



Our Thinking School journey began in 2009 after it was noted in our recent Ofsted, that a vast number of our students were passive learners and the delivery of our curriculum led to our students being given information in order to pass exams but contained little opportunity for learners to discover things for themselves; to become motivated in their own learning and to want to challenge themselves.

One of our action points, unsurprisingly therefore, was to raise the level of challenge for all learners and to encourage our students to become more active, independent learners. 97% of our students have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and/ or complex needs and this was an added complication when trying to find an approach that they would be able to connect with. Our students like things to be right or wrong and find it difficult when there isn't a 'right' answer.

The majority of our students see subjects as very separate entities and compartmentalise skills, and as such are unable to transfer skills between curriculum subjects.

We applied to become a "change school" through the Creative Partnerships programme which encourages creative workers such as artists, architects and scientists to work in schools with teachers to inspire young people and help them learn and develop creative skills. With the three year grant we decided to use the money specifically on developing thinking skills programmes and approaches that would address the particular issues of our students whilst at the same time enabling us to raise the level of challenge for our students and equally importantly considering how that in turn, would impact on their learning and potential attainment.

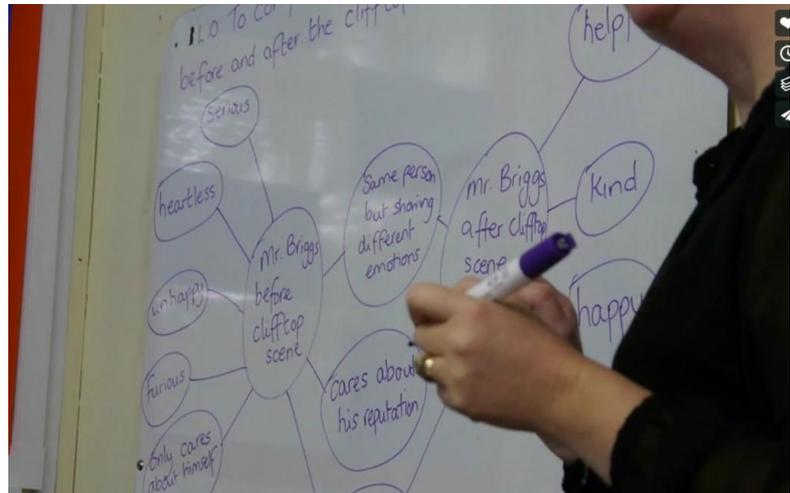


Barbara Priestman students - De Bono's 6 thinking hats

It was during this time that we were introduced to Kestrel Consulting and the Thinking Schools approach. The tools we chose to introduce the students to were David Hyerle's Thinking Maps, Edward de Bono's Thinking Hats and Philosophy for Children (P4C). Alongside this, we also chose to introduce the students to Dramatic Enquiry which is a fusion of P4C and drama.

Many of our students are visual learners therefore we thought if they had concrete strategies e.g. Thinking Maps which could be used across the curriculum this may help them understand that more abstract things such as knowledge and skills can be transferred to other areas of their learning.

We introduced the students to the maps one at a time during assemblies over a period of eight weeks. We wanted to be sure that every student was introduced to them in the same way ensuring that the process for using each map was clear.



The maps were used in lessons in all sorts of ways but one thing was evident almost immediately and that was the increase in the level of classroom talk. Many ASD children are very solitary and find group activities and working co-operatively very difficult. It takes them out of their comfort zone and they feel enormous pressure. Using the maps and having something tangible on which to record their ideas gave them more confidence during discussion as they didn't have to remember what they wanted to say. They were able to record their thoughts first and had something to jog their memory when it came to either discussing in pairs, small groups or as a whole class. The maps were used as aide memoirs but students found the layout easier to use and less threatening than having to write copious notes. Furthermore they were able to use the maps to assist them when writing essays, both in structuring their essays and with the content itself.

Meanwhile, in addition to giving our students something concrete to use to aid their thinking, we also wanted to challenge them further in the difficulties they had with empathy and seeing things from other people's perspectives. Impoverished social imagination and 'pretend' play on behalf of a lot of our students had led to a lack of creativity thus leading to an insular environment in the classroom where individuals were quite intolerant of one another and found it increasingly difficult to put themselves in other people's shoes or think about how they would feel or react in certain situations.

I was introduced to Gordon Poad who, together with James Nottingham and Annie Bromley, developed Dramatic Enquiry as a fusion of drama and Philosophy for Children. In Dramatic Enquiries learners are placed in the centre of a fictitious dilemma and they have to decide for themselves about the questions they need to ask and the rights and wrongs of the given situation.



Creative Enquiry encourages all participants to be active, inquiring individuals. The whole model incorporated the aspects we were looking to address with our students and encompassed all aspects of the PLTS we had been building into our curriculum over the previous two years.

Initially some staff were more reticent, thinking that perhaps some of our ASD students would really struggle with the idea of taking on a role and pretending to be someone else as empathy is an area

that a lot of students with ASD find very difficult. Most agreed that role play and techniques such as Philosophy for Children may help students



understand other people's perceptions and see alternatives to their own way of thinking; it may challenge them in a way they had never been before.

Dramatic Enquiry was so powerful, we now run a session every term; different areas of the curriculum can be brought together rather than trying to teach them separately and current issues can be addressed in an active, engaging way. We also invite students from the local mainstream secondary schools to participate as a way of giving our students the opportunity of integration but in a non-threatening way as they feel they are the experts.

Another key aspect of our Thinking School Journey was our commitment to research. All staff within school undertake some area of research each year and a number of staff have completed Master Degrees supported by funding from school. We achieved the NFER Research mark at extended level in July 2014.

In December 2011 we became the first special school in the country to gain recognition as a 'Thinking School' and in July 2016 achieved Advanced Thinking School Status. We are really proud of our achievement and it is testament to the continuous hard work and commitment of all our staff and students.

Judith Stephenson

Barbara Priestman Academy

[Barbara Priestman Website](#)