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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by The Gordon Children's Academy for the purpose of accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, School of Education, University of Exeter, UK.**

**Evidence base**

The criteria for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School starts from the assumption that all the criteria for the first level of accreditation by Thinking Schools@Exeter continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the community. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have now become so embedded that staff and pupils have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of cognitive education and its impact on both their individual learning and its potential contribution to society. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as a level 1 Thinking School.

The focus for this second level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in seeking to achieve those aims. Evidence has been sought on teaching (and support) staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the pupils beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and their continuing impact on the community of the whole school and beyond. Five key areas for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School have been assessed: Dissemination of Practice; Evaluative Research; Professional Development; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School from The Gordon Children's Academy in the form of a Reflective Proforma with evidence links, extensively illustrating the continuing work the school is undertaking as a level 1 Thinking School together with how it has continued to move forward as a level 2 Thinking School. School evidence includes pupils' work, examples of displays and posters, relevant sections of the school improvement plan, Headteacher reports, photographs, newsletters, project plans, video evidence, Drive Team documentation, action plans, meetings minutes, learning walk observations, and other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on continued development of the school on the basis of the level 2 criteria.

### **Starting point: the school context**

The Gordon Children's Academy is a popular and highly successful primary school with 403 pupils on roll and is an influential member of the highly successful Thinking School Academy Trust (TSAT). The school has a long history of Thinking School development. Indeed, thinking is captured prominently in the school's curriculum intent and also its improvement plan rubric. Accreditation has been at the core of The Gordon Children's Academy for many years with Level 1 re-accreditation being awarded in 2022.<sup>1</sup> The school has sustained its Thinking School development superbly and has gone from strength to strength by continually refreshing its focus and building progressively on its initiatives. It is clear from the evidence provided that The Gordon Children's Academy has built fully on the recommendations for development arising from previous evaluations. Indeed, the school has gone well beyond in this respect. The Gordon Children's Academy is a school where every individual is encouraged to achieve excellence via the pursuit of the Be Your Best Self (BYBS) agenda. The school's ethos is encapsulated in a very straightforward rubric that includes 'Making Learning Irresistible'. These principles are further illustrated in the 'Gordon Greats'. The Gordon Children's Academy clearly places the individual child at the centre of its work.

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<sup>1</sup> School's website, reflective proforma and digital evidence

In aligning the school's vision and values to a metacognitive developmental process via wonderful curriculum intent that encapsulates six thinking areas, The Gordon Children's Academy has ensured that the Thinking Schools approach is a firm and secure part of the learning culture of the entire school. Indeed, the school makes it clear that thinking is 'The way we do it here!'. The Gordon Children's Academy achieves excellent pupil outcomes as demonstrated by a wealth of robust indicators. This is indicative of an educational provision that serves the wider needs of all pupils. The Gordon Children's Academy is rated 'Good' in all key areas by its most recent Ofsted report. The Gordon Children's Academy is clearly a school that prides itself in achieving and maintaining the highest holistic educational standards. For example, the school has an excellent reputation for supporting pupils through its inclusive pastoral system together with an outstanding extra-curricular and enrichment offering. These achievements reflect the school's drive for sustained holistic development, together with an unwavering commitment to lifelong learning for all.<sup>2</sup>

The school's cognitive education development journey has moved forward unswervingly since its previous accreditation. Subsequently, a clear thread of training has been in place. The recent 'Tiered' approach to curriculum developments is particularly impressive in terms of innovative pedagogy and includes a focus on embedding retrieval and memory elements. Parents and carers form an exceptional partnership with The Gordon Children's Academy in terms of the teaching and learning provision.<sup>3</sup> The school's ethos and values have a clear focus on holistic educational excellence for all pupils. What sets The Gordon Children's Academy aside from many schools, is its emphasis on *how* this is achieved. With reference to this, the school seeks to make learning irresistible by developing children as creative, adaptable and resilient thinkers so that they become committed lifelong learners.<sup>4</sup> The Gordon Children's Academy has embedded thinking and metacognitive approaches in all aspects of school life in order to ensure that its aims and ethos are a reality. High quality CPD has done much to secure a cohesive staff team, and there is a real sense of collaboration at all levels. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Digital evidence

<sup>4</sup> School's website, reflective proforma and digital evidence

support of TSAT is exceptional and fully embraces core educational principles and contextual individuality.<sup>5</sup>

