any age group, was cross-curricular and, perhaps most importantly for our staff, was a tool that they could see would immediately benefit their teaching and their pupils' learning.

How we developed our action plan

Our journey towards becoming a Thinking School began with our first whole-school training on David

Hyerle's Thinking Maps. By using the maps, pupils, staff, governors and parents began to share a language that enabled thinking for learning to effectively take place. It was because of this training, and the subsequent implementation, that we began to develop our shared understanding, our mutual commitment and rationale, which have proved to be so powerful.

As a school, we developed a Thinking Policy, cross-referenced to subject specific policies – the school's Learning and Teaching Policy and Assessment Policy. Our Thinking Policy is reviewed every year in the light of our developing understanding. The strategies that staff are using are highlighted in schemes of work and weekly planning.

From the start, governors were engaged in the developed rationale for our actions through visits to our school, training and termly reports. Parents are also kept informed and encouraged to become part of the development process through weekly newsletters, termly curriculum information, the school prospectus, leaflets, curriculum meetings and our website. During this time, the whole school community was involved in the review of the mission and vision statement for our school. Our priority to develop children's thinking and positive attitudes to life-long learning is now part of our mission statement.

Putting our plans into action

Throughout our journey, we have always had a clear idea of what type of learning community we wanted our school to become, as well as plans for what we wanted to achieve. However, like all plans, these have been frequently amended. For example, when we first introduced David Hyerle's Maps, we had planned for them to be embedded in our school after a year. In reality we found that although our staff were using them with confidence in their teaching, an insufficient number of pupils were using the maps independently to support their own learning. It took us two years to fully embed the maps. This reminded

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us that real transformation always takes longer than you expect and, although this may be frustrating, the process cannot be rushed.

Sometimes what we achieved was not only the result of a departure from the direction planned at the start of the year, but also a result of the unexpected. As a consequence of all staff taking part in training at the same time and having joint shared responsibility for the implementation of the strategy, honest and open communication developed, enabling us to share our thinking about our own growing practice and learn from each other.

What surprised us most was the impact that these strategies had on our teaching styles and our expectations for pupil involvement. We soon realised that when using a strategy such as Thinking Maps, we could no longer teach the way we used to. Almost imperceptibly we were changing our teaching style,

with pupils increasingly more involved in their learning and teachers becoming more confident in relinquishing their control, giving greater choices to our pupils. This 'growth mindset' made the implementation of subsequent strategies a much more straightforward process.

Supporting the journey

Throughout our journey, Thinking Schools International has not only supplied the expertise to help our school move forward, but also enabled us to join a network of other schools across the country to meet and share our practice, difficulties and successes. This mutual support from other professionals has proved to be essential for our continuing development, and has also helped train new staff, through the sharing of training events.

By far the most rewarding aspect is the impact on our pupils' attitudes towards learning, on their motivation and their growing sense of themselves as learners. We are constantly amazed by the way they share their thinking and we no longer make assumptions about pupils' capacities to learn. It is the pupils, more than any other members of our community, who ensure that we continue to develop our practice and understanding, so that together we continue to build an effective learning community. Last year our school was inspected. We were delighted that the findings of the inspection team gave our school Grade 1 in all key questions, but we were just as pleased by their acknowledgement that the strategies we use to develop thinking were effective and fundamental to pupils' achievements.

Looking back over the years, one thing is certain; once a school is committed to beginning their thinking journey, that school will never be the same again. Our journey, so far, has been stimulating and inspiring for all involved and has led to a much greater collaboration between all staff and pupils. As a headteacher it has ensured that my priority is centred on developing teaching and learning. Our school is concerned about developing lifelong skills; as the old saying goes: 'Give pupils a thought and they will learn for a day. Teach them to think and they will learn for life.'

More information

- For more information, please visit:
 - www.schoolswire.org/public/king565.html.nocache
 - www.thinkingschoolsinternational.com
 - www.exeter.ac.uk

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An example of David Hyerle's circle map

The circle map is used for the cognitive process, Defining in Context. The example below was completed by first writing the subject 'Sharks' in the centre and then in the large circle writing everything known about the subject. This could be an individual or collaborative group task.

To deepen their learning the teacher has asked the class to apply their knowledge of sharks to themselves. 'In what ways do you share the same characteristics as sharks?' Through this visual and memorable representation, the teacher has deepened the learning. Further, she might ask a metacognitive question such as: 'How has this map challenged the way you think about sharks and people?'

