



Report on visit to Swaminarayan Preparatory School, Brent, by Professor Robert Burden and Mrs Judy Silver for the purpose of Accreditation as a 'Thinking School'

This report will be constructed according to the six key components of Edward De Bono's 'Thinking Hats' programme.

White Hat (factual information)

The Swaminarayan Independent Day school in Neasden, serves children aged two and a half to eighteen years in the Hindu community of North London. Approximately 20% of the families attending the school worship at the nearby temple, which is a setting for many weekly and festival activities for all the children. The Preparatory School is well decorated throughout by examples of thinking maps and has applied for 'thinking school' accreditation.

The school is well served by enthusiastic staff and well informed parents. The Headteacher of the Prep School, Mr Umesh Raja and his staff are passionate about promoting Hindu values in the children and a lifelong love of learning. Mr Raja has undertaken training in Hyerle's Thinking Maps to Trainers level, and the whole staff have also been trained at school by the Kestrel Thinking Skills Training Company. Jillian Johnstone, (the Thinking School Project co-ordinator, Head of Science and IT) has undergone training with Saphere in Philosophy for Children (P4C). The school is also dedicated to using Philosophy for Children in weekly lessons to promote and send well adjusted and articulated pupils into society.

On arrival at the school we were given comprehensive folders containing information from a school map; to a programme for the day; procedures, activities in place and forward plans; Staff Structure; timetables; School Improvement Plan; School diary; Parent guide; Prep School leaflet and the Prep Annual newsletter. These documents provided valuable information about the whole environment and its activities.

The visit began with an observation of School Assembly and a dramatic performance given by Year 6 students about the use of thinking maps to describe pollution and raise associated moral questions. This was followed by breakfast with some parents. The parents were totally supportive of the Thinking Schools project, and spoke enthusiastically about the use of the maps, not only for schoolwork, but as an aid for family life: shopping, planning family outings. They also recognised the maps' application to commercial enterprise.

We were then taken on a comprehensive guided tour of the school conducted by Tej Master and Samanta Zahir, the Prep School Head Boy and Girl. This was followed by observation of both P4C sessions and Thinking Maps sessions, with Years 2, 4, 5 and 6.

We sat in on Miss Johnstone's P4C session where children were offered the stimulus of a world globe to discuss gravity. Miss Johnstone allowed the children to take their ideas where they wanted rather than have them follow her lead. This was skilfully achieved, demonstrating restraint and an awareness of the deeper goals of the session. This gentle but firm facilitation was evident again in Mr. Condely's P4C session with Year 2.

A session with Reception children being introduced the Brace map was also observed. Ms Divecha, the class teacher first asked one child to take a torch to pieces and label the constituent parts, and then used this kind of analysis to introduce the task of cutting up a skeleton into its parts. The children were divided into three groups that sat at tables and on the carpet. The Reception class has a team of one teacher and two teaching assistants. There was differentiation, wherein each group had a slightly different task concerned with the cutting up and analysis of the skeleton. The children appeared engaged and interested in the task and used appropriate language in their discussions. The teaching assistants told us later that they liked working as part of a team and were never made to feel inferior or less valued than the qualified teacher.

Two meetings with children were arranged, from Reception through to Year 6, which was the highlight of the day - one meeting in the morning and one in the afternoon. Children showed each other courtesy and respect and listened to each other before they took their turn. Much of this behaviour could be attributed to conduct learnt in the P4C sessions. It was interesting that the children in the morning said that they preferred P4C sessions to maps because they did not have to write anything down. The group in the afternoon told us they could see how maps would help them for revision and study skills when they got older. They had a lively curiosity about our own work, and our interest in the school.

We were taken into the Mandir which was both a privilege and a beautiful experience, and gave a valuable insight into the practices and religious values of the Hindu culture. Professor Burden was fortunate to be introduced to Pujya Yogvivek Swami, the Head of the BAPs Swaminarayan Mandir(Temple) who was gracious in his endorsement of the cognitive approach.

His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj is the inspiration of both the Mandir and the school. One of His quotations which is on the front cover of the school's prospectus, encapsulates the ethos of this wonderful school.

! *The heart of education is the education of the heart, of the mind and of the spirit. This is not achieved by chance but brought about by great effort and care, both by the students and the schooling system that meets their needs.* This is a faith school and the Hindu culture and moral values of the faith are evident in all aspects of the environment, from the welcome we were offered when we arrived; to the thoughtful refreshments and generosity of our hosts; to the openness of the staff and parents towards us; to their pride not only in their school but in the Mandir; to the respect and love shown to individual children - and it was clear that Mr Raja is an exemplary role model for a Head and knows all the children by name. Most important was the atmosphere of the school which appeared to be calm and business like. The values of the school are evident in all the classrooms, and moral codes are written and placed around classrooms.

Yellow Hat (significant positive features)

The above comments show the positive aspects of this environment. Another positive aspect is the performing arts aspect of the curriculum. All children attend yoga, encouraging a disciplined body and mind. Children are allowed to choose which traditional instrument they wish to study, and traditional dance is also featured. The quality of the art displayed everywhere is beautifully sensitive and seems to reflect many aspects of the ethos of the place. The academic standards achieved by the pupils are clearly high, as is their articulate and appropriate use of language to express their thoughts and ideas. A recent formal inspection visit has commented upon the obvious links between the children's achievements and the thinking skills programme.

Black Hat (potential negative features)

No outstanding negative features within the implementation of the school's cognitive curriculum were detected. At the moment the school is successfully offering a wide range of broader curriculum activities by extending the length of the school day. This means that the time available for formal training in thinking skills is often at a premium. This is currently being overcome by fairly informal communication and interactions between the members of a highly committed staff. It is important, however, not to let slip regular formal opportunities for sharing examples of good practice and skills development.

Green Hat (possible ways forward)

Monitoring the academic self-esteem of the older Prep School pupils by means of an instrument such as the Myself-As-Learner Scale (MALS) would provide additional evidence as to the effects of the cognitive education programme. The natural next step in the school's development programme is Costa's 'Habits of Mind', which will fit very well with the school's philosophy and values system. The Prep School itself can certainly stand as a beacon to other schools elsewhere as exemplifying excellent cognitive practice.

Blue Hat (overall impressions)

The Swaminarayan Preparatory School clearly meets all the criteria set by the University of Exeter's Cognitive Education Centre for the recognition as a 'Thinking School'. It stands as an outstanding example of excellent practice in this domain.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Burden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Robert" and the last name "Burden" clearly distinguishable.

Robert Burden MA PhD, Dip Ed Psych, FBPsS Emeritus Professor Applied Educational Psychology