### **Dissemination of practice**

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking Schools practice and experiences across subject areas with others. There is extensive evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subjects and teams, with all sections of staff participating in formal and informal staff training events and programmes. Parents and support staff are fully included via a range of engagement opportunities. The school website facilitates a wide range of stakeholder input, and the Drive Team Leaders regularly visit other schools. The 'Peer Review' process is particularly impactful and cross-trust events are supplemented by wider conference contributions that provide other educationalists with first-hand experience of the Thinking School approach geared towards the holistic development of children. There is ample evidence of effective dissemination of tools, but also a focus on differentiation. There is a rich blend of qualitative data that contributes well to the collaborative dissemination of best practice. This includes casual observations, pupil interviews and vibrant displays. The Deputy Headteacher is highly influential in her role as Regional Thinking, Teaching, and Learning Lead. Of particular note is the drive to understand the 'why' elements of thinking and this has done much to secure widespread engagement with the area. As such, there is a clear whole school understanding of children's learning progress in both qualitative and quantitative domains.

Teachers and support staff are fully involved in dissemination activities. The external QA expertly provided by 'Insight' is an excellent addition to the school's developmental lens. A variety of staff lead high training with a Thinking Schools focus and nationally these extend to online meetings and conference input. On an international level, the school has established a high-profile global platform, and this is welcomed by a range of global educators. The use of expert groups to share knowledge and expertise is particularly effective and the recent publication of the Deputy Headteacher's case study on Retrieval Practice stands as a model of outstanding dissemination. As a result, The Gordon Children's Academy disseminates high

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

impact practice across internal subject areas, the local community, cluster schools, nationally and internationally.

All new staff receive training in theory, pedagogy, and practical approaches relating to Thinking. There is an extensive and innovative range of resources and structures to further support the dissemination of Thinking School approaches and pupils are pivotal to disseminating best practice. Judicious timelines ensure that the process of dissemination is planned and actioned effectively. Conferences and associated workshops further add to the school's process of dissemination.<sup>6</sup>

### **Evaluative research**

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff are seeking evidence of the positive impact and outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to drive whole school learning and improvement. Based on the evidence of Level 1 and level 2 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school. This includes specific consideration of the process and impact of initiatives on the learning and development of pupils. Evaluative Research is embedded in the working practices of the school. Staff undertake formal qualifications such as NPQ's and Chartered Teacher programmes. Some interesting foci are evident and digital/educational technology together with interventions for children with ADHD diagnosis are good examples of this. The Gordon Children's Academy utilises a range of data collection tools including Thinking Tools audits, focused staff meetings, and pupil/teacher reflections. Indeed, the BYBS Reflective Journals and the 'Think Ahead' system provide wonderful evaluative platforms that ignite educational and professional growth. The Drive Teams play a pivotal role in coordinating data collection and the subsequent analyses. The recent Cycle of Lesson Study has had a wealth of innovative foci, and the 'Tiered' approach is excellent. The Drive Teams lead on lesson observations and facilitate evaluative reflective feedback. The proactive involvement of the Pupil Voice via the Pupil Drive Team and other pupil leadership forums ensures that evaluative research has an inductive as well as deductive dimension.

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<sup>6</sup> Reflective proforma and digital evidence

Evaluative Research at The Gordon Children's Academy has clear, succinct parameters outlining what is being studied, who is being studied, together with associated timeframe. Indeed, the SIP is very much Evaluative Research based. This is an excellent example of the school's commitment to delivering extensive practitioner research excellence. Of particular note, is the regular feedback of evaluations to Governors and other key stakeholders. Together, this has done much to secure an ongoing cycle of Thinking School development. Findings from research have directly influenced the work of the Gordon Children's Academy Drive Teams and staff across the school, and the Cycle of Lesson Study feeds into the process well. Quality Assurance and ongoing support is provided extremely effectively by high-quality 'external' consultants and stands as an excellent example of integrating internal and external evaluative processes. Evidence is presented that demonstrates the ongoing collection of data related to Thinking Skills across the school, in particular with respect to how well Thinking Skills are embedded within the school system and what the impact is on pupils and staff. It is clear that there are effective strategies in place across subject areas that encourage and support evaluation and reflective practice of learning and teaching approaches and impact.<sup>7</sup>

The Drive Teams provide a skilful and rich representation of expertise from across the school so that new ideas for teaching and learning are explored, researched and, if successful, fed back to the wider staff body. Furthermore, Thinking Skills and dispositional development are part of ongoing evaluations of pupil progress, providing further evidence of the ongoing evaluation of Thinking Skills approaches throughout the school. It is important to note in this respect, that pupils are routinely consulted about what the Thinking Tools mean to them. Another important factor within the continuous evaluation of the outcomes of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking, is the evidence of the development of pupil resilience and self-reflection, as well as a sense of shared responsibility towards one another. The focus on the development of the whole child is a particularly strong aspect of school life at The Gordon Children's Academy. The trusts seven principles of learning anchor developments so that a coherent 'golden thread' is maintained, and this indicates that the

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<sup>7</sup> Reflective Proforma and digital evidence

Thinking School approach has a clear drive for impact in relation to positive learning outcomes and behaviours for the whole school community.<sup>8</sup>

### **Professional development**

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators.

