

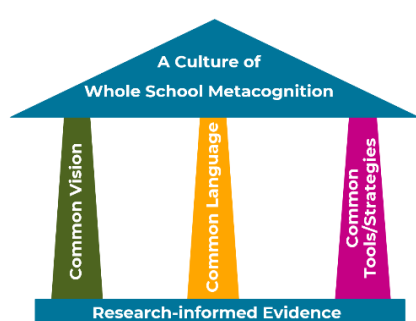
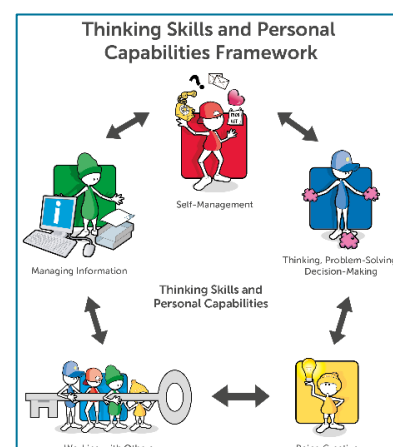
# Looking at Thinking Schools in Northern Ireland

## - a Review of Impact 2025

### Looking Back

The introduction of what was colloquially known as the [‘revised’ curriculum in Northern Ireland](#) (NI) in 2007 brought increased flexibility around curriculum content for schools and an emphasis on skills, defined within a [Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities Framework](#). Since then, the development of students’ critical and creative thinking skills has been a focus for development in many schools. A growing number of these schools have worked with a strategic intent towards becoming recognised

[Thinking Schools](#), pursuing the vision for their students to become ‘meta-learners’, i.e. metacognitive, self-regulating learners. This approach draws on research evidence from both the science of learning and implementation science. Schools commit to building a [visible culture](#) of [‘whole school metacognition’](#), embedding a common language for thinking and learning and specific evidence-informed metacognitive tools and strategies across the school.



[Ballymena Primary School](#) (PS) was the first school in NI to access training from Kestrel Consultancy based in England, now known as [Thinking Matters](#). In 2011 they then gained Thinking School [accreditation](#) with the University of Exeter. In 2009, advisers from the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) initiated a ‘Thinking Schools’ action research project with a small group of primary schools. They were also granted Regio Comenius funding from the British Council to coordinate a Thinking Schools project which was very positively evaluated, partnering with Kestrel Consultancy, Oslo Education Authority, University of Oslo, four schools in Oslo and six local primary schools. One of these schools, [St MacNissi’s PS Newtownabbey](#), also achieved Exeter accreditation in 2012. Since then, a small but steady number of schools have engaged with the approach, with [Cumran PS, Clough](#) also gaining accreditation and subsequently developing their practice to become the first school in NI to gain Level 2 Advanced Accreditation in 2023.

Since the re-launch of the training and support programme under the Thinking Matters (TM) banner in 2018, which coincided with the establishment of a NI-based TM consultant, increasing numbers of schools in NI have engaged with the TM professional development model. Despite the potential impact of factors such as the COVID pandemic and extended periods of difficult industrial relations in NI, including action short of strike, a recent review of evidence in a number of these schools indicates significant and positive benefits of embedding this whole school approach.

In the context of the educational landscape in NI being on the cusp of significant transformation with the launch in March 2025 of the Department of Education’s (DE)

[TransformED](#) strategy, other schools and educational stakeholders may be interested in having a 'look in' to some key features of this effective practice. The evidence which follows includes:

- an overview of case studies documenting experiences of the two schools in NI who have most recently gained Thinking School accreditation with the University of Exeter - [Ashgrove PS, Newtownabbey](#) and [Priory Integrated College \(IC\), Holywood](#). Their evidence is drawn from the schools' published Exeter accreditation reports, from the schools' internal self-evaluation data and from recent interviews with leadership representatives.
- a summary of extracts from Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports published in the past year for schools who have engaged with the Thinking Matters approach.

