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

Bickley Primary School is a popular and successful primary school with 420 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, Bickley Primary School's vision is centred around developing a thirst for learning via a clear belief: 'All Different, All Equal, All Achieve'. This permeates learning throughout the school (including professional learning). Based on this vision, the school has clear values that include Respect, Friendship, Equality, Courage, Determination, Inspiration and Excellence. Bickley Primary School has translated this into core lifelong learning skills such as Resilience, Curiosity, Collaboration / Communication, Reflection, Creativity / Imagination, and the Ability to Take Safe Risks. This is testimony to the school's commitment to holistic lifelong learning. The school is situated in a broadly affluent and high-achieving area with 13% EAL, 8% PP and 13% SEN. Achievement is impressive, and the school achieves above national averages consistently. The Headteacher and her senior team are highly experienced in terms of Thinking School developments and champion a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. Bickley Primary School's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research that embraces knowledge / skills, deliberate practice, learning habits, motivation, memory and schema development, and thinking tools. For example, the mantra for reducing cognitive load is 'cut the fluff and teach the stuff'. 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 Bickley Primary School. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2021 as a response to developing a more metacognitive approach to learning and teaching. The aim was to operationalise the belief that all pupils can achieve. Since then, Bickley Primary School has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development. A number of foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded including Thinking Frames, Higher-Order Questioning,

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

Habits of Mind and Thinking Routines. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster innovative deep thinking for all pupils.<sup>2</sup>

Bickley Primary School 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 Headteacher and Drive Team Leads. Indeed, the Headteacher has made Thinking School developments a single school three-year priority with the proviso that no other initiatives were to be introduced. Active Governor support is also prominent in the development process. Governors receive regular specific updates in relation to Thinking School Developments. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Pupils at Bickley Primary School 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. This has the school's values firmly at its core.<sup>4</sup>

### **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Elizabeth Blake (Headteacher) and Louisa Dakin / Laura Hinde (Thinking Skills Coordinators) 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 2021 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 digital evidence base, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. This structure is consistently applied and is a particular strength. The evidence on the school's website includes visual information relating to how Bickley Primary School teaches thinking. The website also includes key indicators of meta-cognitive approaches in the classroom. These include sharing of thinking tools, higher order questioning, clear curriculum links and pupils tackling tasks independently. As such, there is a clear aim to make thinking visible. The school has linked this well to the science of learning.

### **Thinking School Ethos and Culture**

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of Bickley Primary School. Curriculum policy documents and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

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

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>

Bickley Primary School has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. The school's website and prospectus exemplify the prominence of a Thinking Culture. The Drive Team have produced regular newsletters for parents aligned to the school's work to become a Thinking School. In addition, an excellent Thinking Frames guide has been produced for parents and carers. These communications with parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Indeed, reception meetings for parents (led by the Headteacher) have a core focus on Thinking School developments and parents are invited to induction events and a variety of information / celebration forums. 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>

Bickley Primary School 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 strong links with the school's Local Committee where Thinking Schools approaches are disseminated. The school's Drive Team support schools within the Trust in order to help them develop as Thinking Schools and the Headteacher is extremely prominent in this process. Indeed, the Headteacher leads on Thinking Schools for the entire Trust. Learning Trios have a cross-Trust composition in order to further strengthen the breadth and depth of dissemination. More widely, Bickley Primary School host Metacognition Meets for schools throughout the locality. Through its connections with these stakeholders, Bickley Primary School 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 Headteacher 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 and inclusive Drive Team structure stands as a model of excellent practice. Indeed, the Drive Team composition has been stable since 2021 and this too has been a real strength. The current Headteacher is due to leave at the end of the academic year and every endeavour has been made to appoint a successor of the highest quality with a full and unswerving commitment to the Thinking Schools agenda. Indeed, the new Headteacher is the current Deputy Headteacher at the school and continuity is integral. 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 Leads also provided exemplary support and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

