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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Ashgrove Primary 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.**

Ashgrove Primary School (APS) is a popular, successful and oversubscribed medium sized primary school with 365 pupils on roll (ages 4-11). The school has a clear vision outlining its beliefs and how to achieve them. The overarching focus is on lifelong learning and holistic growth for all pupils regardless of starting points. Indeed, APS's mission is centred around 'Learning, Caring and Growing Stronger Together'. APS has gained the Gold Standard UNICEF Rights Respecting School Award and this as testimony to the school's commitment to child-centred education. 29% of pupils are entitled to Free School Meals and 15% of pupils are on the SEN register. Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy has been consistently above national figures (pre-COVID). The Principal and his senior team are highly experienced in terms of Thinking School developments and champion a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. APS's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research that embraces knowledge / skills, deliberate practice, learning habits, memory and schema development, and thinking tools. Together these elements act to operationalise the school's mission and include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity and resilience and parental engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at APS. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2019/20 and since then, APS has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development. A number of foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded. Of particular note is APS's overall Performance Review and Staff Development Target of developing critical and creative thinking across the school. Specifically, this involves the integration of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities. effective development of the Frame of Reference aligned to Thinking Maps. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster deep thinking for all pupils.<sup>2</sup>

APS has a highly effective and well led Drive Team. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support provided by the Principal, Vice Principal, Drive Team Lead and Key Stage Leaders. Active Governor support is also prominent in the

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<sup>1</sup> Reflective Proforma and Meta-Mirror

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

development process. Indeed, Governors have used cognitive tools such as Thinking Frames as part of school development activities. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Pupils at APS have an history of excellent pupil progress. The school is relentless in pursuing high standards of achievement. However, it is lifelong holistic 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 wider dimensions such as the development of psychological wellbeing and dispositional growth. Underpinning this provision is a fully inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff and the community.<sup>4</sup>

### **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Robert Smith (Principal) and Jill Carberry (Thinking Skills Coordinator) 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 also specifically since 2019/2020 when the focus moved towards Thinking Schools and embedding metacognitive strategies for learning. The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and includes links to a comprehensive evidence Meta-Mirror with website links, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. This structure is consistently applied and is a particular strength, providing consistency without undermining the specific contexts of the individual school elements. The evidence on the school's website includes visual information relating to how APS teaches thinking, a Meta-Tour and an overall development structure referencing five core elements: Thinking Frames (including APS's highly innovative Thinking Frames Hand Signals), Habits of Mind, Thinking Hats, Higher Order Questioning (based on Bloom's Taxonomy) and Thinking Routines (embracing deliberate practice principles). 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 APS. 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.<sup>5</sup>

APS has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. Weekly newsletters to parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Indeed, parents are invited to induction events and open mornings. The information leaflet for parents together with the dedicated parental website link are excellent and further strengthen the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Meta-Mirror.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

collaborative school-parent relationship. Assemblies provide rich opportunities to share children's thinking successes. The high premium placed on celebration and displays further strengthen the Thinking School ethos and culture. As a consequence of these actions, the whole learning community is equipped to support children's learning.<sup>6</sup>

APS has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus. The outstanding collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout wider school community. Specific examples of partnership work include hosting the Northern Ireland Metameet and sharing Thinking Frames expertise with other schools. APS was also approached by the Education Authority to share metacognitive approaches with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. Through its connections with these stakeholders, APS 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.<sup>7</sup>

### **Senior Management and Whole School Commitment**

The Principal 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 the strong Drive Team structure comprised of the Principal, Vice Principal, Drive Team Leader and Key Stage Leaders stands as a model of excellent practice. The collaborative and integrated leadership model includes exemplary external support via a consultant who is highly experienced and trained in metacognitive approaches to educational provision. The Drive Team Lead has also provided exemplary support and feedback based on a comprehensive audit of the key accreditation elements.<sup>8</sup>

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 where thinking skills are seen in action. Governor visits have a clear purpose, identify key questions, allow narrative feedback and suggest future action. Of particular note, is the use of thinking tools at a Governor school development level. This stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback indicates a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.<sup>9</sup>

The Drive Team is comprised of a rich blend of staff and is very well structured and led. Communication is excellent as are planning processes including meetings and subsequent developmental actions. The introduction Pupil Focus Groups to drive metacognitive developments is an excellent and innovative addition. Together, these aspects ensure that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.<sup>10</sup>

There is ample evidence to indicate that APS 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.<sup>11</sup> 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, questioning for enquiry and thinking routines.<sup>12</sup>

There is a specific organic development plan designed to secure the wide-spread use of thinking tools across the school. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational and designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development.<sup>13</sup> 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 APS. Indeed, thinking serves as a 'golden thread' throughout the school. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. For example, Thinking Frames are fully embedded including the highly effective application of the Reflective Lens. Further, Thinking Hats are used for reflection throughout the school. Excellent support and resources ensures that staff and pupils develop thinking approaches effectively. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple and clear' 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 in the importance of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking and that all pupils are capable of making progress. This further supports the school's commitment to cognitive education. This clearly demonstrates how it is one of the school's main aims.<sup>14</sup>

