

Report by Dr Dave Walters following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Oaklands Junior School for the purpose of re-accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Starting point: the school context

Oaklands Junior School (OJS) is a popular and successful small to medium sized primary school and is part of the Corvus Trust, a family of four schools (two primary, one infant and one secondary school). OJS places a high premium on inclusion, creativity, metacognition, and wellbeing. The Big Red Bus provision is an excellent example of the school's innovative educational philosophy as is the extensive extra-curricular programme.¹ The school was accredited as a Thinking School in 2018,² and became a Hub Thinking School in 2019 in recognition of its commitment to the Thinking Schools approach.³ These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all. The Oakland's Mindset encapsulates these qualities.⁴

The school's cognitive education development journey can be traced back to 2012 with the introduction of Philosophy for Children (P4C). Since then, OJS has forged a relentless path of cognitive developments that include Thinking Maps and Write from the Beginning and Beyond (a programme designed to develop creative writing and improved coherence).⁵ Absence rates are low and indicate that pupils enjoy coming to OJS. Pupil outcomes are high and pupils who face disadvantage fair particularly well.⁶

¹ School's website

² Thinking Schools Accreditation Report 2018

³ School's website

⁴ School's website and Reflective Proforma

⁵ School's website

⁶ DfE performance tables 2019

The school's aims and ethos have a clear focus on high aspiration and achievement for all children. What sets OJS aside from many schools, is its emphasis on *how* this is achieved. With reference to this, the school seeks to make learning explicit and visible by developing children as creative, adaptable, and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.⁷ OJS has embedded thinking and meta-cognitive approaches in all aspects of school life in order to ensure that its aims and ethos are a reality.⁸

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for re-accreditation from Duncan Holland (Thinking Schools Coordinator/Deputy Headteacher) 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 2012. The evidence for accreditation is very skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and includes digital links. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall development structure referencing six core elements: Analytical Thinking, Research Skills, Risk Taking, Problem Solving, Transferable Skills and Content Writing Skills. These are firmly rooted in the Ofsted curriculum framework of Intent, Implementation, and Impact. In addition, the school's curriculum approach is wonderfully illustrated and operationalised by the core elements of Thinking Schools, Outdoor Learning and Creativity.⁹

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of OJS. Medium-term and long-term plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff, including support staff, and parents.¹⁰

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through a comprehensive guide leaflet, presentations, school website (which

⁷ School's website

⁸ Ibid

⁹ School's website

¹⁰ Reflective Proforma

includes videos of thinking tools in action), parents evenings and online platforms. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning at home. Thinking Families contain children from all year groups and pupils' Thinking Journey Books serve to further strengthen the thinking culture of OJS.¹¹

OJS has a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus, including Thinking Hub Schools; a group of over 12 partner schools (spanning primary and secondary phases) with a clear commitment to ongoing development of cognitive education. In addition, the school has hosted colleagues from Lithuania with a focus on sharing the work of the school more widely.¹² Through its connections with these stakeholders, OJS conveys a positive, caring and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation.¹³

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The headteacher has made a formal commitment to cognitive education as part of the school's development priorities and communications within the school and more widely. This is evidenced in school improvement planning documentations, booklets and videos celebrating thinking skills, school prospectus and. The thorough approach taken by the Thinking Schools Coordinator / Deputy Headteacher has allowed OJS to maintain coherence in its approach. Together, this commitment has galvanised the school's development.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education and there is a designated member of the Governing Body with specific responsibility for the Thinking Schools portfolio. Meetings between this Governor and the Thinking Schools Coordinator ensure that an organic strategy for improvement is maintained.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² School's website and Reflective Proforma

¹³ Reflective Proforma

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Reflective Proforma

The Deputy Headteacher / Thinking Schools Coordinator judiciously draws on the expertise of staff members in order to bring developments to fruition in an organic way. In addition, the Thinking Families structure adds further to this inclusive approach. Together, these teams ensure that there is ongoing dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹⁶

