



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

Email [dave.walters@groundedpractice.co.uk](mailto:dave.walters@groundedpractice.co.uk)  
Web <https://education.exeter.ac.uk/>

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

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

Falcons School is a popular and family orientated co-educational preparatory school with 123 pupils on roll (ages 2-11). Falcons School is a member of the Inspired School community, a highly successful group of international schools of excellence. This group is built on three pillars:

- Academic excellence
- Sports
- Performing and creative arts.

These pillars are informed by a clear and established ethos and unwavering aims. Dignity, respect and the embracement of diversity thrive. There is a clear recognition of the close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. Ambition is actively encouraged. Curiosity, positivity and resilience underpin learning at Falcons School and citizenship is positioned firmly in the context of a changing world. The overarching focus is on lifelong learning and holistic growth for all pupils regardless of starting points. Falcons School's motto is 'Embracing Individuality, Preparing Leaders'. This permeates learning throughout the school (including professional learning). The school's three pillars are explicitly actioned. Reflection is held in high esteem and the school's vision is captured by the application of collaborative aspiration. Qualitative and quantitative elements align well, and the Pupil Voice is loud and thrives via innovative key features such as the pupil 'Ballot Box'. The Headmistress and her team are fully versed in terms of Thinking School developments and champion a whole school approach to the leadership and teaching of thinking. Falcons School's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research that embraces metacognitive elements. The explicit integration of Forest School dimensions reflects the school's wider understanding of the multi-faceted nature of developing a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking and self-discovery. As a small school, all staff are key members of the Drive Team which is expertly led by the Drive Team Lead / Thinking Schools Coordinator. Together, these elements act to operationalise the school's vision 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>

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<sup>1</sup> Reflective Proforma and Evidence Base

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at Falcons School. The school's continuous Thinking School journey of excellence has gone from strength to strength since its first accreditation in 2021. Falcons School has continued to invest in high-quality training and consultancy. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster creative deep thinking for all pupils.<sup>2</sup> A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support of the Headmistress and Drive Team Lead. Active Governor support is also prominent in the development process. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Falcons 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. There is a clear belief in wider educational development as the core aim and the value of every contribution that services this. Underpinning this provision is a fully inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff and the community. Leading by example matters to Falcons School. This drive has family values firmly at its core.<sup>4</sup>

### **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Sara Williams-Ryan (Headmistress) and Lucelia Barrand (Thinking School Co-ordinator / Drive Team Lead) 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 its initial accreditation in 2021 when the focus moved towards further development as a Thinking School and embedding metacognitive strategies for learning. The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and includes links to a comprehensive evidence base, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. As such, there is a clear aim to make thinking and learning visible. The school has linked this well to its values and curriculum provision.

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

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of Falcons School. 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>

Falcons 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 illustrative

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Evidence Base

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

materials exemplify the prominence of a Thinking Culture. This is captured well in the school's curriculum where the pursuit of lifelong learning is an integral element. Falcons School also demonstrates a holistic approach to this where emotional, physical, academic, social, moral, sporting, artistic, spiritual and cultural development are prioritised. Indeed, sports, and the arts add significantly to a rich academic educational provision. High quality communications with parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Assemblies and other public forums 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. Children are explicitly encouraged to become independent learners where the use of metacognitive tools and strategies are the norm. As a consequence of these actions, the whole learning community is equipped to support children's learning.<sup>6</sup> Falcons School has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus within the Thinking Schools community and more widely. The excellent collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout wider school community. Through its connections with a wide range of stakeholders, Falcons 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 Headmistress and Drive Team Lead give 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 collaborative Drive Team structure stands as a model of excellent practice. Indeed, the Drive Team are 'Agents of Change'. They work closely with high-quality training providers as well as 'internal' development processes. The Drive Team Lead also provides exemplary support and feedback based on a comprehensive audit of the key accreditation elements.<sup>8</sup> This is excellently captured in the comprehensive evidence base. The Governors 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 and Governor visits. 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 Headmistress and Drive Team Lead provide exemplary leadership to support the Drive Team and staff as a whole. Staff are fully engaged in developments as a result of high-quality support. Modelling and communication are 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 Falcons School is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement since 2018 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, and self-regulatory processes linked to an enriching holistic curriculum. The Pupil Voice is instrumental in bringing close involvement of parents and carers.<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 Falcons 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 embracing elements such as Zones of Regulation and Thinking Routines. 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. Of particular note, is the integration of Thinking Tools with the rich holistic curriculum offer. The curriculum is exceptional in terms of aligning metacognitive approaches with the curriculum as a whole. Excellent support and resources ensure that staff and pupils develop thinking approaches effectively. There is a 'keep it simple and clear' approach. In this regard, the Drive Team 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 Falcons School's commitment to the development of holistic well-being, have resulted in learning and teaching that is focused on the holistic development of every child.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Base

