



School of Education
Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
St Luke's Campus
EXETER EX1 1TE
UK

Email dave.walters@groundedpractice.co.uk
Web <https://education.exeter.ac.uk/>

Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Holcombe Grammar School for the purpose of re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, School of Education, University of Exeter, UK.

Evidence base

The criteria for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School starts from the assumption that all the criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools@Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the school 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. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as a level 2 Thinking School.

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.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School from Holcombe Grammar School in the form of a Reflective Proforma with evidence links, extensively illustrating the continuing work the school is undertaking as a level 1 Thinking School together with how it has continued to move forward as a level 2 Thinking School. School evidence includes students' work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, Headteacher reports, photographs, newsletters, project plans, video evidence, Drive Team documentation, action plans, learning walk observations, and other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school more than exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on continued development of the school on the basis of the level 2 criteria.

Starting point: the school context

The Holcombe Grammar School is a proactive, innovative, highly ambitious, and fully supportive secondary school with 1045 students on roll (ages 11-18). The school is situated as an influential member of the highly successful Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT) and has a long history of Thinking School development. Context is key at Holcombe Grammar School and developments are unswervingly mindful of this (particularly deprivations factors). Holcombe Grammar School is totally committed to developing a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking in a responsive and adaptive manner. As such, Holcombe Grammar School is positioned as one of the key members of the international Thinking School community. The school's ethos and values are captured by a clear mission statement: 'Holcombe is an ambitious and supportive Grammar School where life chances are transformed through Mastery, Endeavour, and Thinking'. Indeed, life chances are truly transformed such that students develop their cultural capital. This is wonderfully illustrated by Holcombe Grammar School's curriculum elements:

- Mastery – Mastery of Self via the Be Your Best Self (BYBS) agenda
- Endeavour – Aspire, achieve, and celebrate success
- Thinking – The pursuit of creating a high-quality thinking community.

This clearly demonstrates Holcombe Grammar School's focus on child-centred learning. The core values are operationalised via the Thinking Toolkit comprised of Habits of Mind, CoRT

Tools, Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, and Thinking Keys. Through skilful application, children are nurtured and guided to try hard in every endeavour such that life-chances are transformed.¹ Holcombe Grammar School has sustained its Thinking School development with determination, creativity, innovation, and care. This has subsequently secured exceptional further development due to its unswerving devotion to inclusion and the embracement of diversity. This has been achieved via a visionary curriculum that is supplemented by the TSAT 7 Principles of Teaching and Learning. This is illustrative of an exceptionally adaptive and inclusive school where every individual is encouraged to achieve excellence via the pursuit of a rich and full educational experience.

In aligning the school's ethos and values to a metacognitive developmental process via careful attention to holistic lifelong learning, Holcombe Grammar School has ensured that the Thinking School approach is an integral and secure part of the learning culture of the entire school. Holcombe Grammar School achieves excellent holistic student outcomes as demonstrated by a wealth of robust indicators. In addition to being an Advanced Thinking School, Holcombe Grammar School holds the Artsmark Silver Award (in recognition of excellence in developing a creative learning community) and the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Gold Award (in recognition of high-quality commitment to creating a safe and inspiring place for children to develop their individual talents). This is indicative of an educational provision that serves the wider needs of all students. Indeed, the educational provision extends students' learning and understanding via an imaginative focus on real-life application. Holcombe Grammar School is rated 'Good' by its most recent Ofsted report (2024) which celebrated the school's expert teaching and culture of personal development. Holcombe Grammar School is clearly a school that prides itself in achieving and maintaining the highest educational standards via a 'human' and fully inclusive provision. For example, the school has an excellent reputation for fully supporting students through its curriculum, pastoral system, and enrichment offering. It is no coincidence that behaviour and attendance figures are excellent indicating that Holcombe Grammar School is a wonderfully inviting place to learn.²

