

Report by Dr Dave Walters following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by The Gordon Children's Academy for the purpose of re-accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Starting point: the school context

The Gordon Children's Academy (GCA) is a popular and successful larger than average primary school, and part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT), comprised of 17 schools (10 primary and 7 secondary). The school has a clear vision outlining its beliefs and how to achieve them. The overarching focus is on making learning irresistible with high expectations for all children. GCA's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by an explicit focus on the development of thinking. Specifically, this involves a clear integration of 6 curriculum areas: Thinking about Thinking, Thinking Academically, Thinking Artistically, Thinking Globally, Thinking Healthily and Thinking Inclusively. Within the metacognitive domain (Thinking about Thinking), four main cognitive tools feature and include Habits of Mind, Thinking Hats, Thinking Keys and Thinking Maps. GCA keeps abreast of research and evidence and this acts to operationalise the school's mission in a coherent and informed manner. The school's focus on being our best selves is clearly articulated so that children can locate how to move towards this. The seven elements of Persistence, Flexibility, Bravery, Curiosity, Creativity, Collaboration and Accuracy form the foundations and within this there is the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at GCA. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and there are strong support structures in place embracing aspects such as Autism Spectrum Condition, Dyslexia and Processing, Sensory Circuits, Social, Emotional and Mental Health Wellbeing, Speech, Language and Communication. In addition to this provision, GCA has a rich extra-curricular offering designed to build children's cultural capital.² Achievement continues to rise across the school with attendance and behaviour being of an excellent standard. This would strongly suggest that GCA is an attractive place for children to learn.³ The school

¹ School's Website

² Ibid

³ Reflective Proforma

was accredited in 2018. Since then, GCA has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.⁴

GCA has a highly effective and well led Drive Team. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full and inspirational support provided by the Headteacher and the Thinking Skills Coordinator. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.⁵

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Kirstie Jones and Sam Kirk (Headteacher of GCA, Thinking Skills Coordinator respectively) evidencing the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its origin and also specifically since 2018 when the focus moved towards further embedding metacognitive strategies for learning, enhancing consistency, reducing cognitive load and improving pupils' ownership of their learning.⁶ The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and captured brilliantly on the school's website via a dedicated criteria linked section.⁷ This structure is consistently applied across the TSAT family of schools and is a particular strength, providing consistency without undermining the specific contexts of the individual schools. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall curriculum development structure referencing six core elements. In addition, the school's thinking approach is illustrated by thinking pathways that outline how specific tools map onto key thinking processes. Within each of these domains there is ample explanatory information and exemplar materials linked to the school's curriculum policy and development planning.

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of GCA. Curriculum policy documents and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. This has a judicious blend of TSAT and GCA elements. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.⁸

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Reflective Proforma and School's Website

⁶ Reflective Proforma

⁷ School's Website

⁸ Ibid

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through the newsletter, presentations, school website, homework space, parents' evenings, and online platforms. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning at home.⁹

GCA has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus in order to clarify areas of uncertainty. The TSAT family of schools is a good example of how to secure continuity and progression for children as they move through the various phases of provision. In addition, TSAT provides a high-quality extension to this and further strengthens the Thinking Schools focus via events such as the TSAT conference. In respect of this GCA has led seminars in order to further cement the culture of thinking across the trust. This high-quality ethos and culture is not confined to formal partnerships however, and GCA is open to collaboration with other schools on a more informal basis. Through its connections with these stakeholders, GCA conveys a positive, caring, and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation. This is clearly evidenced via excellent visual displays, newspaper coverage, 'branding,' rewards scheme and conference inputs.¹⁰

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The headteacher is high profile and gives full commitment to both the Thinking School ethos and the implementation of the cognitive development agenda. This has cascaded to leadership throughout the school and is evidenced in school improvement planning documentations, thinking skills leaflet for parents, email communications to parents, parental feedback, and open day inputs. This whole school commitment has galvanised GCA's development.¹¹

The Governing Body are not only fully supportive of the school's commitment to cognitive education, but also demonstrate a good understanding of how this approach enables children to think through their curriculum in order to bring learning to life. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education, particularly through school visits and learning walks where thinking skills are seen in action. Governor visits have a clear purpose, identify key questions, allow narrative feedback and suggest future action. The framework for Governor visits is particularly impressive and uses a Thinking Hats structure. Within this framework key elements are addressed. These include objectives, purpose, key questions, positives, negatives and 'interesting' strands. This

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback indicates that children not only develop their learning significantly, but also their capacity to think independently and develop their opinions leading to positive mental health and wellbeing. This is an impressive positive shift in pupils' holistic educational growth springing from GCA's whole school development as a Thinking School.¹²

