

Reflections on the impact of the Thinking School approach by Damian Groark,  
Headteacher of St Benet's RC Primary School

(Following seven years on the Thinking School journey, in December 2011 Damian's school was graded as outstanding by Ofsted. We asked him to share his reflections.)

"The outstanding curriculum provides pupils with a wide range of interesting and often exciting opportunities which support both their academic and personal development. It is greatly enriched by the school's involvement with the innovative 'thinking schools programme'. Techniques acquired through this approach are very well-embedded across the school and have a significant impact on pupils' ability to plan, reflect and solve problems. They apply these skills regularly as they learn in other subjects and demonstrate them both in their written and oral work. Pupils are able to think deeply about their own and others experiences, respecting the rights of others to hold different beliefs to their own."

(OFSTED December 2011)

The above paragraph from our recent OFSTED inspection I think sums up the impact that following the Thinking Agenda has had on the school during the last seven years that we have been pursuing these techniques.

The school has always had a good ethos but it is without doubt that the ethos has significantly improved as both staff and children have become more confident about using a thinking approach within the classroom.

Fundamentally the biggest impact has been that the children are more independent in their work, work more effectively collaboratively and there is a huge sense of trust between the teacher and the pupil and this in itself creates the kind of environment that leads to deep learning.

The school utilises three thinking tools namely Hyerle's Thinking Maps, De Bono's Six Thinking Hats and P4C (Community of Enquiry). The tools complement each other but also offer contrasting qualities, which gives greater depth to the curriculum. In turn the pupils feel confident exploring, changing and expressing their own ideas.

Thinking Maps are used in all of the year groups and care is taken to ensure that their use is consistent. The school is trying to concentrate on deepening their use in mathematics. In summary, they have really become a school wide language for thinking. Clearly the impact of the Thinking Maps have been most significant in the teaching of writing and during the period that the school has been using them we have seen a rise in the amount of children who are able to attain higher levels.

The Six Hats are predominantly used for problem solving and ensuring that children have the ability to view problems and situations from all perspectives. They are also used in various combinations, or alone when the teacher wishes to explore any of the dispositions that the hats represent. The hats are of particular value when children are trying to identify or track the kind of thinking that they have undertaken: metacognition.

The use of P4C within the school has been successful, in that it has been a huge driver in the children's ability to accept others' points of views. They have been able to formulate opinions, challenge them, defend them and critically analyse them. The school uses a wide range of stimuli and there is significant investment in training of new staff. Thinking in these sessions is typified by its depth and I am convinced that as well as the impact it has on the academic performance of the school, that the ability of children to critically analyse has led to a culture of openness, trust and a true sense of a learning community.

As one of the main drivers for this agenda in the school I am heartened by the response OFSTED had to our Thinking work. It is very affirming and essentially further encourages me that what we are doing through this approach is effectively preparing our children for further study and also that they will be far more effective citizens as a whole.

Damian Groark 3/3/12