In terms of technical development, it is clear from the school development planning that new members of staff are routinely training in Thinking Skills. CPD has been effectively framed as 'Professional Growth'. This has recently been refined to consider 'Impact on self', 'Impact on others', and the 'Impact on trust'. The highly effective use of a range of professional development forums such as reflective meetings, face-to-face training, IHASCO videos, learning walks, and the cross-trust intranet stand as a model of professional growth excellence on a school wide level. The clear and integrated curriculum is outstanding. Thinking School principles are fully integrated, and this does much to aid the overall coherence of the pedagogical aims. There is an excellent induction programme in place and ensures that professional development opportunities are consistent and well embedded in the culture of the entire school. New staff are automatically trained in all the thinking tools and associated pedagogy. This is wonderfully supplemented by the provision of opportunities to shadow, discuss and observe lessons conducted by lead practitioners. More experienced staff take on the role of 'Embedding Teachers' in this respect.

The Drive Team Leads evaluate the Thinking School action plan via regular ongoing analyses of quantitative and qualitative data. This feeds into high quality targeted professional development activities. Indeed, the Drive Teams have an excellent blend of highly skilled leaders. Together, they provide exceptional leadership and professional development for all staff. Professional development has evolved into a reflective process model based on contextual need and application. The recent Cycle of Lesson Study focus on curriculum has an innovative 'tiered' approach geared toward embedding effective practice. Innovations

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

culminate in a 'refinement' stage in order to secure ongoing school improvement. The 'Think Ahead' approach to professional growth has a clear and impactful focus on professional dialogue, regular reflection, mastery, ownership, and collaboration. This is just one of many high-quality developmental initiatives at The Gordon Children's Academy. This is evidence of the school's commitment and appreciation of the need to consider the specific setting for educational developments.

Judicious ongoing evaluative research builds individual strengths and areas for development into whole school planning and actions. The Drive Teams have regular focussed meetings with clear development action points that further feed into CPD linked to priorities. The Gordon Children's Academy provides a range of innovative bespoke resources for staff in order to operationalise the priorities. These excellent resources are supplemented by modelled examples so staff can actually see how they might apply what they have learned in their own classrooms. Pupil feedback plays an intrinsic part on development planning and is used to triangulate reflections, plans, and actions. This has allowed the school to focus not so much on the use of specific Thinking Tools, but to provide a strong background and rationale for Thinking across subject areas, which demonstrates an excellent understanding and awareness of Thinking as a pedagogic strategy throughout the school.

Conference input and associated workshops are wonderfully organised and provide a wealth of rich and inspirational opportunities for professional growth. There is strong evidence of the continued focus of staff on the development of their own knowledge and understanding of thinking and Thinking Skills approaches in general. Thinking Skills approaches are continually evaluated throughout the school and staff are routinely asked to reflect on their use of Thinking Tools. This again provides strong evidence that the use of Thinking Skills and the language around thinking is strongly embedded within the school, the teaching practice and its overall ethos, such that the school's developmental influence is far reaching. It is clear, from the evidence provided that all staff are immediately made aware of this ethos and practice. Importantly, staff are given the time and resources to train and to work with colleagues through cycles of lesson observations. The parent 'Book-Look' sessions, 'Thinking



Thursday' input, and webinar events for partner schools further extend the professional development reach of the school.<sup>9</sup>

