



School of Education
Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
St Luke's Campus
EXETER EX1 1TE
UK

Email thinkingschools@exeter.ac.uk
Web <https://education.exeter.ac.uk/>

Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Orley Farm School for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, School of Education, University of Exeter, UK.

Starting point: the school context

Orley Farm School (OFS) is a popular and highly successful coeducational independent day school with 505 pupils ages 4-13 on roll. The school has a clear vision outlining its beliefs and how to achieve them. The overarching focus is on learning and growing as a collaborative community. OFS's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by an explicit focus on the development of thinking. Specifically, this involves 10 Thinking Skills, introduced in 2013, that are fully embedded throughout the school. These Thinking Skills are built on a clear and firm foundation of dispositional development and include elements such as curiosity, empathy, ambition, resilience, focus, good judgement, initiative, risk-taking, and flexibility of mind. New curriculum foci embrace these elements, and the Forest School initiative is a good example of this. Within the metacognitive domain, OFS has a focus on wider dimensions. The recently introduced Science of Well-being curriculum is an excellent example of the school's ongoing creative and innovative approach to its educational provision. Within this aspect, five integrated strands form an evidence-informed foundation. These include character strengths, neuroplasticity, positive emotions, 'kindfulness', and permission to pause (Mindfulness). OFS keeps abreast of research and evidence and this acts to operationalise the school's mission in a coherent and informed manner. There is a clear and explicit recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at OFS and the school feeds into many of the top academic schools in the country. A significant proportion of the pupils are awarded Scholarships in this respect. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and there are strong support structures in place. In addition to this provision, OFS has a rich extra-curricular offering designed to build children's cultural capital.² This would strongly suggest that OFS is an

¹ School's Website, Reflective Pro-forma and Digital Portfolio

² Ibid

attractive place for children to learn.³ The school began its Thinking School journey in 2013 when the 10 Thinking Skills were introduced. Since then, OFS has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.⁴

The School Council and Governors have been actively involved in shaping the values of OFS. Under the overarching mission 'Orley Farm School: Aiming for excellence in all we do', three pillars serve to operationalise into clear aims; Pastoral Life, Academic Life, Life Beyond. This has done much to create a firm foundation for developing holistic lifelong learners. The school's values fully reflect the Thinking Schools approach and have kindness, forgiveness, collaboration, listening, honesty, and high aspiration at the core. This has created an ethos where children develop metacognitive skills in alignment with independence, self-regulation, perseverance, and initiative. OFS 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 Headmaster, Deputy Head Academic (DHA) and the Head of SMT. In addition, the Junior Leadership Team add immense value by placing the voice of the pupils at the heart of school developments. 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 Samantha Loubon and Karen Harrison (Deputy Head – Academic and Head of SMT 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 2013 when the focus moved towards further embedding metacognitive strategies for learning.⁶ The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and captured brilliantly on the school's evidence 'Wheel' (Digital Portfolio).⁷ This structure is a model of excellent practice. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall curriculum development structure together with a separate (but aligned) Thinking Curriculum referencing 10 core elements. In addition, the school's thinking approach is illustrated by a wealth of related resources that outline how specific tools map onto key thinking processes. Within each of

³ School's Website and Digital Portfolio

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Reflective Proforma and School's Website

⁶ Reflective Proforma

⁷ School's Website

these domains there is ample explanatory information and exemplar materials linked to the school's curriculum policy and development planning.⁸

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of OFS. 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 rich blend of elements. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.⁹

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through documentation, presentations, school website, and parents' evenings. Indeed, parents fully 'sign up' to the school's teaching and learning policy / practice. Of particular note is the public emphasis placed by the Headmaster on lifelong learning. This has done much to ensure that the development of habits of mind is fully embraced by the parent community. Pupils work in partnership with parents in order to undertake and complete extended pieces of work and the weekly 'Think' (led by the DHA) provides a wonderful platform for families to chat about thinking. This aligns well with the Headmaster's weekly reflection which adds further to the opportunities for family engagement in learning. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning fully.¹⁰

OFS continues to forge partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus and is actively seeking to extend this via networking with like-minded schools locally and nationally. Various open days are used to great effect in order to illustrate the school's metacognitive pedagogy widely and social media posts further extend the reach and influence of OFS. Displays around the school are of exceptional quality and provide a rich source of celebratory source for Thinking Schools and tools. Governors provide exemplary support and challenge via rigorous analyses of Thinking Schools developments. Through its connections with these stakeholders, OFS conveys a positive, caring, and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation. Indeed, feedback from Senior Schools is wonderfully positive and indicates extremely high satisfaction in relation to the holistic qualities of OFS pupils.¹¹

⁸ Digital Portfolio and School's Website

⁹ Reflective Proforma, Digital Portfolio and School's Website

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The Headmaster 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, development reports, newsletters, school communications, school website, parent presentations and meeting agendas/minutes. This whole school commitment has galvanised OFS's development.¹²

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 implementation monitoring activities. Governor partnership with the Drive team secures their active and informed role. 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 OFS's whole school development as a Thinking School.¹³