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by clear development planning and CPD underpinned by a firm foundation of research and evidence. Specific research-informed elements include neuroscience, neuroplasticity, Growth Mindset, metacognition, memory and schema development, motivation, feedback and deliberate practice as its foundation. This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose, coherence and impact. The emphasis placed on the learning environment is also clearly illustrated in the evidence provided by the school. These elements, combined with

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Meta-Mirror

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

APS'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.<sup>15</sup>

The school has heavily invested in dispositional development and children get recognition for exhibiting effective learning habits. Recent learning and teaching developments have included the inclusion of Thinking Routines and the 'I See, I Think, I Wonder' is particularly high profile. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are not only nurtured but are also given the practical 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. The Thinking Frames Hand Signals have been introduced to supplement the use of core Thinking Frames. This is one of many examples where APS seeks to continuously innovate and develop. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through displays of high-quality pieces of work. APS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of elements such as cognitive load has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.<sup>16</sup>

## **Training**

The inspirational Principal has fully embraced cognitive education and has ensured that finance and resources are geared towards high quality training for all staff. Governors fully endorse this line of school development. The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. The highly trained Thinking Schools co-ordinator and Drive Team has undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.<sup>17</sup> There is an ongoing and differentiated 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. Indeed, newly appointed staff are expected to show a clear understanding of cognitive education as part of the recruitment process. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that centres on core elements and the inclusion of Thinking Matters in all staff meetings is also a key feature. All staff have received five full days of training provided by high quality consultancy and there is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking. Of particular note is the inclusion of metacognitive training for non-teaching staff. Thinking Hats and Thinking Frames have been a focus in this respect. Innovative forums such as 'Meta-Meet' events serve to further strengthen training provision by providing a rich forum for professional dialogue. In addition, the Vice Principal produces a termly news sheet (Teaching Times) with a focus on the latest research, metacognitive tools and pedagogical approaches. 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 collaboratively across the trust and to provide mutual support through

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Meta-Mirror

the development of thinking generally and also through particular foci. 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 the further extension of practitioner research to embrace the SPARE model of evaluative action research and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect.<sup>18</sup>

### **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 and PASS, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys 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 improvement. Outcomes for key areas are high and APS is working hard to get back to the exceptional standards achieved prior to COVID. above national averages indicating that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of learning. APS has an innovative approach to assessment and the inclusion of effect sizes for MALS analysis is a good example of this. APS demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. APS 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> There is qualitative data from staff, pupils, parents and Governors 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 pupil progress results indicate impressive achievement growth. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive achievement trend and demonstrates transparency and aspiration for further improvement.<sup>21</sup>

### **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 principal's Focus Report is geared to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Evidence Meta-Mirror

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

the impact of Thinking Matters and this is supplemented by End of Year Curriculum Reports. 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'. The development plan is an organic collaborative, document and the pupil voice features prominently in the evaluative process. Other evaluative elements include data analysis case studies, pupil focus groups and staff/pupil/parent questionnaires. There is a clear evaluative focus on developing the transfer of thinking skills and strategies and the collaborative nature of all evaluative elements is a model of excellent practice. It is clear that APS is well placed for future Advanced Accreditation and this reflects the ongoing ambition to develop an exceptional whole school approach to the teaching of thinking.

## **Ownership**

There is no doubt that APS 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 carefully and judiciously expanded their repertoire of cognitive pedagogy. 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 skilled 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. Together, these elements combine to effectively promote the educational growth of all children by providing them with ownership over their own development.

APS is a truly inspirational, innovative and creative educational community that places Thinking at the heart of everything it does. It has carefully developed and nurtured its core values so that they permeate throughout the entire school and beyond. Staff and children think deeply about what they do, and levels of collaboration are exceptional. APS places a high premium on being evidence informed in terms of their ongoing development. This not only embraces external publications but also internal case study analyses. As a result of this high-quality educational provision, all children achieve the highest holistic standards. This has not been at the expense of psychological well-being and the school community interact such that this element flourishes.

## **Conclusion**

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Ashgrove Primary 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 2027.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base, clearly 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 to inform a development visit to aid action planning. This might include:

- Continue to 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 could take the form of an overview for how these elements are integrated.
- Further extend lesson observations to include 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. These indicators of thinking development can be utilised both formatively (ideal in 'real time') in order for teachers to provide feedback at the point of need, and summatively so that teachers and leaders can monitor and evaluate impact.
- 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, 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 evaluative research at all levels of leadership and classroom practice.
- Consider the use of five key questions for evaluative purposes: What works best? For whom? Under what circumstances? How? Why?. These can feed into the 'E' of the SPARE model of evaluative research.

- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of APS. 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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**On behalf of the University of Exeter, UK**

**January 2024**