

Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Durban Girls' College (Junior Primary Phase) for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter, UK.

Starting point: the school context

Durban Girls' College (DGC) is an independent Christian school for girls, founded in 1877. The school consists of a Junior Primary, Senior Primary and High School Phase, has excellent academic results and a strong focus on sports and culture. The school is operating within a Christian ethos, in which girls are inspired to realise their potential "through a unique educational journey built on tradition, innovation, diversity and excellence aimed at enriching our world"¹. Durban Girls' College Junior Primary's values are rooted in a strong sense of diversity, care and self-efficacy, and the school aims to be a happy, lively environment with a sustained commitment to a culture of thinking². The school began their journey as a Thinking Schools in 2017, with a clear focus on Growth Mindset, while also using Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats and Bloom's taxonomy as cognitive tools to teach 21st century learning skills³. The sustained emphasis on thinking skills and strategies reflects the schools' drive for girls' holistic development, with a firm commitment to lifelong learning for all pupils.

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on high aspiration and achievement for all students. Student outcomes at the end of their DGC journey are high⁴, yet this does not come at the cost of a caring, inclusive ethos in which a great emphasis is placed on the school as a community. This is particularly visible in the way in which the school is engaging in its Transformation Journey which places advancing diversity and transformation as a core focus

¹ School's Prospectus 2021

² School's Prospectus 2021 and website

³ The Galleon 2020

⁴ 2020 Matric Results

of the DGC policies, programmes, priorities, and activities⁵. The Junior Primary Phase continuously seeks to make learning explicit and visible by developing children as curious, agile, and resilient thinkers, so that they become committed lifelong learners. DGC Primary Phase has embedded thinking and meta-cognitive approaches in all subjects to ensure that its aims and ethos become a reality for all pupils⁶.

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as a Thinking School from Carol-Anne Conradie (Thinking Skills Coordinator and Head of Junior Primary) evidencing the history of the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its origin in 2017. The evidence for accreditation is collated in an extensive digital portfolio of evidence, which includes a wealth of evidence consisting of digital links, videos, documents, and other forms of evidence.

Thinking School Ethos, Culture and Ownership

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are fully embedded within the culture of Durban Girls' College Junior Primary. Term Planners clearly map out the various thinking tools and routines that feed into the various themes, topics, and subject areas⁷ and thinking skills are included in all aspects of the school's curriculum. The school provides all stakeholders with extensive and clear information about their thinking-focused curriculum, for instance through the use of a 'tree poster', which outlines the various thinking tools used in the school, with Growth Mindset at its heart. Teachers use the extensive and detailed Staff Handbook to help them with their lesson planning and Thinking Skills are clearly at the heart of the school's ethos, culture, and curriculum. The Staff Handbook, for instance, clearly distinguishes 'teaching for/of/about thinking' and clear links are made between the thinking tools, teaching strategies and (thinking) skills⁸. Short-, medium- and long-term plans map out the various thinking strategies and how these are integrated into the curriculum and in lesson plans in all subject areas. Student materials, displays, and the Thinking School logos all serve

⁵ DGC Strategy 2017-2021

⁶ School's Prospectus 2021

⁷ Portfolio of Evidence

⁸ Ibid

as reminders for students in the classrooms of thinking strategies and the school's commitment to cognitive education⁹.

Comprehensive information about the school being a 'Thinking School' is provided to all stakeholders, for instance in the form of the above-mentioned poster, the Staff Handbook, the school's website and the multiple references to thinking that adorn the school's walls. Evidence of the Thinking School ethos permeating school life is provided in many ways in the portfolio, but I would like to pick out a wonderful video of Creative Day, in which pupils not only confidently use thinking tools, but are also demonstrating excellent meta-awareness of their thinking. Similarly, teachers not only use thinking tools in the activities to help guide the children in their thinking, but also actively encourage children to evaluate and reflect on their thinking, collaboration, and learning¹⁰. Teachers also confidently explain strategies around using particular tools, clearly using and modelling their shared language of thinking and ways of thinking. In doing so, the teachers demonstrate an excellent knowledge and skills of the tools themselves and how they might be used, as well as a deep understanding of the role of thinking, collaboration and creativity in children's learning and development. Children, on their part, demonstrate an excellent awareness of the role of thinking and collaboration for their learning, and are confidently using the shared language of thinking amongst themselves and to their teachers¹¹.