¹ School's website, reflective proforma and digital evidence

² Ibid

Holcombe Grammar School's cognitive education development journey has moved forward with ambition, innovation, creativity, care, and rigour since its previous accreditation. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place. Parents and carers form an exceptional partnership with Holcombe Grammar School in terms of the teaching, learning, and support provision.³ There is a strong sense of the 'why' and 'how' elements of pedagogy being pivotal to the work of the school. With reference to this, the school seeks to prepare students as reflective, confident, creative, adaptable, and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.⁴ Holcombe Grammar School has embedded thinking and metacognitive approaches in all aspects of school life in order to ensure that its mission statement is a visible reality. High quality CPD has done much to secure a cohesive staff team, and there is a real sense of collaboration at all levels. The support of TSAT and 'external' quality assurance is exceptional and fully embraces core educational principles and contextual individuality.⁵

Dissemination of practice

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking School practice and experiences across subject areas with others. There is extensive evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subjects and teams, with all sections of staff participating in formal and informal staff training events and programmes. Learning walks (Walk Thrus), drop-ins, staff feedback, IHASCO videos, and the Student Voice interact to spread the Thinking School approaches widely. Indeed, the Student Drive Team (Thinking Ambassadors) is an excellent example of the high premium placed on the inclusion of students in the leadership and dissemination process. Parents and support staff are fully included via a range of engagement opportunities such as the Thinking Tools Parent Guide and interactive open forums. The termly school magazine has a focus on 'Holcombe Highlights' and 'Thinking at Holcombe'. As such, the whole school community receive a wealth of information illustrating Thinking School developments and how Thinking

³ Digital evidence

⁴ School's website, reflective proforma and digital evidence

⁵ Ibid

Tools feed into the development of key learning behaviours. Trust-wide training and collaboration events are supplemented by wider contributions such as regional and national MAT Meets and conferences. On an international level, Holcombe Grammar School has established links with colleagues from a range of contexts including, Lithuania, Canada, and Spain. This input provides other educationalists with first-hand experience of the Thinking School approach geared towards the holistic development of children. As such, there is ample evidence of effective dissemination of tools, but also a focus on personalisation. There is a rich blend of qualitative data that contributes well to the collaborative dissemination of best practice. The Headteacher and Assistant Headteacher for Teaching and Learning (Thinking Skills Coordinator/Drive Team Lead) are highly influential and champion many creative curriculum and assessment innovations. Indeed, the Headteacher has presented at ASCL conferences and the Assistant Headteacher has led developments trust-wide and beyond. Several Holcombe Grammar School colleagues are Professionals as Researchers (PasR) candidates and have presented research findings at the University of Greenwich. These elements wonderfully cascaded to staff throughout the school and has resulted in high-quality partnerships. As such, there is a clear whole school understanding of children's learning progress in both qualitative and quantitative domains.

Holcombe Grammar School has a very strong networking structure that has been extremely impactful in terms of providing an excellent vehicle for dissemination of practice. As one of TSAT's core schools, Holcombe Grammar School is highly influential locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. This is achieved via the excellent collaborative structure and approach which makes excellent use of expansive networking. As a result, it is clear that Holcombe Grammar School disseminates high impact practice across internal subject areas, the local community, cluster schools, nationally and internationally.

All new staff receive training in theory, pedagogy, and practical approaches relating to Thinking. There is an extensive and innovative range of resources and structures to further support the dissemination of Thinking School approaches. Students are pivotal to disseminating best practice. Judicious timelines ensure that the process of dissemination is

planned and actioned effectively. Conferences and associated workshops further add to the school's process of dissemination.⁶

