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Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Traku Vytauto Didziojo Gimnazija 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

Traku Vytauto Didziojo Gimnazija (TVDG) is a popular and highly successful small secondary school providing a rich educational experience for approximately 680 children between the ages of 11 and 19. 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 students regardless of starting points. Thinking Schools developments can be traced back to 2018 when the Deputy Director and two teachers from the Drive Team visited the UK. This involved visits to UK Thinking Schools. From 2018 to 2019 the Drive Team participated in the 'Think, Act, Learn' project funded by the European Structural Fund. Currently, the Drive Team is comprised of the Deputy Director and 15 teachers from across the school. TVDG has continued its Thinking School training in partnership with 'Thinkinggo', an organisation well versed in providing high-quality development opportunities geared towards developing as a Thinking School. Strategically, TVDG has the goal of providing high-quality and versatile education to enable students to find optimal solutions in changing circumstances. This is guided and based on the concept of a Thinking School.

Within this lies a clear vision of developing TVDG as an authentic school of thinking. Its mission is to develop confident students who know how to learn and are able to think critically and creatively. This clearly captures the school's belief in learning being an active and dynamic process. These facets have been so well embedded that they form the culture of the entire organisation. As a result of a rich blend of staff, the Drive Team has high status and is highly influential. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership. Active Director support is also prominent in the development process.

The school's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by a creative blend of academic and distance learning opportunities. Metacognitive pedagogical approaches serve to operationalise the

curriculum such that students develop as holistic lifelong learners. Of particular note, is the curriculum focus on student-centred development, as this fits exceptionally well with the philosophy of being a Thinking School. TVDG is research-informed and this embraces knowledge / skills, Thinking Hats, Thinking Maps, Thinking Habits, and Higher—Order Thinking Questions. Together, this acts to further operationalise the school's mission to include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity and resilience and parental engagement.¹

Student progression through phases has high priority at TVDG. Since beginning its Thinking School journey in 2018, TVDG has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding meta-cognitive development. A number of foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded such that the school's mission is a reality. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster deep thinking for all students.²

Students at TVDG have a history of excellent student achievement. Data from National Student Achievement Tests and Data of School Attendance indicate a steady growth of overall annual achievement. 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 TVDG 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.³

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Jolanta Martynceviene and Rita Sadovskiene (Headteacher/Director, Thinking Skills Coordinator/Project Leader respectively) 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 also specifically since 2018 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 Platform together with website links, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. This structure is a model of excellent practice. TVDG maintains a 'golden thread' throughout the holistic educational process and has a particular focus on

¹ Reflective Proforma, School's Website and Evidence Platform

² Ibid

³ School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Evidence Platform

personal development based key meta-cognitive elements, leadership, work-related aspects, sport, and the arts, as well as other key dimensions such as entrepreneurial skills. Indeed, the 2022-2023 non-formal education schedule is exceptional and is clearly aligned to self-regulatory metacognitive development.

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of TVDG. 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.⁴

TVDG has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. Parents are fully informed and engaged in Thinking School initiatives and are presented with the main developments at the start of every year. In addition, articles are provided relating to lessons, events, after school activities, and celebratory opportunities. The high premium placed on awards, celebration opportunities 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.⁵

TVDG has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus. Teachers share and show the teaching strategies and how they use Thinking Tools to teachers from other schools in the district and nationally. This outstanding collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout the partner schools and also more widely. Furthermore, it will provide a useful developmental platform for future organisational growth and aligns well to the Advanced Level 2 Accreditation criteria. Through its connections with these stakeholders, TVDG 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.⁶

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The Headteacher/Director 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 senior leadership structure comprised of the

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

Headteacher/Director, Deputy Headteachers/Directors and Thinking Schools Co-ordinator stands as a model of excellent practice. The collaborative and integrated leadership model provides exemplary support and feedback based on a comprehensive audit and understanding of the key accreditation elements.⁷