Creativity and creative thinking play a particularly important role in the school, and it is very interesting to see how thinking tools (such as 6 hats for thinking), metacognitive awareness (thinking about thinking) and 21st century learning are integrated¹², providing interesting examples of how thinking and learning approaches move from policy to practice. Teachers confidently explain the reasons for using specific thinking tools and how these are embedded into their teaching practice. Careful thought has been put into the structure and visual presentation of thinking and learning skills, and as such, DGC conveys a highly positive, caring, and creative (and fun!) atmosphere.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ School ethos – Grade 3 creative day video

¹¹ Ibid

¹² DGC Robotics video

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

Both the Executive Head of School and the Head of Junior Primary (who is also the Thinking School Coordinator) have made a formal commitment to cognitive education as part of the Junior Primary school's development priorities and communications within the school and more widely. This is evidenced in planning documentations, booklets and videos celebrating thinking skills, the school prospectus and the school's website. A letter from the Executive Head of School, reinforcing commitment to becoming a Thinking School was included in the portfolio of evidence, which expressed the wish to extend the Thinking School's ethos and culture into the Senior Primary and High School phases. This would be an important aim for the school following accreditation of the Junior Primary phase. While there is no doubt that the thinking skills developed by the younger children will form a strong foundation for their later school years, they would gain so much more if they would be able to further develop their thinking skills and learning by using thinking tools throughout their school journey. In that respect, the best-practice knowledge and skills demonstrated by the teachers in the Junior Primary phase, along with the recent appointment of Mrs Conradie as Head of Primary, seems an excellent starting point for further dissemination of the thinking ethos throughout the school, and will hopefully galvanise the whole school's development into a Thinking School¹³.

Within the Junior Primary phase, the thorough approach taken by the Thinking Schools Coordinator/ Head of Junior Primary, along with the HOD Academics, has allowed DGC to develop and maintain coherence in its approach, by developing a clear shared language and visual representation of thinking throughout the school. The School Board is fully supportive of the development of the Thinking School and members of the School Board are kept up to date about the school's approaches to thinking throughout the curriculum, which not only explains the school's thinking-related practice, but also helps to make learning visible. A Drive Team has been in place since 2020, with regular meetings, outcomes, and minutes of which are disseminated amongst Junior Primary school staff.

¹³ Letter of endorsement – Executive Head of School

There is ample evidence to indicate that DGC Junior Primary is receptive to change and innovation. While the school always achieved excellent Matric results, and is known for its academic, sports and cultural achievements, the development of cognitive approaches has been an instrumental part of the school's vision and drive for many years, rooted in inclusive educational values and an explicit aim to develop lifelong learners. A range of ways in which thinking and learning skills are scaffolded have been incorporated in all aspects of school life, for instance through the aforementioned visual tools, and a shared language for thinking and learning, but also through the physical spaces in which children learn. The range of developments within the school related to thinking and thinking skills are aspirational and designed to empower children to develop themselves into "critical, creative, curious, and collaborative thinkers who are mindful in their approach"¹⁴. The planning and professional development of staff are clearly aligned to the overall Thinking School philosophy and provide clear mechanisms for ongoing development around Thinking Skills in the school.

