

Observations from senior leaders of Thinking Schools in the UK

1. Rhydypenau Primary School, Cardiff, Wales

What does it mean to be a Thinking School?



To become a Thinking School is to become a good school

Since taking up headship at Rhydypenau some years ago, I have sought to clarify and articulate my own vision of what makes a good school. First and foremost, I see a good school as one in which I am proud to work. I see it too as a school, which I would like my own children to attend.

Such a school must be a community of enthusiastic learners. This is the coat rack on which I hang the many supporting components of my vision. A good school is, for me, a place where everyone is learning and where everything that happens contributes towards this end. School does not need to be a place where big people (the learned)- teach little people, the learners. Rather it is a place where we are all learners together.

To this end, our school has embarked upon a series of exciting initiatives, all under the umbrella of “A Thinking School”. This work has involved all children and parents, governors and staff at school, demonstrating the value of all working together to create within our school an ecology of reflection, growth and refinement of practice. It has assisted us in promoting Rhydypenau Primary as a community of confident, enthusiastic learners.

By working in this way, we have successfully combined the challenges of the National Curriculum, the range of the Skills Framework and the principles of the Foundation Phase (for children aged 3 – 7), with the future needs of pupils at our school. For while we know that the world your children will inherit will differ dramatically from the world in which we grew up in (I’m told that 80% of the jobs our current Year 2 children will undertake do not yet exist) we also have a much better understanding now of how we can best facilitate children’s learning.

Our accreditation as a Thinking School has been an exciting journey, a journey of challenge and a journey of change: change because teachers have been asked to adopt new teaching tools, develop their own knowledge and skills; challenge because it has involved some

changes to the teachers' role from transmitters of information to facilitators of opportunities for children to understand. They have moved from being predominantly "the sage on the stage, to guide on the side." (Art Costa)

As a result, our children are highly engaged in their learning, using the tools and strategies we have taught them. They are growing in confidence, autonomy and creativity. The strategies employed as a Thinking School have offered us an invaluable range of tools, which are common to all, together with the development of a common language. This has been a vital part of ensuring continuity and coherence. There is also a sense that we are all developing together, adults alongside children.

Finally, it is I believe, no coincidence that attendance has risen by 5% to 96% and I am confident that the development of the children's thinking skills has been a significant factor in this.

Carolyn Evans, Headteacher, Rhydypenau Primary School

2. Cardiff High School, Cardiff, Wales

Benefits of being a thinking school

- Students are equipped to be independent learners
- Critical thinking is developed which encourages higher order thinking
- Students develop metacognition making them better learners
- Evaluation, creative thinking, synthesis are all aided by thinking approaches
- We meet the essential skill as criteria for thinking
- We equip students to be better citizens by making them questioning and independent thinkers
- We encourage students to have deep learning
- Staff are more likely to use progressive and engaging methods of teaching
- We have joined up thinking about thinking and approaches which go across curriculum boundaries
- We are educating students rather than just equipping them to pass examinations
- We are encouraging students to be creative and innovative thinkers

All of these approaches and ideas come together in the Advanced Thinking Award so that the school [staff and students] acted as one thus embedding our school's ethos and philosophy.

Jude Brigley, Deputy Headteacher, Cardiff High School

- As a school, we were endeavouring to develop resilient, independent thinking learners who could develop "habits of mind" ,to enable them to work out answers to problems, the solutions to which were not evident.
- In our last inspection report, the school was awarded 7 grade 1's, the highest possible. In the year we were inspected, the school achieved the highest percentage of grade 1 lessons for any secondary school in Wales, and this was attributed largely

to our thinking skills approaches. As a consequence, we also achieved one of the highest positive value added examination residuals in Wales. Despite our pupils becoming far more diverse, ability wise, over the last ten years, our exam results have gone up, year on year.

- The key to whole school success is a whole school approach to thinking skills. They need to be taught both discretely and immersed into subject delivery; this can only be achieved by a comprehensive in-service programme that includes the sharing of good practice across the school through workshops.
- The delivery of thinking skills, both as a subject and through subjects, was also combined with the concept of co-construction where students delivered parts of lessons or units of work, which required them to do the initial learning rather than being "spoon-fed" by staff.
- It is critical for the school to have a culture of enquiry and innovation and distributed leadership, and for the leadership team to be committed to thinking skills, otherwise there is a danger that it becomes a peripheral activity practised only by a handful of teachers.

Mike Griffiths, until August 2011 Headteacher, Cardiff High School

3. Rochester Grammar School, Rochester, England

OUTCOMES

Rochester Grammar School (RGS) delivers two pathways for 6th form study.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a highly rigorous, academic and creative programme that demands high levels of thinking, creativity and presentation skills to be successful.

2009 RGS average points score 34
2010 RGS average points score 35
2011 RGS average point score 36

All of these scores are massively above the world average and are the highest IB scores for a state school in the UK.

In a recent analysis of Curriculum leaders the use of higher order thinking grids, thinking maps and a focus on HOM which link to the IB learner profile were cited as some of the most important factors in securing these amazing grades.

This year 2 girls scored a perfect IB score of 45 and one of those Lucy Campbell was a key member of our student thinking team.

GCSE

RGS has an accelerated curriculum which means that students take many of their examinations a year early for GCSE and also some AS levels are even taken a year or two years early. While it is impossible to attribute the success of these results (there have been no significant shifts in results since bringing in early entry) it seems obvious that the coping

strategies that a thinking school approach embeds must be a massively important contributing factor to this.