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 regularly kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education through thorough reports. 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. The Headteacher provides exemplary and inspirational leadership to support the Drive Team. Communication is excellent as are planning processes including meetings and subsequent developmental actions. Together, these aspects ensure that 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 Bickley Primary School 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, higher-order questioning 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 Bickley Primary School. Indeed, thinking serves as a 'golden thread' throughout the school. The school's Learning and Teaching approach is built on evidence-based cognitive principles from the Science of Learning, embracing elements such as cognitive load, motivation, deliberate practice and memory / schema development. 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 application of the Reflective Lens. Further, Habits of Mind are celebrated via weekly certification in order to reinforce the value of dispositional growth. The recent introduction of a 'Process Diary' format for pupil reflections on learning with Habits of Mind as reference points is an excellent development. Another example of exemplary innovation is the use of Floor Books that

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

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

provide a visual representation of learning. These have been developed in response to reducing cognitive load, thus allowing teachers to focus on 'real-time' feedback at the point of need. Parents also gain a clear insight into their child's learning by looking at Floor Books at open evenings. Excellent support and resources ensure 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. 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 Bickley Primary School'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. Other learning and teaching developments have included the inclusion of Thinking Routines. 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. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through displays of high-quality pieces of work. Bickley Primary School has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of elements such as cognitive load and motivation has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.<sup>16</sup>

## **Training**

The inspirational and values-led Headteacher 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 Drive Team is highly experienced due to maintaining a healthy stability in terms of its composition. The highly trained Thinking Schools co-ordinators and Drive Team have undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

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. There is a clear overview of staff training charting professional development activities relating to Thinking Schools and more widely. The integrated and collaborative approach is exceptional. Bickley Primary School has followed the 'Train the Trainer' model for implementing Thinking Schools and this has been a whole Trust initiative. The SPARE model is closely aligned to the implementation process, which is further aligned to a seven-point School Development cycle. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that has had a recent focus on increasing levels of challenge and inspiring writing. The responsive and adaptive nature of this is exceptional. The Drive Team have received training provided by high quality consultancy and this has been expertly cascaded. There is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking. Of particular note is the excellent use of Teaching and Learning Trios within and across schools. Innovative forums such as 'Meta-Meet' events serve to further strengthen training provision by providing a rich forum for professional dialogue. 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 and to provide mutual support through the development of thinking generally and through particular foci. Good practice is shared widely, and lesson observations are used supportively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual aspiration. 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 observations, classroom artefacts and Thinking and Learning Surveys. Indeed, Bickley Primary School is looking to further develop the use of the Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) in order to extend the reach of alternative forms of assessment. Reflection is integral to the assessment process of the school and the Habits of Mind certification reinforce this well. The use of Floor Books to help supplement assessment is an outstanding feature. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. Outcomes for key areas are high and Bickley Primary School is working hard to secure exceptional standards despite the challenges presented as a result of the pandemic. Bickley Primary School demonstrates excellent use of qualitative and quantitative indicators and this is an example of exemplary practice. Bickley Primary School also 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,

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

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

developed their independence, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress.<sup>20</sup> There is qualitative data from a range of sources 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. Half-termly evaluations are undertaken by the Drive Team, Headteacher, and deputy Headteacher. These evaluations are exemplary and draw on a judicious range of indicators including observations, informal dialogue with children and staff, and monitoring of books / floor Books. These evaluations also feed into the excellent School Development Cycle so that a clear developmental direction is charted. Of particular note, is the highly effective use of Pupil / Staff Thinkers and Learners Surveys. 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 the voices of the entire school community features prominently in the evaluative process. 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 Bickley Primary School 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 Bickley Primary School 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

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

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

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.

Bickley Primary School is an exceptional learning community school that celebrates diversity and places the individual needs of children at the heart of everything it does. Leadership is exceptional and the Headteacher is an exemplary role model. The school has an unwavering commitment to its core values. Developments are evidence informed and contextually implemented. Thinking thrives because of this, and reflection is an integral driver. Creativity and innovation are embraced but not at the expense of human elements. Indeed, great care is taken to 'get things right'. Individual flair and collaboration flourish in a climate of trust and support. 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 thrives. Bickley Primary School is an exceptional example of developing holistic lifelong learning.

## **Conclusion**

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Bickley 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 June 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 exemplary 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 (ideally 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. 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 Bickley Primary School. 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.
- Consider aligning the Thinking Routines rubric (already aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy) with lesson objectives to aid targeted planning and teaching / learning.



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

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