Evaluative research

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff are seeking evidence of the positive impact and outcomes of the Thinking School approach and how this evidence is used to drive whole school learning and improvement. Based on the evidence of Level 1 and level 2 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. This includes specific consideration of the process and impact of initiatives on the learning and development of students. Evaluative Research is embedded in the working practices of the school. For example, staff are involved in a range of projects involving a rich blend of foci such as investigating the effectiveness of revision schedules and techniques in Sociology and Psychology. Many staff are engaged in National Professional Qualifications (NPQs). The associated projects skilfully weave together a host of impactful educational initiatives. All projects are of exceptional high-quality and are incredibly impactful in terms of inclusive learning. Evaluative practices at Holcombe Grammar School utilise a range of data collection tools including Thinking Tools audits, learning walks (WalkThrus), focused staff meetings, and student/teacher reflections. The innovative Holcombe Grammar School Staff Academic Journal provides an excellent vehicle for professional inquiry and evidence-informed practice in this respect. The recent Cycle of Lesson Study has moved to a Collaborative Professional Dialogue model. The recent focus on modelling to teach to the top and provide scaffolding (part of the 7 principles of Teaching and Learning) has built upon the expertise of staff across the entire school. Core evaluations are insightfully led by the Assistant Headteacher for Teaching and Learning (Thinking Skills Coordinator/Drive Team Lead) in close collaboration with the Headteacher, SLT, Year Group Leaders, Teaching Staff, and Support Staff. The proactive involvement of students in the evaluative process ensures that Evaluative Research has an inductive as well as deductive dimension.

⁶ Reflective proforma and digital evidence

Evaluative Research Holcombe Grammar School has clear, succinct parameters outlining what is being studied, who is being studied, together with associated timeframes. Indeed, the development plans are very much Evaluative Research based. This is an excellent example of the school's commitment to delivering extensive practitioner research excellence. Of particular note, is the explicit use of the SPARE model of Evaluative Research. Together, this has done much to secure an ongoing cycle of Thinking School development. Findings from research have directly influenced the work of staff across the school, and the Cycle of Lesson Study feeds into the process well. This is an excellent example of research informed inquiry. Evidence is presented that demonstrates the ongoing collection of data related to Thinking Skills across the school, in particular with respect to how well Thinking Skills are embedded within the school system and what the impact is on students and staff. It is clear that there are effective strategies in place across subject areas that encourage and support evaluation and reflective practice of learning and teaching approaches and impact.⁷

Thinking Skills and dispositional development are part of ongoing evaluations of student progress, providing further evidence of the ongoing evaluation of Thinking Skills approaches throughout the school. It is important to note in this respect, that students are routinely consulted about what the Thinking Tools mean to them. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at Holcombe Grammar School and ongoing reflective practice is part of the school's educational culture. The Holcombe Charter anchors developments so that a coherent 'golden thread' is maintained, and this indicates that the Thinking School approach has a clear drive for impact in relation to positive learning outcomes and behaviours for the whole school community.⁸

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.

⁷ Reflective Proforma and digital evidence

⁸ Ibid

In terms of technical development, it is clear from the school development planning that new members of staff are routinely training in Thinking Skills. CPD has real sense of Professional Growth. The highly effective use of a range of professional development forums such as reflective meetings, face-to-face training, learning walks (WalkThrus), and the cross-trust communications stand as a model of Professional Growth excellence on a school wide level. Thinking School principles are fully embedded, and this does much to aid the overall coherence of the pedagogical aims. There is an excellent induction programme in place and ensures that professional development opportunities are consistent and well embedded in the culture of the entire school. New staff are automatically trained in all the Thinking Tools and associated pedagogy. This is wonderfully supplemented by the provision of opportunities to shadow, discuss and observe lessons conducted by lead practitioners within the school, trust, and the wider educational community. There is a clear change management plan and the use of the Holcombe Grammar School Staff Academic Journal together with the Be Your Best Self (BYBS) Reflective Journals are again highly impactful.