There is ample evidence to indicate that OJS is receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for many 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 in developing lifelong learners.¹⁷ A range of ways of scaffolding effective thinking and learning skills have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning visual tools, thinking dispositions and questioning for enquiry.¹⁸

There is an organic and visual Thinking Development Plan clearly aligned to the overall school development plan illustrating where and how the agreed cognitive tools, strategies and resources are being implemented and taught across the school.¹⁹ The range of cognitive developments indicates that these plans are aspirational, designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development. The pupils' Thinking Journey Books are excellent examples of this being put into practice.²⁰ Planning and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

Learning and Teaching

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of OJS. School improvement planning provides an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. Good practice is shared judiciously with all staff to develop their practice. High levels of parental engagement further add to the development

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Reflective Proforma

of a thinking culture in the school. This evidence demonstrates how it is one of the school's main aims.²¹

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by Bloom's Taxonomy which has the core elements of thinking processes and meta-memory 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 OJS'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. The Oakland's Mindset is an excellent illustration of this and cleverly integrates dispositional growth with metacognitive elements.²²

Recent learning and teaching developments include applying the principles of Bloom's Taxonomy to curriculum planning and classroom practice. OJS also embraces developments in neuroscience and retrieval practice is increasingly being applied to learning and teaching. This serves to develop a learning approach that has a 'reflective lens' so that higher order thinking qualities are nurtured as children get more secure in the thinking processes towards the higher end of Bloom's Taxonomy. 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 some 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. This is particularly evident with regard to visual tools. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through awards and displays of high-quality pieces of work. OJS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching since the previous accreditation despite the challenges of recent times.²³

²¹ Ibid

²² School's website

²³ Reflective Pro-forma

Training

The Thinking Schools coordinator is well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. He integrates staff expertise across the school and this model of leadership works well given the size of the school. The highly trained team has undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.²⁴ 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. Support staff are well informed about the school's approach and new applicants are expected to express and demonstrate a keen interest in cognitive education. 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. Bloom's Taxonomy has rightly been chosen as a key mechanism to sustain coherence and a common thinking language. Good practice is shared in a climate of mutual support. This is moving towards taking more of a practitioner research approach to data collection, analysis and application and the Thinking Schools Coordinator has led on this aspect and is looking to develop an evidence informed development approach.²⁵

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 at an external level, complimented by internal ongoing professional dialogue and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further support in the development of children's thinking and learning. The wider application of the P4C processes of Think-Commit-Justify-Reflect have been identified as an area in need of a particular focus for future development and will no doubt contribute significantly to the

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

pupils' Thinking Journey Books. OJS 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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 dispositional growth.

Outcomes in Reading, Writing and Mathematics are all good. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect this trend, together with internal growth, and demonstrates transparency and aspiration for further improvement.²⁸

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 effective use of the curriculum development processes of Intent, Implementation and Impact. Through a collaborative approach to leadership, the Thinking Schools Coordinator has established a culture of thinking and school improvement built on regular opportunities for staff to discuss the process and efficacy of cognitive education and how it can be maintained and improved. There is a genuine feel that 'this is the way we do things around here'.

Ownership

There is no doubt that OJS 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

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Reflective Pro-forma

²⁸ Ibid

demonstrate a wide range of practice geared towards the development of thinking. There is evidence that the school is beginning to distil and integrate 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. Through the bespoke Oaklands's Mindset, 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. OJS is a fine example of holistic educational development where cognitive tools, strategies and resources are adapted to meet the specific needs of the learning community. The school is truly committed to lifelong learning for all.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Oaklands Junior School meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School and 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 school for the clear and judicious evidence base that 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 Oakland's Mindset model and Bloom's Taxonomy. 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.
- Move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. Shift 1 is to move from a self-evaluation processes that produce objectives to ones that generate research questions of the style 'How can we/I improve...?'. Shift 2 is to ensure that all staff sustain the 'open door' philosophy and remain open to evaluating their own impact in an honest and self-critical way. Shift 3 means providing opportunities for best practice impact to be made public. 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 OJS's 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 OJS. 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. OJS 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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