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

The school has heavily invested in metacognitive development and children get recognition for exhibiting effective learning habits. For example, 'Hedgehog Habit Superstar' awards are geared towards recognition of key Habits of Mind such as fascination, persistence, expression, collaboration, confidence, inquisitiveness, reflection and flexibility. The linkage of Habits of Mind and Hedgehog Habits is highly impactful in terms of targeted dispositional development. There is a real sense of integrating metacognitive strategies throughout the school. For example, metacognitive strategies are available to parents via presentations, fortnightly newsletters and parent conferences / reports. The aim is clearly 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 and strategies to aid consistency, recognition and application of Thinking Skills. The aforementioned alignment of Habits of Mind with Hedgehog Habits is an excellent example of this. Children are encouraged to strive for high standards through displays of high-quality pieces of work. Falcons School has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of wider elements via the outstanding holistic curriculum it offers. This has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.<sup>16</sup>

## **Training**

The inspirational and values-led Headmistress and her team have fully embraced cognitive education and have 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 are highly experienced due to maintaining a healthy inclusive breadth and depth in terms of its composition. The highly trained Drive Team have 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. From an initial focus on the development of independent learning and the 2021 accreditation, Falcons School has continued to drive developments. There is a clear agenda and next steps. The school's approach to CPD is one of professional growth. 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. Falcons School has aligned training with their core aspiration to take a whole-school approach to the teaching of thinking and the Drive Team work closely with a high-quality training provider. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that has had a recent focus on the re-design of Habits of Mind and the expansion of Thinking Frames. There is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking. New CPD initiatives are judicious, and the 'Falcons Learniverse' is just one of many

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Base

examples of this. Parents are fully informed of the Thinking Schools ethos, which features prominently 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 observational visits are used supportively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual aspiration. The customised training approach extends the reach of professional growth. 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 a range of surveys / questionnaires. This is serviced well via a range of evaluative opportunities including destination data. Reflection is integral to the assessment process at Falcons School, and the voices of staff and pupils are integral. Reflection is aligned closely to peer and self-assessment. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. Dispositional development and well-being indicators are impressive over the Thinking Schools implementation period indicating that Falcons School is an attractive place to learn. Achievement outcomes for key areas show an impressive rate of growth. Falcons School demonstrates excellent use of qualitative and quantitative indicators, and this is an example of excellent practice. Falcons 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, 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 holistic pupil growth indicates impressive impact. 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>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

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

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

## **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. Falcons School makes explicit use of the SPARE model of Illuminative Evaluation, and outcomes from judicious assessments inform school developments. As a result, quantitative and qualitative data relating to thinking, attitudes and behaviour are integrated as part of the evaluative process. These evaluations are excellent and draw on a range of indicators including reflective observations. These evaluations also feed into the excellent school development cycle so that a clear developmental direction is charted. The 'Phase' approach to planning is exceptional. Staff are fully involved in the collation of data and peer observations are particularly impactful in terms of evaluating pedagogy. Of particular note, is the highly effective use of the pupil voice in the evaluation process. The development of staff as Cognitive Coaches is a key feature of planning, training and evaluation. 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', and this is clear evidence of the drive to create a culture of thinking. The development plan is an organic collaborative, document and 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. Falcons 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 Falcons School has made a full commitment to developing and embedding cognitive education throughout the school. From the initial introduction of cognitive tools and practices and the initial accreditation in 2021, 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 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. Indeed, progress in developing a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking has been purposeful throughout. Together, these elements combine to effectively promote the educational growth of all children and the professional growth of staff by providing them with excellent support and ownership over their own development.

Falcons School is an exceptional school on many levels. The curriculum approach is one of promoting holistic lifelong learning and the skilful integration of metacognitive approaches with other curricular dimensions is wonderful. Falcons School's consistent drive for 'next

steps' clearly illustrates that it is a responsive educational community that celebrates creativity and diversity. The destination ('next steps') never undermines how the journey is undertaken. Falcons School places the individual needs of children at the heart of everything it does. Leadership is excellent at all levels and the Headmistress and Drive Team Lead are at the heart of this. Developments are evidence informed and implemented with purpose and care. Thinking thrives because reflection, aspiration and family values are integral drivers. External evaluation is welcomed and responded to. Academic excellence, sports and the arts thrive as a result of the school's thinking culture where people collaborate at every level. As a result, the whole school community flourishes in a climate of 'Embracing Individuality, Preparing Leaders'. Falcons School is wonderful example of a Thinking School where holistic lifelong learning is central and people matter. It has been a pleasure to undertake this evaluation and see the continued exceptional educational development of Falcons School.

## **Conclusion**

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Falcons 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 re-accreditation be awarded until October 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 Falcons 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 introducing and aligning Thinking Routines (already aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy) with lesson objectives to aid targeted planning and teaching / learning. This will also help to service the further development of dispositional elements.
- Consider the use of the Myself as a Learner scale (MALS) or the Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS) inventories as evaluative impact supplements as both include 'norm' comparisons.
- Further develop the school's website to reiterate the core position of Thinking Schools in the educational provision and offer.



**Dr Dave Walters, BA Ed Hons, MPhil Ed, EdD  
Thinking Schools Assessor  
Grounded Practice Educational Services**

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

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