



Report on the visit by Mrs Fiona Knapp to The Portsmouth Academy on 18th July 2016 for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Exeter University Cognitive Education Development Unit.

The Portsmouth Academy currently caters for girls aged 11-16, but will become a coeducational academy from September 2017. The academy opened in September 2013 and is sponsored by the Thinking Schools Academy Trust, a growing family of schools that work together to "improve the life chances" of all its children and young people, and which currently includes ten academies in Kent, Medway and Portsmouth, led by The Rochester Grammar School. At the time of the accreditation visit there were some 547 pupils on roll, drawn from the local area, which experiences a significant level of deprivation, with more than half the pupils classified as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The majority of pupils are White British with approximately 33% representing ethnic minority groups, 26% of whom speak English as an additional language. 41% of all pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium Funding, 25% are eligible for Free School Meals and 17% are identified as having learning difficulties and disabilities.

When the predecessor school, the City of Portsmouth Girls' School, was last inspected by Ofsted in February 2013, it was judged to require special measures. Once the school had become a member of the TSAT, the new Principal, Natalie Sheppard, was appointed and took up her post in October 2013. There have been significant changes in staffing since then: all senior leaders and approximately one third of middle leaders have been newly appointed to the academy, and by the time of the first Ofsted inspection of the school as an academy in April 2015, more than half the teachers were new to the school. This most recent Ofsted inspection rated the school as Requiring Improvement although Leadership and Management and the Behaviour and Safety of Pupils were rated as Good. The report highlights the many strengths of the school, and confirms the great and rapid improvements made as it grows from strength to strength.

Prior to my visit to the school, I received a submission from Bev Lewis, Associate Leader for Thinking Schools, for accreditation as a Thinking School. This included an indication of the school's on-going work in relation to the criteria for accreditation as a Thinking School, and a comprehensive portfolio containing a wealth of evidence. Much of the evidence has informed this report, and reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as a thinking and learning community.

Further evidence was made available to me on the day of my visit, including a promotional video which can be accessed via the following link:

<http://www.theportsmouthacademy.org.uk/the-portsmouth-academy-video/>

The Portsmouth Academy has the highest expectations and aspirations for both staff and pupils, underpinned by a warm, supportive and caring sense of community. There is a relentless focus on all pupils developing as independent and ambitious lifelong learners who have the capacity to think for themselves, coupled with a recognition that in order to make sense of a very complex world and be

successful in the future, they also need to have highly developed 'Habits of Excellence'. This is central to everything that the school believes is essential in a learning-focused community and is reflected in the following extracts from the school prospectus:

'At the Portsmouth Academy for Girls we strive for personal excellence and ensure there is a happy, caring and safe learning environment. Learning is at the heart of our school. To achieve this we need to plan for each girl to develop her thinking skills, so that she does not only think about History, English or Mathematics, but learns to apply her thinking to the world at large. We will provide "thinking toolkits" to allow girls to approach learning in different ways. They encourage flexibility, creativity and critical thinking and each girl will develop habits of perseverance, open mindedness and teamwork... Our aim is for every girl to enjoy her learning and to have high aspirations. We will nurture her so that she becomes a confident, happy and successful young woman who will thrive in the world beyond school.'

The school's friendly and caring ethos is very evident; I received a warm welcome, the day was well organised and staff, pupils parents and governors were all aware of the purpose of my visit. Behaviour is excellent; there is a sense of calm and purposeful thought-fullness across the school, and staff and pupils are clearly happy and readily spoke about their school with warmth and enthusiasm, as did the governors and parents I met.

During my visit I met at various times with the Principal, and the Associate Leader For Thinking, conducted learning walks, looked at exemplars of pupil work and saw a range of lessons across the school, and across the curriculum where thinking tools and strategies were being used very effectively to engage pupils in the learning, challenge and deepen their thinking and generate higher-order questioning. I met with the Drive Team, which is responsible for driving forward the key developments, and also met separately with a group of teaching and support staff, and a small group of parents and governors.

Pupil Voice is key in an accreditation visit and I also had the opportunity to meet with members of the Pupil Drive Team and the Student Leadership Team to discuss their observations, experiences and reflections on the school's cognitive approaches. There is much evidence to indicate that The Portsmouth Academy is not only receptive to new developments and initiatives, but is also bold and adventurous and actively seeks opportunities to enhance and enrich the pupils' love of learning and deepen their thinking.