The Directors 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. Directors are kept fully up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education as a result of the Deputy Director being a core member of the Drive Team. This stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback indicates a positive shift in students' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.⁸

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. The Student Council are highly influential in terms of the leadership of the school and champion the school's thinking. The integral and active involvement of the students is an excellent addition to the leadership of cognitive education. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.⁹

There is ample evidence to indicate that TVDG is receptive to change and innovation. The school's communications to a wide range of stakeholders provides the entire learning community with a clear and concise visible illustration of the school's Thinking School vision and approach. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for well over five years in response to ensuring that the school has an explicit vision based upon inclusive educational values that would serve as the foundation for a strategic move forward.¹⁰ 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 critical/creative thinking.¹¹

There is a specific organic School Development Plan designed to secure the wide-spread use of thinking tools across the school. This is an integral part of TVDG's aspirational development framework

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

for continuous whole school improvement. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are challenging and designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development.¹² 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 TVDG and that there is a clear 'golden thread' of holistic education throughout the school. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. For example, over 80% of students demonstrate a high level of competency in terms of application of Thinking Tools and the school is working hard to further develop students' understanding of how to self-regulate their own learning. Of particular note is the core elements of developing as a Thinking School are fully embedded in classes, school environment and pedagogical approaches. Students' notebooks also demonstrate the explicit focus on the application of Thinking Skills and dispositional development. The non-formal education provision is an exemplary model of application provision and projects, based on Engineering, Science, Technology, English, Art, Sport, and Mathematics, make full use of thinking tools in order to design projects based on deep thinking and wide application of knowledge. TVDG places a high premium on the mental health of the whole learning community and the help for students and parents is outstanding. As a result, there is ample provision for students who need support. 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 growing universal staff belief in the importance of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking and that all students 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.¹³

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the school's strategic goals, vision, and mission as its foundation. Specific research-informed elements include Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Habits of Mind and Higher-Order Thinking Questions . 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 TVDG's commitment to the development of psychological

¹² Reflective Proforma School Website and Evidence Platform

¹³ Ibid

well-being, have resulted in learning and teaching that is focused on the holistic development of every child.¹⁴

The school has heavily invested in character development and children receive recognition for exhibiting effective learning habits. 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. TVDG has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of metacognitive elements has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.¹⁵

Training

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. 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.¹⁶ 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 an annual cycle of lesson study in place that centres on core elements. Staff typically select 1-2 Thinking Schools foci as observation goals. Specific foci have included demonstration of Thinking Habits and self-regulatory use of Thinking Tools. Based on the evaluation and self-evaluation process, teachers choose 1-2 areas for their personal professional development. Personal development plans secure judicious training application. This, together with the innovative mini-training groups, provides a rich source of professional dialogue based on thinking reflections. As such, training and staff development have a highly collaborative and professional approach. The leadership of the school is committed to creating and maintaining world-class teachers. There is ample provision for staff to trial and extend approaches to the teaching of thinking. 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

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¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Platform

the development of thinking generally and also through particular Thinking Schools foci. Good practice is shared widely, and lesson observations are used extensively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual support. Moving forward, this would benefit from the further extension of a practitioner research to embrace the SPARE model of evaluative action research and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect.¹⁷

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. Thinking Habits underpin the personal progress monitoring plans of each student. The innovative 'Time to Talk' strategy, geared towards the development of effective learning behaviours, is fully inclusive of students, teachers and parents. This is another example of exemplary practice. There is an Annual Planner of Class Hours dedicated to the ongoing development of Thinking Habits to further maintain the focus on the development of impactful learning behaviours. Assessments, including achievement, attendance and behaviour, indicate high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. TVDG may want to consider the use of the Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) to further add to the already well-developed assessment processes as this has the added quality of 'norms' in order to benchmark cognitive development outcomes. In addition, dynamic ('real-time') assessment processes illustrated by the work of Ron Ritchhart (Harvard University) in his book 'Making Thinking Visible' may also provide further avenues for assessment development. Outcomes indicate that students are well prepared for the next stage of learning. A future development area may well include the use of baseline and subsequent growth indicators via both quantitative and qualitative data sources. TVDG demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. The school 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.¹⁸

TVDG 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 student progress.¹⁹ There is qualitative data from staff, pupils, parents and Directors about how the development of learning behaviours are

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Evidence Platform

associated with positive outcomes for students and are associated with high academic outcomes and improved motivation.

