Report on the visit by Bernadette Hancock to Avika Primary School, for the purpose of re-accreditation by Exeter University's Cognitive Education Development Unit as a Thinking School.

Context

Akiva Primary School, in Finchley, North London, opened in 1981 as the first Jewish primary school in the country established by the Progressive Jewish community. It moved to its new site in 2008 as part of The Sternberg Centre for Judaism which is the largest Jewish communal site in Western Europe. It is a two-form entry voluntary aided primary school, that is high achieving and oversubscribed. The school has a clear vision of establishing an ethos in which pupils are encouraged to develop as articulate, creative, intelligent thinkers through their engagement in authentic learning experiences. The school is committed to innovation and excellence. It has high expectations and high aspirations for both staff and pupils, underpinned by a very supportive and caring environment, which permeates the learning ethos of the school.

Evidence Base:

Prior to my visit to the school on 8th December 2016, I received a portfolio submission from the Thinking Skills Co-ordinator, who is also the Assistant Head teacher. The portfolio that supported the submission was in a hard copy together with a USB stick of evidence. The portfolio included a great deal of evidence of the school's journey prior to 2013 when the school gained their first accreditation and offered an insight into the school's on-going development as a Thinking School since 2013.

During my visit, I met with the Head teacher, members of the Senior Leadership Team, the Drive Team and the Thinking Skills Co-ordinator. I talked to a range of staff and met with a group of parents and governors. I had a tour of the school led by two Year 6 pupils and met with a group of pupils from years two, five and six. I also observed parts of a number of lessons from a variety of curriculum areas, across the whole school in which thinking tools and strategies were being used to engage pupils in their learning, to challenge and deepen their thinking and generate some higher-order questioning.
When I arrived at the school, I received a very warm welcome. The day was well organised and staff, pupils, parents and governors were all aware of the purpose of my visit. Behaviour was excellent. Staff and pupils were clearly happy to speak with me and readily spoke about their school with warmth and enthusiasm, as did the governors and parents I met.

School Ethos

Akiva Primary School is a warm and welcoming school with a strong compassionate ethos whose thoughtful identity is immediately apparent. Through discussion with staff and pupils it was evident that parents are supportive of the school, know that their children are safe, happy and feel confident to approach leaders and teachers at any time. The school provides parents with a wide range of information. They are kept informed about the content and approach of the thinking curriculum through the newsletter, school visits and curriculum information booklets. The school encourages parents to join in many aspects of school life. They are highly appreciative of the school’s positive ethos, the pastoral care the school offers and the values and attitudes it promotes.

The pupils’ response to their experiences of school life was very positive. They are confident and secure in expressing their own views and values according to their age and capacity. They are proud of their school and appreciate that their school is a ‘Thinking School.” They know that adults are there to help them in all aspects of their school life. The pupils speak very highly of their teachers who “Help everyone to get the best from learning.” I was told that staff are, “Always ready to help;”* and “Always find a way to make us understand.”

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

All stakeholders are committed to the cognitive learning approaches, which lie at the heart of the school’s life and work. The head teacher with the governing body, have made a formal commitment to cognitive education as part of its development priorities. They view nurturing the thinking abilities of all their pupils as part of their wider responsibility of developing caring, thinking adults of the future.

The governors are supportive and committed to cognitive education. The parent governors that I spoke to felt well informed about the school’s approaches to cognitive education through induction, information evenings, the website, reports from the head teacher, subject leaders and curriculum booklets. The governors visit the school and take part in learning walks that enable them to learn more about the approaches. These visits are reported back to the whole Governing Body as part of the on-going governor monitoring.
Curriculum booklets for parents include information about the cognitive approaches at Akiva and outline the ways in which pupils will be encouraged to use their thinking skills using a range of ‘thinking tools’ such as Edward De Bono’s Six Hats™ and David Hyerle’s Thinking Maps® to help the learning process. Parents said they learn much from what their children discuss and use at home, and value the fact that they are developing as confident, creative, independent learners, thinkers and problem-solvers. They are proud of the school’s very good reputation. Akiva School is highly regarded by parents and the community.

