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Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Priory Integrated College 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.

Priory Integrated College is a popular and successful secondary school with 601 pupils on roll (ages 11-18). 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, Priory Integrated College's vision is centred around continuous self-reflection and collaboration. This permeates learning throughout the college (including professional learning). Priory Integrated College has gained the Apple Distinguished School Award and this is testimony to the school's commitment to innovation, leadership and educational excellence. 36% of pupils are entitled to Free School Meals and 14% of pupils have SEN stage 5 status, with 41% having SEN stage 1-4 status. Achievement is impressive however, and the school achieves above Northern Ireland averages consistently for KS4 and KS5. The Principal and her senior team are highly experienced in terms of Thinking School developments and champion a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. Priory Integrated College'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.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at Priory Integrated College. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest as a response to developing more open-ended activities and challenge. The aim was to promote dialogic talk and higher-order thinking. Since then, Priory Integrated College 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 Priory Integrated College's integrations of the Thinking School approach with Apple Distinguished School developments. Specifically, this involves the integration of Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster innovative deep thinking for all pupils.²

¹ Reflective Proforma and Evidence Links

² Ibid

Priory Integrated College 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 Principal and Drive Team Lead (Leader of Learning). Active Governor support is also prominent in the development process. Indeed, Governors receive regular specific updates in relation to Thinking School Developments. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

Pupils at Priory Integrated College 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 restorative practices at its core. Priory Integrated College is rightly proud of its 'Education at its Best' and 'Together we Achieve' philosophy.⁴

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Nicola Wilson (Principal) and Deidre Scarlett (Thinking Skills Coordinator and Leader of Learning) 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 2019 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 base 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. The evidence on the school's website includes visual information relating to how Priory Integrated College 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 its restorative approach.

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of Priory Integrated College. Curriculum policy documents and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.⁵

Priory Integrated College has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. The school's website and

³ Ibid

⁴ School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Evidence Links

⁵ Ibid

prospectus exemplify the prominence of a Thinking Culture. The Drive Team have produced information leaflets for parents aligned to Learning Guidance sessions to further maintain the impact of taking a whole-school approach to the teaching of thinking. These communications with parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Indeed, parents are invited to induction events and a variety of information / celebration events. 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.⁶

Priory Integrated College 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 visits from high-quality external consultants and involvement in Meta-Meets, to include learning walks in order to illustrate the Thinking School journey and impact. Priory Integrated College also played an active role in the recent Northern Ireland Thinking School Conference and a sub-group of the Drive Team are poised to share the school's Thinking School journey at the forthcoming Thinking Matters Festival of Metacognition. Through its connections with these stakeholders, Priory Integrated College 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.⁷

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 and inclusive Drive Team structure stands as a model of excellent practice. Indeed, the Drive Team composition has been stable since 2019 and this too has been a real strength. 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.⁸

The Governing Body are not only fully supportive of the school's commitment to cognitive education, but also demonstrate a good understanding of how this approach enables children to think through their curriculum in order to bring learning to life. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education through Board of Governor Reports. These are compiled twice per year and chart Learning and Teaching developments together with the progress of the school's Thinking School journey. 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.⁹

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

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. Of particular note is the use of Sub-Drive Teams such as the Oracy Drive Team. The introduction Pupil Focus Groups to drive metacognitive developments is an excellent and innovative addition. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹⁰

There is ample evidence to indicate that Priory Integrated College 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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 Priory Integrated College. Indeed, thinking serves as a 'golden thread' throughout the school. The school's Learning and Teaching approach is built on seven evidence-based cognitive principles from the Science of Learning, embracing elements such as spaced practice, cognitive load, dual coding, skilful questioning, deliberate practice, effective feedback and pupil self-evaluation. 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 Rubrics have been made bespoke to subjects and are also part of the school's reward system and Behaviour Learning Charter. Habits of Mind Bookmarks are also used as a stimulus for lesson planning. Reflective Journals are used throughout the school in order to provide ownership of learning. 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

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Links

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.¹⁴

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 Priory Integrated College'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.¹⁵

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. 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. Priory Integrated College 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.¹⁶

Training

The inspirational and values-led 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 Drive Team is highly experienced due to maintaining a healthy stability in terms of its composition. 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.¹⁷ 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 spanning 2019 to 2024. The integrated and collaborative approach is exceptional. Indeed, SEN training has clear links to the Thinking Schools approach. Further, all classroom assistants have iPads and have undergone training in using voice technology in order to use Oracy as a support to share their thinking. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that centres on the seven core elements of the Science of Learning. The responsive and adaptive nature of this in relation to

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Links

the recent pandemic is exceptional. Indeed, clear advice relating to remote learning has been integral. All staff have received 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. 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.¹⁸

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 the Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS) inventory, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys, focus groups and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils. Reflection is integral to the assessment process of the school. Dedicated Improvement and Reflection Time (DIRT) is a regular feature in lessons and Reflective Journals supplement this well. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. Outcomes for key areas are high and Priory Integrated College is working hard to secure exceptional standards despite the challenges presented as a result of the pandemic. Priory Integrated College demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of excellent practice. Priory Integrated College 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Evidence Links

²¹ 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. 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. Annual Evaluations are exemplary and draw on a judicious range of indicators. These evaluations feed into the excellent 'The Way Forward' process so that a clear developmental direction is charted. For example, the Key Priorities for 2024/2025 include the further development of Thinking Routines, extending and developing the Reflective Lens dimension of Thinking Frames, and the production of clear Assessment Rubrics for Habits of Mind. 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 Priory Integrated College 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 Priory Integrated College 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.

Priory Integrated College is an exceptional school that places the celebration of diversity and individual needs at the heart of everything it provides. It is a true educational community led by a commitment to its core values. Developments are evidence informed and contextually

implemented. Thinking thrives because of this, and reflection is an integral driver. Technology is embraced but not at the expense of human elements. Resilience and innovation flourish in a climate of high-aspiration and collaboration. 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. Priory Integrated College is a beacon of holistic lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Priory Integrated College 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 Priory Integrated College. 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 examination Assessment Objectives (AOs) to aid targeted planning and teaching/learning. For example, consider which Thinking Routines best service A01 and in contrast A02 / A03?



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