The excellent achievement growth results indicate impressive curricular 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.²⁰

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 students' meta-cognition and the transfer of skills, strategies and learning behaviours. There is a Dedicated Evaluation Team that works closely with the Planning Team in order to align school improvement processes. Thinking School developments feature prominently in strategic and yearly plans with results being evaluated rigorously on an annual basis. Key evaluative components include strategic data analyses, compulsory school criteria, teacher reflections, student and parental feedback, and exam/test results. Students are integral to the evaluative process at every level and the Student Council is an inclusive part of this dimension. By way of further development, the SPARE model of Illuminative Evaluation (Action Research) would benefit from dissemination at all levels (from leadership to individual teachers) in order to further foster a 'researching professional' culture. 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 student voice feature prominently. There is a clear evaluative focus on developing the transfer of thinking skills and strategies and the collaborative nature of this is a model of excellent practice. It is clear that TVDG 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 TVDG 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

²⁰ Ibid

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. The strategic goals, mission and vision are alive throughout the school and has done much to ensure that learning is an active process underpinned by a committed whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. Teachers, students, and parents combine to effectively promote the educational growth of all children by providing them with ownership over their own development. Teaching and learning at TVDG has moved from being an educational process to being an exemplary pedagogical culture such that the school stands as an exemplary model of meta-cognitive excellence.

TVDG is an inspirational and collaborative educational community. It has carefully developed and nurtured its core values so that they permeate throughout the entire school and beyond. Staff and children think deeply about what they do, and levels of inclusion are exceptional. TVDG places a high premium on continuous whole school development and innovation. This places TVDG at the cutting edge of educational provision both regionally and nationally. 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 flourishes.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that Traku Vytauto Didziojo Gimnazija 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 April 2026.

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 excellent 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:

- 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, thinking routines (geared towards further developing Growth Mindset), assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This should take the form of an overview for how these elements are integrated. This would enable teachers and leaders to have a clear overview of metacognitive development as a whole.
- 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.
- Add the internal use of effect sizes at an individual teacher, team and whole school level to further strengthen the quantitative robustness of data in order to supplement high quality qualitative data. This will allow impact comparisons of meta-cognitive strategies and feedback with the work of The Sutton Trust and John Hattie. The key evaluative questions are 'What works best?', 'For whom?' and 'How?'. A multi-method approach to data may serve to get to the heart of these questions and focus group interviews are particularly effective in generating efficient data to supplement outcome and survey data.
- Consider the further development of the school website to include a clear and prominent Thinking Schools drop-down menu.
- Move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. Shift 1 is to move from a self-evaluation processes that produce objectives to ones that generate research questions of the style 'How can we/I improve...?'. Shift 2 is to ensure that all staff sustain the 'open door' philosophy and remain open to evaluating their own impact in an honest and self-critical way. Shift 3 means providing opportunities for best practice impact to be made public. 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 and could easily be applied to the evaluative protocols already in place. Thinking Schools@Exeter is well placed to support in this regard.

- TVDG may want to consider the use of the Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) to further add to the already well-developed assessment processes as this has the added quality of 'norms' in order to benchmark cognitive development outcomes. In addition, TVDG may also want to reignite its links with UK Thinking Schools. The Victory Academy contact may provide further development ideas such as the Be Your Best Self reflective approach.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of TVDG. 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.



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On behalf of Dr Judith Kleine-Staarman, Director of Thinking Schools @Exeter

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