The previous thinking skills co-ordinator successfully led the school in developing a variety of thinking tools that concluded in the school gaining Thinking School accreditation in 2013. After this initial accreditation, the thinking strategies continued to be maintained but further developments were delayed because of external priorities and imperatives that diverted the school’s energies into other areas. However, more recently, the school has re-engaged with its on-going journey as a thinking community and this has been given renewed focus.

The drive team represents staff from all areas of the school. The team is perceptive, keen to respond to the needs of the pupils and are eager to develop their own knowledge and understanding, and that of their colleagues and pupils. They hold regular meetings to discuss and reflect upon the teaching and learning experiences related to the development of a thinking school. They support and promote reflection, purposeful interactions and thought-filled decision-making for both individuals and groups within the school community.

The school has taken a whole school approach to developing thinking and use thinking tools to support and extend learning. In the learning, I observed there was clear evidence that the school has fully embraced the cognitive approach and embedded a range of thinking tools and strategies into their practice. In a Year 6 class, there was particularly strong evidence through a problem solving activity, of pupils being challenged not only to think mathematically, but also to explain and justify their thinking and pose further questions.

The pupils I met spoke readily about their thinking and talked confidently about the range of cognitive approaches they use, seeing them as central to their learning as well as demonstrating them in practice.

Termly curriculum ‘Challenge Days’ are a feature of the curriculum where the whole school is involved in sharing a focus that emphasises the processes of pupils’ learning, develops open questioning and enriches the curriculum.

There is a strong emphasis on developing positive pupil learning behaviours and dispositions to learning for all pupils. Staff now include a Habit of Mind focus in learning objective of the lesson and this practical application has enhanced their use. Positive feedback, pupil and peer self-evaluation all help to reinforce and give value to these learning habits. From speaking with pupils, it was clear that they had a
good understanding of the learning habits and how they can be used to help them to develop as learners. They could also relate how these positive behaviours can be applied in their life outside school. For pupils to be able to articulate this understanding with such confidence shows a mature level of understanding.

Thinking Hats are clearly understood by pupils and used extensively and effectively throughout the school as a tool to support and help pupils to articulate their thoughts. They are used orally in discussion, as notes to clarify their thinking before writing and after learning to help express what has gone well and how their learning could be improved. The hats are used creatively on displays to increase the interaction and engagement of pupils.

Visual Tools are used throughout the school and across all areas of the curriculum including PE. The use of the maps is largely teacher directed but with age, increasing opportunity is given to pupils to choose their own visuals independently. However, the maps are not drawn or used consistently in the school and not all the maps are used by all year groups. This hinders the development of a common visual language across the school. Younger pupils are usually provided with photocopied sheets of a map rather than allowing pupils to map their own thinking. This can confine and limit pupils’ thinking. There was also little evidence that the ‘Frame of Reference,’ or the metacognitive frame was being used to help pupils to reflect upon their learning.

The school uses a range of strategies to develop questioning in the classroom. Developing the questioning of staff is a whole school target. Bloom’s Taxonomy is used as a framework to help develop the questioning of staff and pupils. When Blooms was applied most effectively such as with the oldest pupils where learning began at lower levels of Bloom’s—recalling, defining, explaining, etc.—and then progressed through to increase the level of thinking, the Taxonomy becomes a kind of pathway to guide the learning process itself. Older pupils know the importance of asking questions and were able to explain how they used Blooms to enrich their understanding.

The school understands the need to clarify expectations regarding the use of thinking tools by staff and pupils in order to ensure progression, consistency and continuity. An articulated long-term plan has begun to undertake a review of the school’s curriculum to develop a more enquiry based approach that strengthens and tracks the use of thinking strategies and tools used by the school.

**Training**

All teachers are kept informed via a range of updates, and discussions at different meetings as well as through a planned programme of in-house training. There are established strategies to induct newly appointed staff, which includes mentoring. Supply staff are also well informed about the school’s approach. The strength of the understanding and confidence of staff in using the thinking strategies is considered
when deploying staff within the school and staff are encouraged to learn from each other. The school has benefited from working with Andrea Smollen, a parent and educational psychologist who has assisted the school on its thinking skills journey over a number of years.

The school has actively developed opportunities to collaborate within and beyond the school community. Teachers from Barnet have visited the school to observe at first hand the thinking strategies and tools that the school uses.