In 2011 RGS achieved 70% A*/A GCSE grades our highest ever score for GCSE. 75% of these GCSE grades were achieved a year early.

Teacher observations

RGS holds key stage reviews every year for each key stage. For each review the senior team complete between 60 and 75 observations of teachers. These lessons are ranked according to ofsted criteria which always places learning and progression at the heart.

The average number of teachers scoring a level 1 (Outstanding/Excellent) has risen to 27 % in 2010-11 from 22 % in 2009-10 which was higher than 19 % in 2008-9.

Our overall % of teachers being rated as a level 1 or level 2 (good –very good) rose to 83% last year which is really outstanding.

In our observations it is quite clear that the use of thinking strategies such as thinking maps for organisation of notes and ideas, thinkers keys to stimulate creativity and participation, 6 hat thinking to improve lateral thinking and HOM as a means to assess dispositions to learning; that the quality of BOTH teaching and learning has improved at RGS.

This is backed up by consistent improvement of results.

Richard Coe, Assistant Headteacher, Rochester Grammar School

4. Christ the King Primary School, Cardiff, Wales

We initially began developing our practices in response to our priority 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 teaching strategies that we could use to enhance our pupils' learning and enable them to become more engaged and involved in their own learning. We were keen to ensure that any strategies we developed were inclusive and benefited all our pupils and must impact positively upon pupils' outcomes; their level of achievement.

Our journey towards developing a Thinking School culture began with our whole school training in David Hyerle's thinking maps. By using the maps the Thinking Maps strategy, pupils, staff, governors and parents began to share a language that enabled thinking for learning to effectively, consistently and progressively take place. It was because of this training and the subsequent implementation, that we started to develop our shared understandings, our mutual commitment and rationale which have proved to be so powerful.

During the years we have continued to build our whole school approach, developing a range of teaching strategies, based on sound pedagogical understanding of how children learn and

translating these new understandings into classroom practice through the use of a variety of complimentary effective tools.

By far the most rewarding aspect of developing a 'Thinking School Culture' has been the impact on our pupils' attitudes towards learning, on their motivation and their growing sense of themselves as learners. We are constantly amazed by their sharing of their thinking and no longer make assumptions about pupils' capacities to learn. Pupils have become increasingly more involved in their learning with teachers becoming more confident in relinquishing their control, giving greater choices to our pupils. This 'growth mindset', an outcome of our initial focus on Thinking Maps, made the implementation of subsequent strategies such as P4C, Habits of Mind, Thinking Hats, Bloom's Taxonomy, TASC Wheel etc, which complemented and dovetailed into our existing strategies, a much more straightforward process

Throughout, we have ensured that we have both quantifiable and qualitative data for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the strategies was authentic. The achievement of our pupils continues to rise.

In 2008 our school was inspected. Some comments they made were:

'Thinking skills support pupils' understanding of the purpose of assessment..... The use of strategies to develop thinking is outstanding. Teachers' questioning is highly skilled. Teachers' use of strategies such as Q Matrix and Bloom's taxonomy ensure high levels of questioning.... Through strategies, such as 'no-hands-up', pupils' interest and motivation is sustained. Questioning allows teachers to ascertain prior knowledge and also develops pupils' higher order thinking.... Through strategies such as Habits of Mind pupils become more independent in their learning and surer of how to improve the way they work. Also, more able children become more challenged in their learning.'

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 head teacher 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.'

Bernadette Hancock, Headteacher, Christ the King Primary School

5. Kingsdown and Ringwould CEP Primary School, Deal, England

The Introduction of elements from The Thinkers Toolbox and our accreditation as a Thinking School has had a dramatic and positive impact on all learners in the school, staff, parents and perhaps most importantly pupils. The Thinking Maps are a key approach to helping the children in our care record and present their understanding allowing every child the opportunity to express their knowledge and understanding at a level appropriate to them.

This has ensured that our results have improved, especially in writing where the Maps have ensured planning of work frees the writer to express themselves fully. Maths investigations are now more flexible with pupils able to challenge themselves and explore new techniques.

The use of Ryan's Thinkers Keys at the start of the day means that when lessons begin the children's ability to think has already been stimulated so they are more receptive to the learning process.

Children are keen to learn, more resilient, confident to take risks and challenge the teachers! The school has become a place where thinking is understood and celebrated. It has empowered staff to explore different subject matter and become more responsive to the interests of the children yet still ensuring core, key skills are taught and used effectively.

Staff and pupils are now travelling together on the learning road and enjoying every minute of the whole experience, encouraging parents to walk with us for a while and celebrate success.

The use of Edward De Bono's Thinking Hats is developing a more creative curriculum with greater opportunities to explore globally the world we live in, but also as a means of problem solving, responding to conflict and developing further focussed thinking. Other schools around us have seen the enthusiasm of members of the school and are keen themselves to explore this route as a way of meeting the needs of future generations of learners.

"Thinking is so much fun better than what we used to do!"

From baby birds in a nest waiting for knowledge to be fed to them our children and staff have flown the nest and seek and explore new and innovative ways of discovery and learning. A journey we have taken together and enjoyed at every step.

Rose Cope, Headteacher, Kingsdown and Ringwould CEP Primary School

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6. Summary of evidence from accredited Thinking Schools in the UK