When Natalie Sheppard took up her post as Principal she was fully aware of the need for significant improvement in all aspects of learning and teaching. Under her determined and committed leadership, the school embarked on a rigorous whole-school programme of improvement, working alongside and supported by The Rochester Grammar School. As a member of the TSAT, the school recognised the teaching of thinking as fundamental to developing the skills of open-minded, independent, lifelong learners and this then became the priority for the school as it worked towards Thinking School accreditation. The school adopted a very structured approach to introducing a range of thinking approaches and strategies, under the guidance of The Rochester Grammar School, and supported by targeted professional learning for teachers, learning support staff and governors. The approaches adopted include Tony Ryan's Thinkers' Keys, David Hyerle's Thinking Maps, Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats and CoRT tools and Anderson's Taxonomy and the Question Matrix, all underpinned by sixteen 'Habits of Excellence'.

All the tools are widely and consistently used across the school and across the curriculum and in all the lessons I saw, it was clear that pupils are familiar with all the tools and strategies. Both adults and pupils were using them with skill and in a wide range of ways to support and scaffold thinking, learning and reflection, and using the language of thinking as a natural and integral part of the teaching and learning conversations. Of particular note was the Perspectives of Portsmouth project for Year 7. This is an innovative cross-curricular project, modelled on The Rochester Grammar School's Perspectives of London project, and is designed to develop independent thought and to encourage pupils to effectively integrate thinking tools and strategies with increasing independence. The girls had clearly enjoyed this and there were some excellent and very detailed examples of their completed projects available to me on the day of the visit. This initiative will be continued in future years following a review to ensure that the project is not too overloaded with content.

The staff I met with were very committed to and positive about the cognitive approaches and value the whole school focus on learning and thinking. They feel that the common consistent approach has permeated the culture of the school, changed the nature of professional dialogue and encouraged staff to be more reflective. The approaches adopted have offered a structure and a framework that has had a very positive impact on teaching, planning and delivery and the use of 'fertile questions' to drive the learning, has led to increased motivation and deeper thinking. They feel that there is a much greater focus on pupil-led thinking, on collaboration and group work and pupils have a much greater sense of themselves as learners and take greater responsibility for their own learning with teachers acting as facilitators. Pupils are more resilient and resourceful, more inquisitive, have a thirst for learning and are more reflective and more confident to take risks.

Staff greatly appreciate the support from the Drive Team and the opportunity to participate in planned professional development sessions to share reflections and ideas, learn from each other and reflect on, develop and enhance their own practice. There are clear procedures for the appointment and induction of new staff. All new members of staff take part in a programme that is designed to help them to understand the way in which the school promotes and uses a range of thinking tools. They receive professional development on the purpose and application of each tool, and have access to a range of support to discuss the consistent and accurate application of the tools. Staff value the fact that the agreed thinking tools and strategies are modelled and used in staff meetings and to support wider decision-making and development planning across the school.

The Portsmouth Academy has further focused on the on-going development of the school as a "Thinking School" by including clear targets for development as objectives in the Performance Management process. The Drive Team, led by Bev Lewis, meets regularly to monitor, review, reflect and plan future developments on the Thinking School journey. The Drive Team is responsible for identifying professional learning needs, pinpointing and sharing excellent practice and for planning and leading INSET for other staff and governors. A range of professional learning opportunities are open to all staff, including learning support staff as part of the on-going planned programme of CPD.

Recent initiatives include the development of agreed 'Truly Great Teaching' Standards which will continue as a major focus from September 2016, together with further reference to the work of Carol Dweck and Growth Mindsets, and the Habits of Excellence. The school is committed to strong partnerships between all stakeholders and the governors I met spoke of feeling included and well

informed, and are fully supportive of the “Thinking School’ ideal. They are open to change, have had some training themselves and feel that they have a good insight into the approaches.

Although there is no formal monitoring of the Thinking School initiative as yet, the Academy Advisory Board meets termly to monitor provision across the school and can see the benefits for the pupils and the significant impact on learning and achievement.

The parents I met were also very positive about the school’s cognitive approaches. They said that they felt well informed about the thinking tools through information evenings, the website, parent workshops, the emailed newsletter (Front Page), in home learning and through the conversations they have with their daughters. They commented that the pupils are using the tools and the language of thinking and learning at home, and feel that they are more motivated and much more aspirational. The parents I met spoke of the huge changes that have taken place in the school over recent years and feel that it is now a bright, colourful, welcoming learning environment in which expectations have risen dramatically with a clear uncompromising commitment to success for all.