## **'Looking in' at Ashgrove PS**

[Ashgrove PS](#) is a two-form entry co-educational primary school which initially embarked on their Thinking School journey in the context of the Covid pandemic, specifically due to concerns with the impact of extended periods of lockdown on levels of student well-being and independence. They have prioritised professional development for the whole staff over a five-year period, introducing staff to key aspects of the science of learning, and to a range of specific metacognitive tools and strategies. They established a strong 'Drive Team' who also received TM training and support in their role in guiding implementation and managing change effectively. This team has followed a rigorous process of planning, monitoring and evaluating, enabling staff time and support to effectively embed strategies in practice. The school successfully gained accreditation as a Thinking School from the University of Exeter in January 2024.

The school's [accreditation report](#) states that "*the school is clear that the focus on cognitive development through a whole school consistent approach to learning has improved children's attitudes, improved their enjoyment, developed their independence, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress*". In terms of student academic progress, attainment in Literacy and Numeracy had been consistently above national figures pre-Covid, but as with most schools, standards dipped during the pandemic; senior leadership report that English and Maths standardised assessment data is now consistent with pre-Covid levels. The evidence submitted to the university also included data for the primary seven student cohort who had been impacted by the pandemic. Over a three-year period, individual case studies for these students indicated gains, not only in academic measures and attendance, but also in relation to improvements in self-concept and in attitudes to learning. Particular benefits have also been noted for highly able students who welcome increased levels of challenge and stretch in the metacognitive approaches utilised.

The school now has a defined [thinking school toolkit](#) which includes the [TM Thinking Frames](#), [Kagan Learning Structures](#), de Bono's [Thinking Hats](#), Costa's [Habits of Mind](#) and [Philosophy for Children](#) which are used consistently throughout the school. The staff has also received training in [Visible Thinking Routines](#) and utilise a select number of those in their practice. Efforts have also been made to nurture the students' age-appropriate understanding of key aspects of the science of learning, making connections within

curriculum and pastoral provision, embedded in the principles of deliberate practice and being profiled in a 'Neuroscience Week'. Whole school assemblies have also been used to introduce the Habits of Mind, reinforcing student progress in demonstrating the Habits in their learning through teacher feedback and certificates rewarded at celebration assemblies.

Ongoing reflective practice and robust evaluation has ensured that strategies are embedded with depth, for example, during the first year of implementing the Thinking Frames, monitoring identified the need for a further focus on questioning strategies with the use of the 'Reflective Lens'. After a year of introducing the Habits of Mind, '[Mindful Mascots](#)' were introduced to help make them more meaningful in early years classes by using animals to represent each Habit. During a recent student voice review, it was clear that even the youngest students, not only recognise the mascots, but can explain what Habit they represent and can exemplify what it means in their learning.



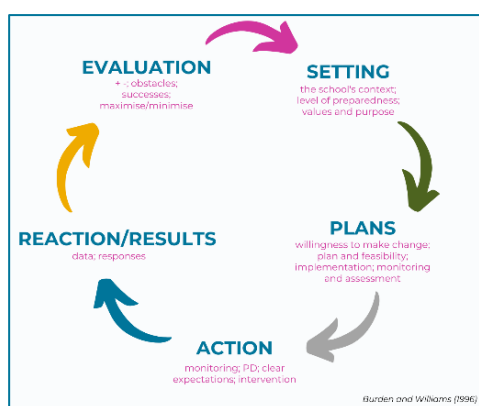
The accreditation report also highlights progress in "*developing critical and creative thinking across the school*", with effective integration of the NI Curriculum's [Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities](#). School leadership particularly note evidence of students asking more and better questions, and of providing more eloquent responses and clear explanations. Use of the metacognitive tools have also contributed to student capacities to engage in collaborative learning tasks and group work and, with the more recent introduction of regular P4C sessions, there is increasing evidence of students offering rich creative ideas and justification of opinions during discussions.