The Drive Team has evolved significantly over the years and includes a rich blend of staff. The full integration of the pupil body in the leadership of school developments via the Junior Leadership Team and School Council is a model of exceptional leadership practice. This structure, together with the excellent leadership of the Drive Team lead, has had a significant influence on the school's positive development as a Thinking School. Of particular note is the high active profile of The Drive Team. Staff lead on training activities and Governors are fully involved, including research and development elements. The Student Council support assembly rollouts and also take part in impact evidence gathering. The clear distributed responsibilities have secured coherence and stands as a model for other schools to emulate. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹⁴

There is ample evidence to indicate that OFS 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

¹² Ibid

¹³ Digital Portfolio

¹⁴ Ibid

that would serve as the foundation for a strategic move forward.¹⁵ An impressive range of cognitive approaches have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning thinking tools, thinking dispositions, reflective tools, and self-regulatory elements.¹⁶

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. Plans clearly set out the developmental agenda with the overarching current focus being to further develop aspirational lifelong learners.¹⁷ Also, plans 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 OFS. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that lessons include thinking skills. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple and focussed' approach. In this regard, developments 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.¹⁸

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the core elements of 10 Thinking Skills and Zones of Regulation 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 OFS'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 Science of Wellbeing programme is just one of many examples of how this is an integral part of the educational provision at OFS.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

OFS has worked hard to develop a common thinking language that is appropriate to both age and stage. Pupils are routinely engaged in metacognitive talk. The pupil voice is integral to every stage of school development and this serves to embed the Thinking School approach across the school. 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. The extended independent project is an exceptional development and promotes, challenge, high aspiration, and self-regulatory thinking. 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 and thinking tools 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. OFS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the current focus on developing aspirational independent learners reflects an unswerving commitment to carefully embed metacognitive 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 approaches to embrace thinking routines into self-regulatory strategies for moving out of a 'I am stuck' moment.²⁰

Training

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of metacognitive 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.²¹ 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 has evolved over time. The recent focus on assessment, marking and reporting has been undertaken to great effect in terms of encouraging greater pupil engagement with their own learning. The use of effective questioning continues to be an area of ongoing development and includes 'Thanks' via a collaborative approach with parents. Dedicated Independent Reflection Time (DIRT) is highly impactful and further enhances metacognitive development. Formal lesson observations have been replaced by learning walks. The focus on key learning qualities such as pupil alertness and engagement provide a sound research/evidence base for this process. This dovetails well with the Thinking Curriculum. The peer observation model has created a very supportive lesson study climate

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Digital Portfolio, Reflective proforma and School's Website

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. 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.²²

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. The aim is to enable pupils to assess themselves as learners. The use of PASS and supplementary pupil surveys continues to be an ongoing and formative process for school development along with a variety of other sources. Internal questionnaires and associated discussion are astutely related to the effectiveness of cognitive tools, peer assessment and questioning. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. OFS demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of excellent practice. CAT 4 and progress assessments align well with this and serve as a model of excellent multi-method assessment practice. OFS 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.²³

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.²⁴ There is qualitative data and quantitative data to support this indicating that the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils and are associated with academic outcomes and improved motivation.

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

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 a wide range of child-centred indicators has ensured that pupils have a voice in this process. Indeed, an exceptionally high premium is placed on student voice across the school.²⁵

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. Through a collaborative approach to leadership, the Drive Team have 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. Evaluation is based upon the implications of change and includes a judicious blend of approaches and dimensions. The focus is on meeting the needs of all pupils alongside securing a positive staff workload. Innovative evaluative tools include PASS surveys, CAT 4, progress data, and a range of rich qualitative sources including classroom artefacts. Pupil and staff feedback relating to Thinking Skills is placed at high premium and is a real evaluative strength. Pupils are integral to the evaluation process at OFS and regular reflection opportunities are provided. Again, this is a model of excellent practice. OFS 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 OFS 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. Collaboration is a high priority for the school, and it leaves no stone unturned. The focus on social, emotional, psychological, and physical dimensions is testimony to this. Through the careful and progressive

²⁵ Ibid

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. The vision for ongoing change has been expertly developed and operationalised via a clear roadmap for delivery, agreed with a range of stakeholders including staff, pupils, governors, and parents. Progression processes are highly effective and visual displays exemplary. OFS is a truly an inspirational beacon of meta-cognitive excellence where the drive for holistic educational provision geared toward the development of lifelong-learners flourishes.

Conclusion

The huge range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that OFS 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. It has been a privilege to undertake this evaluation. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until April 2026.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base, expertly organised around the evaluation rubric, 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 OFS 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.
- Consider developing a dedicated Thinking Schools menu on the school's website in order to capture the rich range of resources and developments.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of OFS. 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. OFS is well placed to be a centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking and radiate best practice out to a wider educational audience. The pursuit of Advanced Accreditation would support this vision.



Dr Dave Walters

**Thinking Schools @Exeter
School of Education
Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
University of Exeter**

On behalf of Dr Judith Kleine-Staarman, Director of Thinking Schools @Exeter

April 2023