The Student Leadership Team and the Pupil Drive Team play a key role in the development of the school as a Thinking School, and are actively engaged in the process. They were instrumental in commissioning and designing new signage for six of the key Habits of Excellence and their role will be further enhanced as the school continues to move forward on its journey. I met with representative members of both teams, including two former Year 11 pupils who had made a special request to return to school so that they could participate in the discussion. The girls talked about their school with warmth and enthusiasm and a genuine sense of loyalty and pride. They were both articulate and aspirational, and it was clear from the discussion that they not only know about and use a range of thinking tools and approaches, but also have a strong sense of ownership, see them as central to their learning and offered these thoughts:

We are encouraged to do our best, and pushed to achieve more than we think we can;

There is a real sense of community and encouragement for each other;

The teachers have time for us and are caring and approachable;

The school is motivating, exciting, colourful and welcoming. It lightens our mood and opens our minds;

The school encourages us to take pride in what we do;

We learn how to be independent and confident;

We are responsible for ourselves and we have to prioritise for ourselves;

I have learned that I need to focus on what is really important and trust in my own decisions

When I asked them specifically about the importance of being a good thinker, and about the thinking tools and strategies they know and use they commented:

Now I wouldn’t know how to learn or what to do without the tools;

This is a new way of learning; it makes us unique and helps us to aspire and achieve;

You have to think to develop learning: when you're thinking, you're learning more;

Thinking is independent, learning is interdependent;

The tools give us a structure so we become more rounded as thinkers and learners;

The Habits of Excellence prepare us for the future; they are skills for life and help to make us better people and more advanced thinkers in and out of lessons. The Habits won't change.

We apply the Habits without realising it, and we find humour every day!

Thinking Maps are really helpful because they help me to see what I'm thinking. If I use a Double Bubble Map I can see clear differences and I'm learning more at the same time;

I use the Maps to plan; then I can reflect back to my plan and evaluate whether I changed things as I went along.

In terms of their own aspirations, all planned to go on to further study, including at university level, and ambitions included teaching, dentistry, journalism, fashion design, law, becoming a 'female Lord Sugar' and film direction. I concluded the visit by meeting with Bev Lewis and Rachel Gray, one of the Assistant Heads, to discuss my findings and some ways in which the school could continue to develop and refine their practice as they move forward.

This might include:

- Developing the induction programme for Year 7 and consider extending it more fully into Year 6 as part of on-going liaison and in preparation for transition;
- Revisiting, further refining and developing David Hyerle's Thinking Maps, focusing on precision relating to the thinking process rather than the name of the Map, and continuing to develop the use of Maps in combination with each other and with other thinking tools;
- Developing the use of the metacognitive Frame of Reference for all Thinking Maps;
- Further developing the 'Thinking School' area of the website to give it a higher profile;
- Developing resident pupil experts in each of the key tools and strategies;
- Considering current research such as that from Project Zero at the University of Harvard to further develop the culture of thinking, and the use of a range of other structures and routines to 'make thinking visible';
- Considering recent research on the teenage brain and the implications for teaching and learning for both boys and girls;
- Considering the International Middle Years Curriculum for KS3;
- Considering the appointment of a 'Link Governor' for cognitive education;
- Capturing and sharing existing best practice, both within school and beyond, and begin to work towards Advanced Thinking School Recognition;
- Developing Action Research initiatives (staff and pupils) as part of the journey towards Advanced Thinking School Recognition.

Clearly much has developed since The Portsmouth Academy embarked on its Thinking School journey. It has been a transformational journey underpinned by passionate and inspirational leadership combined with a relentless drive for excellence, on-going self-evaluation and review and the commitment and willingness of governors, staff, pupils and parents to embrace the Thinking School ideal.

In the words of Natalie Sheppard, 'the school has become more than I imagined.' This success is partly reflected in this year's GCSE results, which are the best ever: 64% of pupils achieved the benchmark of 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C, including English and Maths, which represents a rise of 16% from 2015, and makes the school one of the most rapidly improving schools in the country. 75% of students achieved 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C, and more than 1 in 4 (28%) of all grades was an A* or an A, including one pupil who achieved 7 A* and 4 A's! 10 In conclusion, The Portsmouth Academy meets all the criteria set by Exeter University's Cognitive Education Development Unit for accreditation as a Thinking School. This is confirmed by the range of evidence in the portfolio, the richness of the learning environment, observation of planning and classroom practice, the consistent application of the tools to support and scaffold thinking, and discussions with the Principal, the Drive Team, pupils, parents, governors and a range of staff. I therefore recommend that the school be accredited as a Thinking School until July 2019.