The introduction of the TM Thinking Frames as practical and visual representations of common thinking processes has been fundamental in increasing student awareness of thinking. The flexibility to use the Thinking Frames with written and digital text, and with images and/or concrete objects has enabled them to become a common visual language for thinking in every class. The school recounts examples of their youngest learners in P1 independently using the Thinking Frames and in recent student voice focus groups, all of the students involved were able to provide real examples of where they had recently used some of the Thinking Frames in tasks. Some students described their usefulness, e.g. "*Thinking Frames give me a way to clearly record my work*", "*they help me organise my thinking*" and "*I like that you don't always need to write a lot on them and you can use pictures as well*".

The visibility of these tools and the associated thinking language is apparent in the school's curriculum documentation, classroom discourse, visual environments, assemblies and website. The accreditation report highlights the significant efforts made by the school to inform and engage parents and carers in its Thinking School journey, for example by providing useful information leaflets and profiling use of metacognitive tools in its weekly newsletters and social media sites and including it on agendas at

parent/carer meetings and in induction information. Senior leadership have noted that prospective parents and other visitors to the school often comment on the visibility and celebration of thinking within the physical environment and in student work and attitudes. The metacognitive tools are also utilised in pastoral and administrative contexts, for example the use of Thinking Frames in governors' tasks and of the Habits of Mind when managing student behaviour.

The accreditation report also acknowledges the vital role of senior leadership in strategically and authentically prioritising thinking/metacognition and making meaningful connections with other priorities within School Development Planning processes. This included ensuring governor support, establishing a Drive Team and utilising existing structures such as PRSD processes to ensure the work was a professional target for all teachers and coordinators. The development of the Drive Team has contributed to distributing leadership responsibilities and building leadership capacity within the school and the accreditation report describes the team as "*highly effective and well led*".



The school skilfully utilised the [SPARE model](#) recommended by the Exeter University's accreditation process (Burden, 1997) to guide the implementation process. In establishing the 'setting' and building in monitoring processes, the Drive Team engaged in a rigorous process of baselining and auditing, inviting feedback and collaboration through use of student voice strategies and stakeholder questionnaires/surveys – utilising effect size with the '*Myself as a Learner Scale*' as an innovative way of measuring progress in student self-concept levels.

The prioritisation of and commitment to provision of high-quality professional learning opportunities for staff which have included both externally facilitated and internally led training have been fundamental in securing positive outcomes for learners. It has also benefited staff in terms of deepening professional knowledge and enriching pedagogical skill. The school has also ensured that non-teaching staff have had opportunity to access appropriate training in the approaches. Teachers have had ongoing opportunity to reflect on their roles as 'cognitive coaches', building their own appreciation of evidence-informed practice, and of the science of learning and its relevance to pedagogy. Consideration has been given to the role of the teacher as the 'expert thinker' in providing skilful modelling, clear instruction and appropriate guidance and scaffolding for students.

This sustained whole school focus on the clearly articulated common vision, supported by the introduction of evidence-informed strategies across the whole school has contributed to building [Collective Teacher Efficacy](#) (Eells, 2011). As a valued member of the Thinking Schools Network and now a TSN Hub School, leadership and staff representatives regularly contribute to local and international professional learning networks. They have responded positively to invitations to share their practice at events including conferences and webinars and the school has hosted a TM meta-meet for other schools. Staff members now regularly open their classroom doors with confidence to welcome interested visitors to the school during learning walks.

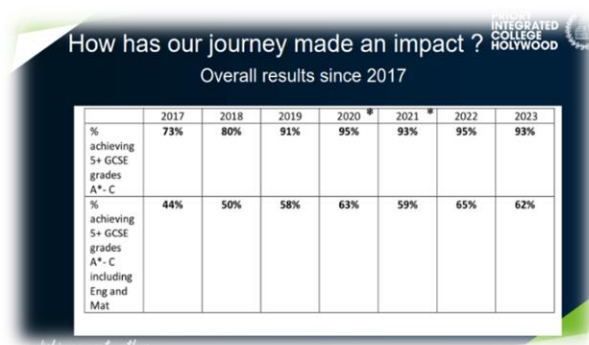
The accreditation report celebrates that “...*the school’s pedagogical approach is informed by clear development planning and CPD underpinned by a firm foundation of research and evidence... This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose, coherence and impact*”.