Learning and Teaching

Despite the challenges of recent times, there is clear evidence of developing learning and teaching in line with a Thinking School ethos. The wealth of evidence presented provides a good indication that the school has fully embraced and embedded a range of thinking tools in their practice. Visual displays and graphic organisers are used throughout the school and student work and videos demonstrates extensive use of Thinking Hats and Thinking Maps, which clearly function as a common 'visual language' for teachers and students alike. The children and teachers are confidently using Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats and Visible Thinking Routines in their practice and evidence presented in the portfolio indicates that both adults and children are very familiar with the tools and associated language of these tools and of cognitive approaches such as 'Growth Mindset' and they are used both consistently and flexibly to support thinking and learning. The video of one of the teachers reflecting on thinking skills and how this has changed the way in which she teaches, the way in which children learn and how it has developed herself as an educator, was particularly enlightening, presenting a very clear and eloquent understanding of the various tools

¹⁴ Portfolio of evidence

used and the ways in which this has impacted the children's learning¹⁵. This, together with the rest of the evidence provided comprehensively demonstrates that the Thinking Tools that are currently used in the school, are firmly embedded into the school's teaching, learning and evaluation practices.

An important and continuing focus for the school is developing and maintaining a culture of caring, based around the values of courage, attitude, respect, empathy, and self-control. Thinking skills approaches and associated language are used throughout to encourage mindful learning and behaviour, for instance through the Care Circle approach, in which girls are encouraged to listen to one-another, to be open to differences and to build on each other's points of views. Growth Mindset is used to anchor and bring together the school's values, strategies and learning aims, and an effective visual representation of a tree is used and referred to throughout the school, helping children and staff to use the shared language of thinking. Reflection is built into lesson planning, and teachers noted that, while reflection takes time, it is always interesting and useful. There is evidence of children having excellent awareness of their learning and goals, and they also demonstrate a good meta-awareness of thinking in the videos presented as part of the portfolio of evidence¹⁶.

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by Growth Mindset which has core elements such as reflective thinking, metacognition, and planning as its foundations. This approach is based on sound research evidence, which has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose and coherence. Throughout the thinking journey, the school has developed itself as a learning environment and community in which the physical space, pedagogy and culture come together to develop children holistically. The tree representation is an excellent example of this, cleverly integrating learning, thinking and the school's values and personalised and contextualised visual displays such as this clearly aid consistency, recognition, and application of thinking skills.

¹⁵ Video review cognitive education

¹⁶ Care circle reflection: the Red Hat

Since the beginning of the school's thinking journey in 2017, continuous evaluation has taken place of the Thinking Skills approaches that are being used and of how they are being used. Approaches such as Six Hats for Thinking and Thinking Maps help pupils develop key problem-solving skills, and there is an intention to begin to use Habits of Mind as an additional approach to thinking. The fact that the teachers are not only using various approaches and tools but are personalising them to suit the school's specific context and aims, indicates a thorough understanding of the principles of teaching and learning that underpin these teaching and learning tools, such as metacognition, collaboration, and self-regulated learning. In my view, the school might now be in a good place to consider approaches to develop children's core critical and reflective thinking and collaborative dialogue, such as Philosophy for Children or Thinking Together, or a teaching approach such as Dialogic Teaching. While these approaches are perhaps less directive or provide less visual scaffolding, they would seem a useful and timely continuation of the thinking journey in the school, building upon the knowledge, skills and dispositions already developed by the teachers and children.

Training

Since 2017, the Thinking Schools coordinator has attended a wide range of training around Thinking Schools led by Thinking Schools South Africa, in which new approaches have been introduced, and deeper understandings about thinking skills have been developed. The school has a formal programme of evaluation of staff training and thinking skills and there are formal and informal opportunities for staff to evaluate and reflect on the tools used. In addition, there has been an extensive and planned programme of training for staff, in which TSSA trainers and other external speakers have led sessions on specific strategies, leadership, assessment and lesson planning and staff have attended relevant conferences. There is shared drive available for new staff, and they are introduced to the Thinking Tools ethos and the school's guiding principles by members of the Drive Team. The Thinking Schools coordinator has attended relevant conferences and she also leads CPD meetings for other staff and there is good evidence of staff providing mutual support through lesson observations, staff meetings and more informal sharing of practice.

The development of teaching staff within the Thinking Schools ethos is clearly evidenced and in addition, it is wonderful to see that parents are not only fully informed of the Thinking School's ethos but seem fully on board and highly supportive of the thinking ethos, aims and language. It was very interesting to see the videos of parents, in which the shift from teaching content to teaching skills and the focus on not just content but also on 'how to learn', was eloquently discussed by the parents.

