

Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of Falcons School for Girls and Peregrines Nursery for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Starting point: the school context

Falcons School for Girls and Peregrines Nursery (FSGPN) is a popular and successful small independent preparatory school and nursery, and part of the Alpha Plus Group of independent schools, nurseries, and 6th form colleges. The school has the overarching mission to raise all girls to become high achievers, leaders, and lifelong learners. Clear aims act to operationalise this mission and include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity and resilience, citizenship leading by example. FSGPN has recently been shortlisted for an Independent Schools of the Year Award in the Category of Student Wellbeing.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at FSGPN, as is full inclusion. With around 40% of pupils requiring learning support in some capacity, this has presented some challenges. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2018 in response to an observed need to overcome passivity in a broad segment of the pupil community. FSGPN saw an opportunity to further develop its work surrounding Growth Mindset and Habits of Mind in this respect.²

As a small school, FSGPN has a small Drive Team. As is common in London schools, there is a regular turnover of staff. These two factors combine to create the additional challenge of maintaining consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

¹ School's website

² Reflective proforma

³ Ibid

Pupils at FSGPN have an outstanding history of 11+ results and so the school has an enviable reputation in this regard. However, it is lifelong learning that is placed at the core of the educational provision at the school and not just the end result. Subject specific learning sits alongside additional dimensions such as Remote Education, Able, Gifted and Talented, Learning Support, Forest School, Thinking School, Votes for School (discussions and questions surrounding current affairs and issues such as health, charity, sport, and the environment). Underpinning this provision is an inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff, and the community.⁴

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from James Kelly (Assistant Head and Thinking Skills Coordinator/Project Leader) evidencing the history of the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its origin and specifically since 2018 when the focus moved towards Thinking Schools. The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and includes digital links, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall development structure referencing five core elements: Habits of Mind, Thinking Frames, Blooms Taxonomy, Growth Mindset, and Thinking Routines. 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 FSGPN. 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. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.⁵

⁴ School's website

⁵ Digital drive evidence

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 such as 'School in the Cloud' (which includes recorded assemblies on Thinking Skills). As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning at home.⁶

FSGPN has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus in order to clarify areas of uncertainty. An example of this is the link with a school who had had more experience in using Thinking Frames. The result was that FSGPN were able to move from a position of 'Shoe-Horning' teaching into the use of Thinking Frames to one where they were used as a supplementary tool.⁷ Through its connections with these stakeholders, FSGPN conveys a positive, caring, and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation.⁸

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 also headteacher reports to Governors. This commitment has galvanised the school's development. Indeed, the headteacher directly instigated the school's Thinking School development in response to the perceived passivity in a proportion of the pupils.⁹

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 through the website, reports from the headteacher and Governor visits to see thinking skills in action. Local Governors meetings

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Reflective proforma

⁸ Digital drive evidence

⁹ Ibid and school's website

have 'Thinking School' as a regular item on their agenda and the Alpha Plus Governors take an executive interest in the progress of the Thinking School journey. Feedback from both sources indicate a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.¹⁰

The Drive Team is comprised of a small but rich blend of staff including members of the Senior Leadership Team, subject leads and the SENDCo. In addition, the school has fostered an ongoing formative dialogue between pupils and teachers with a particular focus on Habits of Mind and successful approaches to learning. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹¹

There is ample evidence to indicate that FSGPN 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.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

¹⁰ School website and reflective proforma

¹¹ Digital drive evidence and school website

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Reflective proforma and digital drive evidence

Learning and Teaching

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of FSGPN. 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 meeting headings of 'Experiences in classroom' and 'Change in practice moving forwards' ensure 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.¹⁵

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the core elements of Thinking Frames, neuroscience, neuroplasticity, Growth Mindset, metacognition, Bloom's Taxonomy, Habits of Mind, motivation, feedback, and Thinking Routines 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 FSGPN'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 'Girls on Board' and 'Zones of Regulation' initiatives are excellent illustrations of this and cleverly integrate social and emotional development with dispositional growth and cognitive tools.¹⁶

Recent learning and teaching developments include adding a 'Reflective Lens' to thinking tools. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are nurtured. 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

¹⁵ Digital drive evidence

¹⁶ Digital drive evidence

awards and displays of high-quality pieces of work. FSGPN has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the introduction of Thinking Routines and the concept of the Learning Pit has been carefully embedded 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 routines into self-regulatory strategies for moving out of a 'I am stuck' moment.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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 Habits of Mind and more recently Thinking Routines. 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, and lesson observations are used extensively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual support. This has involved taking more of a practitioner research approach to data collection, analysis and application and the Drive Team have led on this aspect with particular effect.¹⁹

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 PASS at an external level, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys and

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Reflective proforma and digital drive evidence

¹⁹ Ibid

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. A number of pupils in Key Stage 1 have been identified as a group in need of a particular focus on emotional support. In addition, Motivational Maps have been used to specifically help teachers and parents support Year 6 pupils in order to boost work ethic levels and enthusiasm for learning. FSGPN 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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 excellent 11+ results for 2020/21 have led to all 20 pupils progressing to their school of choice. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive examination trend, together with internal growth, and demonstrates transparency and aspiration for further improvement.²²

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 SPARE wheel model of illuminative evaluation on which the Thinking School approach is based. 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. There is a genuine feel that 'this is the way we do things around here'.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Reflective Pro-forma

²² Digital drive evidence

Ownership

There is no doubt that FSGPN 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 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 careful and progressive introduction of cognitive tools and CPD geared towards developing teachers as cognitive coaches, 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. FSGPN is a fine example of educational creativity where cognitive tools, strategies and resources are adapted to meet the specific needs of the entire learning community.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that FSGPN 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 September 2024.

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 to inform a development visit to aid action planning. This might include:

- Further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best 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 should take the form of an overview for how these elements are integrated.
- 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. The key evaluative questions are 'What works best?', 'For who?' and 'How?'. A multi-method approach to data may serve to get to the heart of these questions and focus group interviews are particularly effective in generating efficient data to supplement outcome and survey data.
- 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 process 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, 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.

- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of FSGN. 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.



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September 2021