## ‘Looking in’ at Priory Integrated College (IC)

[Priory IC](#) is an integrated all-ability 11-18 school with over 700 students. Approximately 36% of students are entitled to Free School Meals, 14% are identified as SEND stage 5 and 41% SEND stages 1-4. During 2018-19 senior leadership representatives joined a group of NI schools on a professional learning visit to a recognised 11-18 Thinking School in Hertfordshire and then met with a TM consultant to consider how a bespoke approach to training and support could be designed for their context. The agreed approach sought to build on their existing school improvement programme in which rigorous data analysis was being utilised effectively to track student progress and to set targets. Meaningful connections were also made with their strategic priorities – their recently revised teaching and learning policy, their embedding of assessment for learning practices and their focus on developing literacy across the curriculum. They identified particular aims of promoting oracy and dialogic talk and developing higher order thinking through creating more opportunities for challenge and open-ended learning tasks.

The TM training and support that was provided included both specific training on effective implementation with the Drive Team and whole staff training, specifically when introducing new metacognitive tools. Links were made with key evidence from the science of learning as staff were gradually introduced to Thinking Frames, Metacognitive Questioning, Visible Thinking Routines and the Habits of Mind. The initial timescale for the training and support programme was reviewed regularly and the pace was adapted in light of the impact of the COVID pandemic and of action short of strike. Following each training input, the Drive Team created a detailed action plan which included rigorous monitoring processes, and time was given for staff to trial and review the strategies and to map their use in appropriate curriculum and policy documentation. In June 2025, the college celebrated becoming the first post-primary school in NI to gain Exeter-accreditation as a Thinking School and is now a Thinking School Network Hub School.

Based on the evidence presented, the accreditation report recognises the school improvement progress which has been made, with outcomes for KS4 and KS5 now being above NI average for similar schools – “*the school is clear that the focus on cognitive development through a whole school consistent approach to learning has improved children’s attitudes, improved their enjoyment, developed their independence, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress*”.

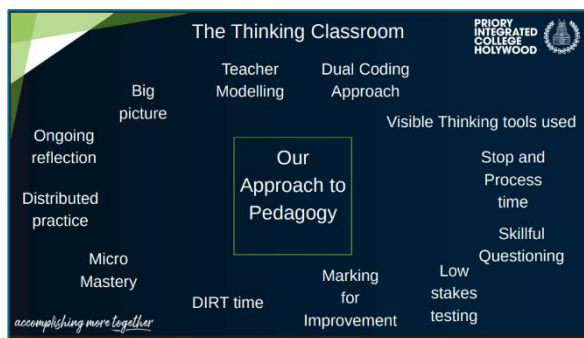


The evidence also recognises additional benefits for specific cohorts of students. In agreeing baseline measures at the outset for example, as well as continuing to monitor



overall performance, senior leadership had also identified a year nine cohort where some concerns existed in relation to performance, attendance and behaviour. This cohort's performance was then tracked through to year twelve when 95% of these students exceeded their predicted grades, achieving 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent), (NI average for similar schools – 79.9%). The college also reports that SEND learners are benefiting from use of metacognitive tools and strategies, especially the Thinking Frames which are used as very valuable tools in making thinking more visible and in enabling tasks to be broken down and scaffolded.

The staff and Drive Team have engaged in professional learning on a variety of science of learning topics, including brain structure and functioning, the emotive brain, motivation,



deliberate practice, memory and cognitive load theory. Staff have given careful consideration to the impact of this knowledge on their pedagogy and have developed increased consistency in teaching approaches. Students have also been introduced to aspects of the science of learning in appropriate learning contexts and it has been integrated in study skills and revision guidance.