The Drive Team is comprised of a rich blend of staff and is very well structured and led. The Drive Team lead has a particularly impressive professional development profile which includes Open University accreditation. The Drive Team has clear distributed responsibilities including leadership of the Student Drive Team, coordination of observations, demonstration of outstanding practice, collation of feedback (staff and students), undertaking Thinking Walks, coordination of Governor visits and visits from other schools. The list of 'non-negotiables' ensure that the team operate with challenge and purpose. Of particular note is the way the Drive Team use specific research questions to inform developments throughout the year. They adopt the role of researching professionals and again this is a model of excellent practice. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹³

There is ample evidence to indicate that GCA is receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for a number of years in response to ensuring that the school had an explicit vision based upon inclusive educational values that would serve as the foundation for a strategic move forward.¹⁴ An impressive range of cognitive approaches have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning visual tools, thinking dispositions and reflective tools (Thinking Hats and Thinking Keys).¹⁵

There is an organic Thinking Action Plan by which the agreed cognitive tools, strategies and resources are being implemented and taught across the school. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational, designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development. The Action Plan clearly sets out a termly agenda with the overarching current focus being to develop whole school consistency.¹⁶ Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

¹² School's Website

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Reflective Proforma and School's Website

Learning and Teaching

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of GCA. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple' approach. In this regard, the Drive Team meetings typically focus on what works best, for whom and how. This, aligned to excellent leadership and communication, ensures that good practice is shared judiciously with all staff to develop their classroom impact. There is a universal staff belief that all pupils are capable of making progress and this further supports the school's commitment to cognitive education. This clearly demonstrates how it is one of the school's main aims.¹⁷

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the core elements of Thinking Maps, Thinking Keys, Thinking Hats, metacognition, memory and schema development, and Habits of Mind as its foundation. This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose and coherence. The emphasis placed on the learning environment is also clearly illustrated in the evidence provided by the school. These elements, combined with GCA's commitment to the development of psychological well-being, have resulted in learning and teaching that is focused on the holistic development of every child.¹⁸

Recent learning and teaching developments include how to engage parents in supporting children's cognitive and psychological wellbeing. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are not only nurtured but in a way that allows wider opportunities to flourish. Effective use of displays enriches the learning environment by encouraging a common language for learning and fostering self-regulation of thinking and learning. Of particular note is the interactive quality of displays where children are encouraged to interact with the content by selecting a particular focus for their learning. Where feasible, the school has personalised and contextualised visual displays to aid consistency, recognition and application of Thinking Skills. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through displays of high-quality pieces of work. GCA has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the current focus on developing consistency across the school reflects an unswerving commitment to carefully embed cognitive approaches within lessons to encourage children to increasingly move out of their learning comfort zone. This is an interesting area for continued development, perhaps through formalising some of the successful tools and dispositional

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

approaches to embrace thinking routines into self-regulatory strategies for moving out of a 'I am stuck' moment.¹⁹

Training

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. The highly trained Drive Team has undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.²⁰ There is an ongoing training programme in place, aimed at the development of expertise in a range of cognitive tools, strategies, and resources for established and newly appointed staff. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that centres on the consistent use of Thinking Maps, Habits of Mind and Thinking Keys. This dovetails well with the overarching 'Six Starting Points' and the 'Thinking Pathways' integral to the TSAT vision and model. The peer observation model has created a very supportive lesson study climate that has undoubtedly fostered creative and innovative practice. There is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking. Parents are fully informed of the Thinking Schools ethos, which features prominently on the website and in the school's communications. Staff are encouraged to work together and to provide mutual support through the development of thinking generally and also through subject contexts. Good practice is shared widely, and lesson observations are used extensively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual support. Moving forward, this would benefit from further developing a practitioner research approach to data collection, analysis and application and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect on this aspect. Mapping the Ofsted curriculum focus of Intent, Implementation and Impact onto the SPARE model of evaluative research would be a good way of driving this as the Planning, Action and Reaction/Results match directly. It would therefore extend the Ofsted model by taking the Setting into consideration and also adding Evaluation in order to set out the next steps. This would fit well with the focus on becoming a reflective practitioner. Staff feedback in relation to training is extremely positive and indicates clear improvements to learning and teaching.²¹

Assessment and Outcomes

Alternative and complimentary forms of assessment spanning the formative, summative and ipsative domains are routinely used to examine the development of cognitive skills, and how these are related to learning outcomes in the wider sense have been implemented. These include MALS, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Reflective proforma and School's Website

²¹ Ibid

GCA has extended the application of MALS to focus on longitudinal changes to pupils' self-perception and this is an excellent development as it will enable long-term continuing impact to be charted. The Thinking Hats model is used to structure self-assessment, and this further illustrates that GCA has embedded a whole school approach. Assessments, including attendance and behaviour, indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. GCA demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. GCA demonstrates a healthy 'data informed' (rather than data led) approach to assessment to avoid assessment becoming the master of the curriculum rather than the servant.²²

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.²³ There is qualitative data from staff, pupils and parents about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils and are associated with academic outcomes and improved motivation.