Evaluative research builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. Staff make explicit use of the Cycle of Lesson Study approach to support the introduction of new ideas based on current research. The Drive Team has regular focussed meetings with clear development action points that further feed into CPD linked to priorities. The recent focus on High Quality First Teaching has a specific focus on the school's Teaching and Learning Blueprint and has led to the provision of a range of innovative bespoke resources for staff to operationalise key priorities. Staff are supported wonderfully to maximise their Professional Growth. Working Parties drive CPD provision and showcase best practice annually. Thinking Carousels add to this. The Drive Team are extremely influential in the pursuit of Professional Growth for all staff. For example, they offer weekly CPD drop-in sessions and maintain a high-quality Thinking Library (Cognition Corner) together with a Tip of the Week to support thinking, metacognition, and pedagogy. A number of staff are pursuing formal recognition of this via awards such as National Professional Qualifications. Excellent resources are supplemented by expert trust and QA support so all staff can see how they might apply what they have learned in their own classrooms. 'Outside' expert input is judiciously integrated, and student feedback plays an intrinsic part in development planning.

Conference input and associated workshops are well researched and organised such that they provide a wealth of rich and inspirational opportunities for Professional Growth. There is strong evidence of the continued focus of staff on the development of their own knowledge and understanding of thinking and Thinking Skills approaches in general. Thinking Skills approaches are continually evaluated throughout the school and staff are routinely asked to reflect on their use of Thinking Tools. This again provides strong evidence that the use of Thinking Skills and the language around thinking are strongly embedded within the school, teaching practice, and its overall ethos, such that the school's developmental influence is far reaching and impactful. It is clear from the evidence provided that all staff are immediately made aware of this ethos and practice. Importantly, staff are given the time and resources to train and to work with colleagues through cycles of lesson observations. The collaborative and team approach to Professional Growth is highly influential in terms of promoting professional dialogue and development, iterative reflection, skill mastery, and collaboration.⁹

Differentiation

This area of accreditation includes the value of Thinking Tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem-solving. Through thorough and on-going dialogue with students, teachers are able to mediate learning such that learning is geared towards the needs of all students at an individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. A range of Thinking Tools are scaffolded wonderfully to serve the varying needs of all students. For example, Holcombe Grammar School's Whole School Provision Map for Quality First Teaching is exceptional in terms of fully integrating all students' learning, thinking and reflection skills. WalkThru Clusters secure excellent operationalisation of this ambitious pedagogy and the Holcombe Learning Blueprint provides a wonderful platform for children to explore and reflect on what it means to be an effective learner. Intrinsic to this, the Student Voice is also exceptional in terms of inclusion, individualisation, and differentiation. Indeed, the Student Drive Team (Thinking Ambassadors) is one of many examples of how the school embraces

⁹ Ibid

this. Holcombe Grammar School is fully committed to child-centred education. This is rightly recognised by the school gaining the prestigious Rights Respecting School Gold Award. The curriculum model of the school adopts a holistic lens where interleaving features in order to develop 'range' and creativity. As such, wider educational provision is excellent such that all children get opportunities to excel in different ways by preserving alternative, varying, and diverse outlooks. Progression is clearly mapped via this adaptive and responsive curriculum and all students are encouraged to develop individuality and autonomy. Resources are carefully differentiated to enable all children to access tasks and displays are used actively to promote discussion related to the identification of thinking processes. This has further ensured that students are supported fully based on individual needs. Holcombe Grammar School has a collaborative and family orientated approach where diversity, nurture, inspiration, inclusion, and ambition flourish in harmony. Indeed, parents and carers are highly supportive and appreciative of the school in this respect.¹⁰

Whole School assessment

This aspect of the accreditation relates to students' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' performance via assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Assessment developments are excellent at Holcombe Grammar School. They clearly integrate a range of Thinking Tools and approaches with self/peer reflections. For example, student reflections benefit from the use of BYBS Reflective Journals and Carousel Student Voice Comments. The school has made highly effective use of Microsoft Forms feedback geared towards student and staff reflections. This is used alongside a rich range of other school-developed assessment processes. These have a focus on self-perception as a learner together with the effectiveness of Thinking Skills application. As a result of these aspects, the Student Voice thrives through regular self-assessment opportunities. This is an excellent example of how assessment is the servant rather than the master of the curriculum. Assessments again indicate high impact across a wide range of indicators. Thinking Tools such as Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Thinking Keys, CoRT Tools, and Habits of Mind are all used effectively for assessment and evaluation purposes.