In seeking to support the development of 'meta-learning' capacities for their students, the staff has also sought to deepen their assessment for learning practice. They have sought to nurture a culture of reflection, embedding self-assessment and peer assessment practices. They have seen benefits from engaging students more actively and authentically in target-setting, developing effective teacher feedback, use of the Reflective Lens as an integral questioning tool with the Thinking Frames and use of strategies such as Reflective Journals, 'Dedicated Improvement and Reflection Time' (DIRT) and 'WWW/EBI' (*What's Worked Well? Even Better If?*).

A further significant development has been the college's focus on effectively connecting metacognitive strategies with a defined Oracy framework. Last year, members of their Drive Team facilitated a workshop for attendees at the TM Festival of Metacognition in London on this topic. Their approaches have included use of 'talk tactics', detailing talk roles and sentence stems, developing exploratory talk, presentation skills, agreeing common rules for effective group work based on a 'listening ladder' and developing questioning skills through, e.g. use of the Reflective Lens with Thinking Frames and Visible Thinking Routines. General improvements in students' oracy skills and confidence levels were recounted as well as results in Progress in English standardised tests for a focus group of Key Stage 3 students, of whom 17% achieved 'higher than expected grades' and 22% achieved 'much higher than expected grades'.

As an Apple Distinguished School, the college has also sought to integrate their metacognitive tools and strategies with their ICT provision. This has included innovative use of iPads with digital versions of the Thinking Frames accessible on the college's internal drive, thus encouraging increased levels of independent use of the tools. Use of the Showbie app has also facilitated sharing of tool use for staff and students. All classroom assistants also have access to iPads and have undergone training in using voice technology in order to use Oracy as a support to share their thinking. The accreditation report also acknowledged as 'pivotal', "*the high premium placed on*

*sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff* which was also helped through effective use of digital technology.

When introduced to Costa's Habits of Mind as a framework, the college prioritised four specific learning Habits for their learners. The impact of the substantial investment of effort in deepening staff and student understanding of how these behaviours can be nurtured is now evident. The Habits are being embedded within curriculum contexts and in pastoral provision. Habits of Mind Bookmarks are also used as a stimulus for lesson planning. Detailed assessment rubrics based on [Perkins'](#) (2012) four levels of metacognition have been developed for each learning Habit in subject-specific domains, enabling students to increase their levels of self-awareness and capacities to self-assess, with staff reporting that many students are more alert to *how* to improve specific behaviours. These rubrics now form part of the school's reward system and Behaviour Learning Charter and student progress with the Habits is reinforced through teacher feedback.

 Persistence	 Listening	 Managing Impulsivity	 Accuracy
IF I PROMOTE THE RIGHT TO AN EDUCATION I MAY ACHIEVE...	1	Be on time to class and be prepared in order to learn	  
Positive calls or phone call home	2	Listen to and promptly follow all instructions given by staff	  
Best work	3	Try my best in all tasks given	 
Verbal praise	4	Make positive contributions to class discussions and activities	  
Stamps, certificates, stickers	5	Show respect towards pupils, adults and property	  
A reward			
IF I TAKE AWAY THE RIGHTS OF MY OR OTHERS EDUCATION I MAY RECEIVE...			
First reminder			
Second verbal warning			
Site referral and sanction			
After school department detention			
Peak site referral and sanction			

In building their visible thinking culture, Priory IC has also sought to profile its metacognition focus in visual displays around the school environment and on the college's [website](#). Information is visible in relation to how thinking is being taught, the metacognitive tools and learning Habits in use, the importance of higher order questioning and of student independence and clear links with the curriculum and pastoral dimensions such as its restorative approach. Information leaflets aligned to Learning Guidance sessions have been produced for parents/carers and the Thinking School work is profiled in induction events and a variety of information and celebration events for the parent community, leading the accreditation report to conclude that *"the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong"*.