**Assessment & Outcomes**

It is difficult for the school to extrapolate the impact that their focus on cognitive development has had on the academic outcomes of pupils, and therefore robust evidence of a causal relationship is limited. However, the high academic achievement of pupils, demonstrates the positive impact that the Akiva approach to teaching and learning, infused by the development of thinking skills, has had in meeting the needs of all pupils. Developing cognitive skills in combination underpins academic outcomes and Akiva is a high achieving school in which pupils make very good progress.

There is much qualitative data from all stakeholders about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils and are correlated with academic outcomes. The staff that I spoke to were very clear that the whole school approach to developing thinking has had a positive impact upon pupils’ attitudes to learning and on standards achieved.

It is particularly evident in the upper juniors, how knowledge and understanding of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Habits of Mind, combined with the skill to apply the strategies and approaches in practice has had an impact on the way in which the pupil approach demanding learning. Pupils know about a range of tools and approaches, see them as central to their learning and are able to talk about them with confidence. They also commented on the strengths of the school and feel that:

- There is a real sense of togetherness and community;
- They are encouraged to be creative and persistent;
- There is no limit to what they can achieve.

However, if pupils and staff were given the opportunity to identify their progress using checklists or rubrics, they would be enabled to see their growing effectiveness in the use of the tools over time and in a variety of different learning situations. This would benefit their metacognitive skills. In addition, a whole school approach that focuses directly on pupils’ perceptions of their learning abilities would help to highlight those pupils who need further support to develop their self-awareness and positive attitudes towards learning.
Evaluation of Programmes

The school’s ‘Challenge Days’ are reviewed by all staff and determine the next step in planning. For example, the organisation and approach of the next ‘Challenge Day’ has been modified to include the expectation of an outcome. Qualitative data is collected regarding the implementation of new developments such as using the ‘Blue Hat’ for reflection. The cognitive school action plan highlights in general terms the impact of actions that the school expects, but a more consistent, regular and evaluative approach to monitoring would sharpen the evidence base of effectiveness, ensure a consistent approach across the school and highlight with greater accuracy, any areas that the school needs to develop.

Ownership

The use of the tools is embedded in the culture of the school; the non-negotiable ‘Akiva Way’, which articulates ‘the way we do things here.’ This gives a consistent methodology to teaching which underpins and pervades everything. The school has developed its own routines. It uses the tools as a structure to open up questions about traditions and faith, and in restorative practices.

Should the school make some of the tools more accessible to pupils by adapting for example, the terminology and/or icons of the Habits of Mind, the increasing ownership this would give to pupils would enhance how they value these learning behaviours and increase the commitment they make.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted in the portfolio, the displays around the school, the observations of classroom practice, the pupils’ application of the tools to enrich and enhance their learning, discussions with the Head teacher, the Drive Team, pupils, parent governors and a range of staff, confirms that Akiva Primary School meets the criteria set by Exeter University’s Cognitive Education Development Unit as a Thinking School. In some areas, the school fulfils the criteria strongly. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until December 2019.

I would like to thank all staff for the warmth of the welcome and the hospitality I received during my visit. It was such a pleasure to meet you all and of course to meet your tremendous pupils. Staff and pupils are rightly proud of their school.

Further Recommendations

I concluded the visit by meeting with the Drive Team and discussing some ways in which the school could continue to develop and refine their practice as they move forward. This might include:
• To review the purpose and use of the Bloom’s Taxonomy in developing the questioning of pupils and consider the use of Q Matrix, particularly with younger pupils.

• To revisit, further refine and develop David Hyerle’s Thinking Maps, focusing on using all the maps from early years, emphasising the thinking process rather than the name of the Map and further developing the use of Maps in combination with each other and with other thinking tools;

• To develop the use of the metacognitive Frame of Reference for all Thinking Maps where appropriate;

• To sharpen monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure consistency, effectiveness and progression in the use of the tools throughout the school and to gain first hand evidence and quantitative data;

• To develop assessment procedures that enable pupils and staff to understand and see their progress in the use of the tools;

• To consider adapting or developing some of the tools so as to increase the ownership of pupils and staff;

• To use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of Akiva School and gain Advanced Thinking School accreditation in three years.

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