¹⁰ Ibid

Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff through the emphasis of developing as a researching professional. Staff approach curriculum developments with evidence informed reflections and align high quality teaching with their own Professional Growth. Students are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them. Assessment and evaluative information are shared school-wide to strengthen the consistency of effective teaching and learning strategies. A clear line of student feedback has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the children's perspective. Parents are also involved in the monitoring process. They are supported well by the school and add significant value to the educational provision at Holcombe Grammar School. Achievement, attendance and behaviour show continued growth indicating that the exceptional collaborative partnerships are highly impactful. Assessment at Holcombe Grammar School is wonderfully aligned to the school's inclusive culture and adds significant value to the holistic educational growth of the children. Assessment at Holcombe Grammar School certainly puts children first.

Points for further consideration

Holcombe Grammar School has responded well to the points for further consideration suggested in the previous accreditation report. The developments relating to Evaluative Research and assessment are good examples of this, as are the developments in curriculum development policy and practice via elements such as the Holcombe Learning Blueprint. I conclude my evaluation with some suggestions as to how the school could continue to develop as a Thinking School and possibly inform a development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- Continue to further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best by fine-tuning the already best practice.
- Continue to move from evaluation to Evaluative Research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. The SPARE model of Evaluative Action Research is a useful framework through which to apply Evaluative Research at all levels of leadership and classroom practice. Indeed, the Plan, Action and Reaction elements of the SPARE model map well with the Intent, Implementation and Impact structure.
- Consider the use of five key questions for evaluative purposes: What works best? For whom? Under what circumstances? How? Why? These can feed into the 'E' of the SPARE model of Evaluative Research.
- Consider further developing and aligning Thinking Routines (already aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy) with lesson objectives (and examination Assessment Objectives) to aid targeted planning and teaching/learning.
- Further consider the place of metacognitive approaches in the curriculum design. For example, research has shown that higher levels of impact occur when a 'blended' approach (separate provision *and* integrated in subjects) is taken. This could build on the already established provision.
- Further extend international influence via adding to the global platforms and publication lines already in place.

Outcome

The thorough evidence provided by Holcombe Grammar School clearly reflects that the school is a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. Holcombe Grammar School has taken a wonderfully inclusive and evidence informed holistic educational growth stance in relation to its entire provision. This goes beyond knowledge and metacognition to fully embrace dispositional development and different ways of thinking. The school's broad and balanced curriculum services this well. For example, via the exceptional Whole School Provision Map for Quality First Teaching, Holcombe Grammar School fully embraces individuality and diversity such that the needs of students with particular needs are fully integrated. In so doing, Holcombe Grammar School is an inspirational beacon of inclusive metacognitive educational excellence. In the context of the international Thinking School community, this places Holcombe Grammar School as a world-leading transformative holistic educational provider. By living up to its vision statement, learning and thinking are really brought to life such that life-chances and cultural capital are transformed. Holcombe Grammar School's Thinking School approach is part of the entire school culture, and it has been a pleasure to review the inspirational, innovative, inclusive, transformative, and child-centred practice undertaken by this exceptional Advanced Thinking School. In conclusion, the application has provided rich and extensive evidence for re-accreditation, and I therefore recommend that re-accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until August 2028. Congratulations to Holcombe Grammar School for this exceptional achievement!



Dr Dave Walters, BA Ed Hons, MPhil Ed, EdD
Thinking Schools Assessor
Grounded Practice Educational Services

On behalf of the University of Exeter, UK
August 2025