As with Ashgrove PS, the roles of senior leadership and the Drive Team were highlighted in the accreditation report as *"highly effective"* and as key factors in contributing to successful implementation, with particular mention made of the *"strong and inclusive structure"* and the stability of Drive Team membership since 2019. Active governor support was also identified as *"a model of excellent practice"*, with their role having been prominent in the development process with *"governors receiving regular specific updates in relation to Thinking School developments"*. The report also commends the excellent communication and strategic planning and evaluation processes including the use of Sub-Drive Teams such as the Oracy Drive Team. The Drive Team has also valued genuine engagement with students and has actively sought their feedback throughout the process, through use of questionnaire surveys and also Pupil Focus Groups.

Benefits for staff have included opportunities to develop leadership potential and to network and share practice. This has included some staff leading staff development internally within the college, participating at TM conferences and webinars, sharing examples of practice, welcoming visits from other schools. The school also recently hosted a TM Meta-Meet which included the opportunity to share their Thinking School journey and its impact and included a learning walks for attendees.



The positive benefits evident in improved student attitudes to learning and their performance is reflective of the clear vision and strategic planning of school leadership and the skilful knowledge, passion and commitment of the whole staff team. The accreditation report highlights the importance of this and of the evidence-base which has informed the work - *“the school’s pedagogical approach is informed by clear development planning and CPD underpinned by a firm foundation of research and evidence. This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose, coherence and impact”*.

## ‘Looking in’ at Inspection Findings

Since 2024, five schools who have introduced the Thinking School approach have been inspected by the ETI and specific mention has been made to their focus on thinking skills within the published reports. Some of these schools initially accessed professional development from TM many years ago and have subsequently continued their Thinking School journey independently. Others are active members of the Thinking Schools Network, with some currently engaging in a sustained period of professional learning with TM. Extracts have been selected from the ETI reports which illustrate the impact of their whole school focus on thinking/metacognition and the full reports may be accessed at the links below:

[Edendork Primary School](#)

[Killicomaine Junior High School](#)

[Moir Primary School and Nursery Unit](#)

[St MacNissi’s Primary School, Newtownabbey](#)

[St Mary’s Primary School, Pomeroy](#)

Observations of **student learning and thinking** included:

“The children’s thinking skills are very well developed; they use thinking frames to organise, structure and plan their work. They engage enthusiastically with others in discussions, problem-solving and investigative activities to make choices and find solutions. The children are well supported in setting their own targets and samples of work show how feedback from the teachers enables the children to reflect on and improve their work. The older children can articulate how, through taking on a wide range of roles to support their peers, they are developing responsibility and skills such as, teamwork, communication and resilience which they explained will be useful when, for example, they have a job”.

*Edendork PS, Sept 2024*



"The children are curious and enthusiastic learners who enjoy working with others and show resilience when carrying out investigations and problem-solving activities...

The children's thinking skills are particularly well developed across all areas of learning; they explain their thinking confidently and listen and respond maturely to the ideas and views of others".

*St Mary's PS, Pomeroy, May 2024*

The children are reflective learners and evaluate their work confidently. The whole school focus on the development of thinking skills is successfully equipping the children with strategies to become lifelong learners.

*Moirá PS, Nov 2024*

... the pupils apply their learning confidently in real-life contexts across the curriculum and develop well their thinking skills and personal capabilities.

In discussions with the pupils, they articulate well how they learn best, through, for example, the opportunities they have to use strategies to improve their work and engage in practical learning activities. They talked positively about how their teachers help them learn and support them when needed.

*Killicomaine Junior HS, Nov 2024*

Observations of the **quality of teaching and learning provision** included:

The very successful whole-school approach to developing the children's thinking skills is underpinned by the skilful questioning by the staff and meaningful, planned opportunities for paired and group work.

From an early age, the children are taught to reflect on and express their feelings and to empathise with, and respect, others.