The evidence provided indicates impressive achievement growth. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive achievement trend together with dispositional and psychological wellbeing growth. The use of the 'Be Your Best Self' (BYBS) thinking journal has ensured that pupils have a voice in this process. Indeed, a high premium is placed on student voice across the school.²⁴

Evaluation of Programmes

There is a continual review of the range of cognitive tools, strategies and resources employed, with specific reference to their impact on pupils' meta-cognition and the transfer of skills, strategies and learning behaviours. This makes use of the SPARE wheel model of illuminative evaluation on which the Thinking School approach is based. The SPARE model would benefit from wider dissemination at all levels (from leadership to individual teachers) in order to further foster a 'researching professional' culture. The SPARE model can be easily aligned to the Ofsted curriculum focus on Intent, Implementation and Impact areas as already mentioned. Through a collaborative approach to leadership, the Drive Team have established a culture of thinking and school improvement built on

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

regular opportunities for staff to discuss the process and efficacy of cognitive education and how it can be maintained and improved. Microsoft Forms is used to gain feedback from staff and pupils. This has been in response to a development point arising from a previous reflective document and shows how receptive the school is to feedback aimed at improving practice. Pupils are integral to the evaluation process at GCA and the BYBS reflection journal is a model of excellent practice in this respect. The RECHARGE acronym is also an excellent mechanism for driving improvements. GCA has a real thinking culture across the school. There is a genuine feel that 'this is the way we do things around here'.

Ownership

There is no doubt that GCA has made a full commitment to developing and embedding cognitive education throughout the school. From the initial introduction of cognitive tools and practices, the school has expanded their repertoire of cognitive pedagogy and demonstrate a wide range of practice geared towards the development of thinking. There is evidence that the school is committed to distilling and integrating these practices both in how they are used together and in the way they have become part of the thinking culture throughout the school and across roles and ages. Inclusion is a high priority for the school, and it leaves no stone unturned. The focus on social, emotional, psychological, sensory and physical dimensions is testimony to this. Through the careful and progressive introduction of cognitive tools and CPD geared towards developing teachers as mediators of learning, linked to the school's vision and values, the school has laid a strong foundation that ensures the whole school approach to the teaching of thinking flourishes. GCA is an inspirational example of the drive for holistic educational provision geared toward the development of lifelong learners.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that GCA meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School and demonstrates an unswerving commitment to the continued development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until February 2025.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base, clearly organised around the evaluation rubric, which provided the lens through which the excellent practice could be viewed.

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 development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- Further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best, for whom and how, by fine-tuning the already best practice. This combination of training will secure a balance of internal self-improvement with an external freshness and perspective. This requires getting underneath cognitive tools and dispositional development to identify the underlying meta-cognitive processes that enhance children's learning and thinking.
- Further integrate thinking processes with questioning, visual tools, dispositional development, deliberate practice routines, assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This would benefit from an overview for how these elements are integrated and could build on the GCA's models already in place and act as a means of providing a concise overview. Thinking Schools@Exeter is well placed to support this via a bespoke workshop.
- Focus lesson observations on key indicators of learning and thinking processes. These need to be simple, clearly observable and made explicit to all staff. The work of Project Zero (Harvard University) is a particularly useful source in this respect.
- Add the internal use of effect sizes at an individual teacher, team and whole school level to further strengthen the quantitative robustness of data in order to supplement high quality qualitative data. This will allow impact comparisons of meta-cognitive strategies and feedback with the work of The Sutton Trust and John Hattie.
- Further develop evaluative research to continue the development of staff as researching professionals. To gain accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School (a suggested next step), researching professionals are expected to offer articles relating to best practice to publications such as the school's magazine, local newspapers, the school website and professional publications. Other forums where impact can be made public are leader/teacher learning communities and action research seminars. The SPARE model of evaluative action research is a useful framework through which to apply this at all levels of leadership and classroom practice and could easily be applied to the Intent, Implementation and Impact approach to curriculum development given the alignment of PAR to Intent, Implementation and Impact. The addition of the Setting (S) and Evaluation (E) would enhance current practice without having to re-invent it.

- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of GCA. In particular, the extension of practitioner research through wider dissemination of the SPARE model of illuminative evaluation may provide a vehicle for further contextualising cognitive approaches to find out what works best, for whom and how. GCA is well placed to be a centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking and radiate best practice out to infant, primary and secondary schools in the Trust and beyond. The pursuit of Advanced Accreditation would support this vision.



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