## **Differentiation**

This area of accreditation includes the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in pupils' approaches to problem-solving. Through thorough and on-going dialogue with pupils, teachers are able to mediate learning such that learning is geared towards the needs of all pupils at an individual level, regardless of starting point or specific barriers to learning. Weekly and medium-term planning fully embrace differentiation and teaching clearly puts this into practice. As such, The Gordon Children's Academy has developed a unique culture of personalisation that goes beyond a 'broad-brush' approach to learning and teaching. The Thinking Toolbox and associated evaluations indicate high impact with the evaluations spanning whole school impact, individual lesson impact, and pupil self-evaluations. In addition, the wider educational provision is excellent, and evidence informed, such that children get personalised support. Indeed, Thinking Tools are an integral part of 'Behaviour Reflection Forms' and associated conflict resolution processes indicating that a variety of metacognitive approaches are used adaptively to suit the abilities of different pupils. Progression is clearly mapped via an adaptive and responsive curriculum and all pupils are encouraged to develop individuality and autonomy. Pupil support is also highly personalised and adds significant value to the educational provision at The Gordon Children's Academy. Resources are carefully differentiated to enable all children to access tasks and displays are used actively to promote discussion related to the identification of thinking processes. The recent focus on intertwining behaviour management and thinking strategies is of particular note in terms of thinking strategies underpinning personal learning targets and behavioural goals. The Pupil Voice is a strong part of the learning culture of the school and means that teachers can identify what works best, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

## **Whole School assessment**

This aspect of the accreditation relates to pupils' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' performance via assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Whole school assessment policy and practice are a core strength of the school. Assessment at The Gordon Children's Academy clearly integrates a range of Thinking Tools and approaches with self/peer reflections. The formative use of PASS provides a baseline from which progress can be monitored and the innovative BYBS Journal dovetails well with this. Indeed, the BYBS Journal is highly impactful and the 'Myself as a Learner Scale' is integrated well. This is an excellent example of how assessment is the servant rather than the master of the curriculum. Assessments again indicate high impact. Thinking tools such as Thinking Maps and Thinking Hats are also used effectively for assessment and evaluation purposes.

Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff through the emphasis of developing as a researching professional. Staff approach curriculum developments with evidence informed reflections. Pupils are encouraged to find meaning in a variety of thinking approaches such that they see the relevance and point of developing them as a result of 'why' elements being made explicit. Assessment and evaluative information are shared school-wide to strengthen the consistency of effective teaching and learning strategies. A clear line of pupil feedback has been highly effective in identifying learning needs from the children's perspective. Parents are also involved in the monitoring process. They are supported well by the school and add significant value to the educational provision at The Gordon Children's Academy. The Gordon Children's Academy goes beyond using assessment as a summative indicator towards using it as a formative tool to support and enhance pupils' learning. At each juncture the aim of the school is to secure full and effective learning for all pupils. Staff are encouraged to reflect on the use of Thinking Tools and strategies and evidence demonstrates continuous reflection on the implementation, use, and impact of Thinking Tools.

## Points for further consideration

The Gordon Children's Academy has responded well to the points for further consideration suggested in the previous accreditation report. The developments relating to evaluative research and ongoing training are good examples of this. 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:

- 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.
- Continue to move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. 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. Indeed, the Plan, Action and Reaction elements of the SPARE model map well with the Intent, Implementation and Impact structure already in place.
- 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.
- Consider further developing, and aligning Thinking Routines (already aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy) with lesson objectives (and examination Assessment Objectives) to aid targeted planning and teaching/learning.
- Further consider the place of metacognitive approaches in the curriculum design. For example, research has shown that higher levels of impact occur when a 'blended' approach (separate provision *and* integrated in subjects) is taken. This could build on the already established provision.

## Outcome

The substantive evidence provided by The Gordon Children's Academy creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. In the context of the international Thinking School community, The Gordon Children's Academy is a world class inspirational and child-centred school. It brings its ethos and values into every facet of educational provision such that the pursuit of holistic lifelong learning is a reality.

There is an exceptional thinking culture that permeates every facet of school life and The Gordon Children's Academy truly lives up to its Thinking School mantra in that it really is 'The way we do it here'. The school's commitment to continually develop as a Thinking School is modelled brilliantly through a wealth of collaborative partnerships and has influenced a number of schools locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. The fully inclusive collaborative approach to leadership, teaching and learning is exceptional and stands as a model of exemplary practice for other to emulate. The Gordon Children's Academy is clearly evidence-informed, and this is illustrative of a school that is committed to the highest standards of educational provision for all children. The school fully embraces the need for enculturation in a rapidly changing world and has made thinking a visible element in its practice. High achievement and wellbeing flourish because of an unswerving focus on holistic lifelong learning. The Gordon Children's Academy goes well beyond the surface of educational excellence. It has been a pleasure to review the progress of the school. In conclusion, the application has provided compelling and comprehensive evidence for accreditation, and I therefore recommend that accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until March 2028. Congratulations to The Gordon Children's Academy for an exceptional achievement!



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**On behalf of the University of Exeter, UK**

**March 2025**