A key strength of the learning and teaching is the priority given to the development of the children's thinking skills. Through skilful questioning and effective paired and group work, the staff enable the children to reflect on, develop and explain their ideas and responses, and to consider carefully the views of others.

*Edendork PS, Sept 2024*

The children are supported and challenged to think critically, pose and solve problems, collaborate with others, try new ways of working and take risks in their learning. The staff ask effective questions to stimulate and develop the children's thinking skills and extend their oral responses. Consequently, the children explain their thinking confidently and listen and respond maturely to the ideas and views of others.

*St Mary's PS, Pomeroy, May 2024*

Throughout the school, a key characteristic of the effective practice is the opportunity provided for the children to discuss their learning through well-planned group work and problem-solving activities, enabling them to develop their critical thinking skills and personal capabilities.

*Moirá PS, Nov 2024*

A key strength of the provision is the whole-school focus on the development of thinking skills which enables all of the children to structure their thought processes, reflect on their learning, develop ideas and solve problems. Assessment for learning strategies are highly effective and consistently applied across the year groups.

... as an accredited Thinking School, the associated principles and practices are demonstrated consistently in the learning and teaching. They have a positive impact on the children who know how to structure their thought processes, reflect on their learning, develop ideas and solve problems. As they progress through the school, the children are increasingly adept at choosing independently which thinking frames to use within any given context and can articulate confidently their ideas and findings.

*St MacNissi's PS, Newtownabbey, Nov 2024*

The most effective lessons were characterised by: a consistent planning structure and clear intended learning; pupils engaged actively in well-paced learning; effective use of thinking frames to guide and deepen learning; and a range of effective self-, peer- and teacher assessment for learning strategies to inform planning. The pupils were given good opportunities to apply their learning in real-life contexts across the curriculum and to develop well their thinking skills and personal capabilities and the cross curricular skills of communication, using mathematics and using information and communications technology.

*Killicomaine JHS, Nov 2024*

Observations on **strategic leadership** included:

ETI will continue to work with Edendork Primary School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely includes: the very successful whole-school approach to the development of the children's thinking skills.

*Edendork PS, Sept 2024*

The senior leaders foster a vibrant and inclusive community of learning which prioritises the ongoing professional learning of all staff... Significantly, the medium- and short-term planning addresses explicitly the development of the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities central to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. As a result, during their lessons, the children manage information skilfully, work maturely with their peers and approach tasks flexibly and creatively. The ETI will continue to work with St MacNissi's Primary School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are: the whole-school focus on the development of thinking skills...

*St MacNissi's PS, Newtownabbey, Nov 2024*

Staff professional learning is well-planned and aligned to the whole school priorities; the school is developing a 'Thinking School' pedagogical approach including a range of thinking frames and other metacognitive tools to help the pupils with planning their learning and developing their independent study skills. A 'drive' team, consisting of a range of staff across a majority of curricular areas, has been established to lead this learning and teaching strategy. The 'drive' team have: updated the learning and teaching policy with a common vision for learning in Killicomaine Junior High School; led on staff professional learning; and initiated learning walks to monitor the quality of the provision for learning and teaching across the school.

*Killicomaine JHS, Nov 2024*

## Looking Forward

With metacognition and self-regulated learning now ranking highest in the most recent revision of the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF, 2025) '[Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#)', in terms of potential impact on student progress, the growing bank of evidence from recognised Thinking Schools in NI suggests that there may be even further and additional benefits in successfully embedding a visible culture of 'whole school metacognition'.

A key factor in successful implementation in these schools was provision of high-quality professional learning, which is not a 'one size fits all' programme, but rather **adaptable** support to suit the unique needs and context of individual schools. The professional learning programme has also valued the integration of **externally** facilitated training and support with use of the schools' **internal** expertise and maximisation of opportunities to share practice. Fundamentally, the training context also seeks to deepen the

professional knowledge and practice of teachers by introducing evidence-informed practical classroom strategies and pedagogical approaches. Importantly for a Thinking School, these approaches can then be used across the whole school and are underpinned by an understanding of relevant science of learning theory.