Assessment and Outcomes

Multiple and complementary forms of assessment are used in the school to assess the children's wellbeing and development. Both formal and informal assessment methods are used, and the Thinking School ethos has created an atmosphere in which children are encouraged to take risks in their learning and mistakes are considered part of the learning process. Formative assessment, focused on individual student growth and development through self-reflection, takes place routinely and allows students not only to develop themselves as a learner but also helps to develop their self-regulative learning skills. Ongoing evaluation and informal assessment of students' wellbeing and use and understanding of thinking skills demonstrates that students are forming good learning habits and a good self-concept of learning.

The benchmarking assessment indicates that the focus on cognitive development through a whole school consistent approach round thinking skills has developed children's attitudes to learning and to themselves as a learner, improved their confidence, developed their interest in others, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress¹⁷. In addition, there is anecdotal evidence from staff, pupils, and parents about how the focus on, and development of, thinking skills are associated with positive outcomes for pupils related to academic growth, improvement in thinking and language, dispositions to learning, creative writing and, importantly, high quality teaching. The school's own evaluation process and

¹⁷ Reflective Pro-forma

presentation of outcomes clearly demonstrates the aim to be transparent and an aspiration for further development and improvement¹⁸.

Evaluation of Programmes

There is a continual review of the range of cognitive tools, strategies and resources employed, and implementation of cognitive tools is done carefully and collaboratively. There seems to be a culture of thinking and school improvement built around trust and collaboration, which includes opportunities for staff to discuss the process of implementation and efficacy of the tools and approaches, and how these can be maintained and improved¹⁹.

Conclusion

The wide range of evidence submitted confirms that Durban Girls' College Junior Primary clearly meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School. The school demonstrates a true commitment to the continued development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until January 2025.

I would like to thank the Thinking School Coordinator and leadership, along with the rest of the staff, children and parents, for submitting such a comprehensive and insightful evidence base, giving a real insight into the Thinking Ethos in the school and for giving their time in, what must be a particularly difficult and incredibly busy period for the school. It is very clear that Durban Girls' College Junior Primary is a Thinking School in every respect, and that Thinking is at the heart of all teaching and learning that takes place in the school. Staff and children can be rightly proud of their school community.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

Further Recommendations

I conclude my evaluation with some suggestions as to how the school could continue to develop as a Thinking School and possibly inform a (virtual) development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- An exploration of dialogic approaches to teaching and learning, which might be a new (but related to current practice) avenue to develop; linking firmly with ideas around diversity, equality and inclusion, which seems an important driving force within the school. There is good evidence that dialogic approaches to education can further improve children's attainment in English, Maths and Science²⁰, but through its basis in democratic values and reasoned argument, it tends to promote wider and deeper thinking and learning amongst pupils and can help bridge differences, by its underpinnings in tolerance, empathy, and inclusion. Due to long-standing involvement in research in this area, Thinking Schools @Exeter is well-placed to support this, for instance via a bespoke online workshop.
- To further consider adapting or developing the tools the school currently uses, to increase the sense of ownership of pupils and staff and to further develop and carry out the 'Durban Girls' College approach to thinking'.
- To further integrate thinking processes with questioning, collaborative learning, creativity and assessment and evaluation processes. This would benefit from an overview for how these elements are integrated and requires getting underneath cognitive tools and dispositional development to identify the underlying meta-cognitive processes that enhance children's learning and thinking.
- To use the best practice and extensive knowledge and skills already available in the Junior Primary Phase to disseminate and implement the Thinking Ethos across the whole school.

²⁰ See <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED581114.pdf>

- To use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, to deepen, expand and disseminate the significant understanding and expertise of Durban Girls' College, and to gain Advanced Thinking School accreditation. DGC is well-placed to be a centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking, already demonstrating best practice around Early Years teaching in the Junior Primary Phase. The pursuit of accreditation as a Thinking School in the Senior Primary and High School, as well as Advanced Accreditation for the Junior Primary Phase would support this vision.



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