Ultimately, the extent to which any professional development programme will have the maximum and intended impact will be determined by the strategic leadership approach adopted and the levels of buy-in and commitment from the staff. The skilful use of the SPARE model within TSN schools has thus provided a useful action research and school development framework to guide the process. An analysis of the SPARE model when compared with the recent synthesis of [implementation science research](#) conducted by the EEF (2024) indicates reassuringly that it reflects the three key elements identified therein, in recognising the *behaviours* that drive implementation and the *contextual factors* that influence it and by using a *process* that is structured but flexible. The phases of the SPARE model also align with the EEF's recommendations for effective implementation, i.e.:

<i>SPARE Model Phase</i>	<i>EEF Implementation Recommendations</i>
<b>S</b> etting	→ Explore
<b>P</b> lan	→ Prepare
<b>A</b> ction	→ Deliver
<b>R</b> eaction/Results and <b>E</b> valuation	→ Sustain

The SPARE model also reflects the processes generally identified within common school development planning and self-evaluation cycles, such as in the guidance provided by DE and ETI.

The recent introduction of DE's ambitious TransformED strategy and its associated action plan details a programme of comprehensive and system-level change in education. It seeks to take forward reform of curriculum, assessment, qualifications and school improvement and to address educational disadvantage, and it promises significant investment in high-quality teacher professional development. Initial TransformED actions have included a strategic review of the NI curriculum led by Lucy Crehan with the review findings recently published – [A Foundation for the Future: Developing Capabilities Through a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum in Northern Ireland \(June, 2025\)](#). The review concluded that NI needs a new curriculum and it outlined key principles which should underpin its future development. In July 2025, the Minister for Education published his [response to the review](#), outlining the way forward and detailing his response to the 21 recommendations made in the review, clearly stating his acceptance that:

*"...Northern Ireland needs a new curriculum which is purpose-led, knowledge-rich, continuous and coherent, specific and focused, flexible and inclusive. A curriculum grounded in powerful knowledge will enable critical thinking, a love of learning and cultivate curiosity."*

TM and its Thinking Schools Network (TSN) member schools warmly welcome DE's intentions to develop, not only a 'knowledge-rich curriculum', but also one in which the positive dispositions and critical and creative thinking skills necessary for our young people to thrive in today's world are integral and explicit. TM also welcomes DE's commitment to invest in teacher professional learning which utilises the learning from

research-informed practice. Many TSN member schools have certainly seen the benefits gained from a whole school explicit focus on deepening teacher knowledge of the science of learning and on embedding evidence-informed pedagogical strategies.

DE's recent announcement of an allocation of £31 million of dedicated funding over a three-year period for professional development should enable all schools to identify and access training and support which best suits their needs and priorities. DE's further recent announcement of additional funding for schools to host Research-Informed Conferences in the 2025/26 academic year which will focus on pedagogy, curriculum development and improving outcomes for learners and which will foster collaboration among teachers, researchers and school leaders is also to be celebrated. Amongst many other valuable opportunities, this funding will enable other interested NI school leaders and teachers to attend a research-informed conference hosted by Ashgrove PS on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2025. There they will have opportunity to hear more of the theoretical and research evidence underpinning the science of learning and the science of effective implementation, and also to hear about impactful classroom practice strategies from a number of TSN member schools.

The evidence from recognised Thinking Schools in NI who have invested long-term in a strategic approach founded on evidence-based pedagogy, and who are seeing improved outcomes for learners in both the academic and pastoral domains, suggests that these schools will have much to offer in realising DE's strategic vision to *Make Best Practice Common Practice*.

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Further information may be found at [www.thinkingmatters.org](http://www.thinkingmatters.org) or by contacting [lorna.gardiner@thinkingmatters.com](mailto:lorna.gardiner@thinkingmatters.com)