

Report by Dr Dave Walters on the application of Meon Junior School to be accredited as an Exeter Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.

Starting point: the school context

Meon Junior School (MJS) is a popular and successful larger than average primary school, and part of a family of 3 schools (1 primary and 2 infant) situated within the larger Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT), comprised of 16 schools (10 primary and 6 secondary). 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. MJS's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research and embraces knowledge / skills, deliberate practice and learning habits, memory and schema development, and thinking tools. Together this acts 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 MJS. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and there are strong links with support agencies like CAMHS. The proportion of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium support is around the national average and pupils enter MJS with high starting points. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2017/2018 with the whole school introduction of Thinking Maps. Since then, MJS has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.²

¹ School's website

² Google Drive evidence

MJS has a highly effective and well led Drive Team currently 11 in number and with representatives from the upper school, lower school and support staff. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support provided by the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and the designated Governor thinking lead. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

Pupils at MJS have an history of high achievement and so the school has an enviable reputation in this regard. 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.⁴

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Anna Judd (Thinking Skills Coordinator/Project Leader) 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 2017/2018 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 digital links, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. This structure is consistently applied across the TSAT family of schools and is a particular strength, providing consistency without undermining the specific contexts of the individual schools. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall development structure referencing six core elements: Thinking Skills, Visual Mapping, Collaborative Networking, Dispositional Development, Environmental Structure, and Reflective Questioning. In addition, the school's thinking approach is illustrated by thinking pathways that outline how specific tools map onto key thinking processes. Within each of these domains there is ample explanatory information and exemplar materials linked to the school's curriculum policy and development planning.

³ Ibid

⁴ School's website

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

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

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through the newsletter, presentations, school website, homework space, parents' evenings, and online platforms. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning at home.⁶

MJS has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus in order to clarify areas of uncertainty. The 'M3' family of schools is a good example of how to secure continuity and progression for children as they move from infant to primary provision. In addition, TSAT provides a high-quality extension to this and further strengthens the Thinking Schools focus, as does the Portsmouth Primary Thinking Hub. This high-quality ethos and culture is not confined to formal partnership however, and MJS works in close collaboration with other schools on a more informal basis. Through its connections with these stakeholders, MJS 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 via assemblies, improvement planning, self-evaluation processes, Governor visits, communications with parents, Academy Advisory Board feedback and classroom/whole school displays.⁷

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The headteacher 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 is evidenced in school improvement planning

⁵ Google drive evidence

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

documentations, termly management timeline schedules, school prospectus and also Governors visit feedback. This whole school commitment has galvanised MPS's development.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 to bring learning to life. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education, particularly through school visits where thinking skills are seen in action. Governor visits have a clear purpose, identify key questions, allow narrative feedback, and suggest future action. This stands as a model of good practice. Feedback indicates a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.⁹

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 action 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 MJS 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 and questioning for enquiry.¹²

There is an organic Thinking Action Plan by which the agreed cognitive tools, strategies and resources are being implemented and taught across the school. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational, designed to empower children to

⁸ Ibid and school's website

⁹ Google drive evidence

¹⁰ Google drive evidence and school website

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

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 MJS. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple' 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 that all pupils are capable of making progress and 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 ongoing CPD which has the core elements of Thinking Maps, neuroscience, neuroplasticity, Growth Mindset, metacognition, memory and schema development, Habits of Mind, motivation, feedback and deliberate practice/Thinking Routines as its foundation. This sound research evidence base has allowed learning and teaching to move forward with purpose and coherence. The emphasis placed on the learning environment is also clearly illustrated in the evidence provided by the school. These elements, combined with MJS'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

Recent learning and teaching developments include deliberate practice via Thinking Routines and a focus on memory/retrieval practice. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are not only nurtured but are also allowed 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

¹³ Reflective proforma and Google drive evidence

¹⁴ Google drive evidence

¹⁵ Google drive evidence

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. MJS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching, and the introduction of deliberate practice/Thinking Routines has been carefully embedded within lessons to encourage children to increasingly move out of their learning comfort zone. This is an interesting area for continued development, perhaps through formalising some of the successful routines into self-regulatory strategies for moving out of a 'I am stuck' moment.¹⁶

Training

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological well-being. The highly trained Drive Team has undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.¹⁷ There is an ongoing 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 cycle of lesson study in place that centres on the consistent use of Thinking Maps, Habits of Mind and more recently Thinking Routines. This dovetails well with the overarching 'Six Starting Points' and the 'Thinking Pathways' integral to the TSAT vision and model. 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 together and to provide mutual support through the development of thinking generally and also through subject contexts. 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 more of a practitioner research approach to data collection, analysis and application and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect on this aspect.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Reflective proforma and Google drive evidence

¹⁸ Ibid

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 MALS, complimented by internal ongoing practical surveys and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils. Assessments, including attendance and behaviour, indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. A future development area may well include the use of baseline and subsequent growth indicators via both quantitative and qualitative data sources. MJS demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. MJS 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 staff, pupils and parents 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 results in Reading, Writing and Mathematics for 2020/21 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

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,

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Reflective Pro-forma

²¹ Google drive evidence

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 foster a 'researching professional' culture. The SPARE model can be easily aligned to the Ofsted curriculum focus on Intent, Implementation, and Impact areas. 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'.

Ownership

There is no doubt that MJS 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 expanded their repertoire of cognitive pedagogy and demonstrate a wide range of practice geared towards the development of thinking. 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 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. MPS is a fine example of educational creativity where cognitive tools, strategies and resources are adapted to meet the specific needs of the entire learning community.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that MJS 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 October 2024.

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, deliberate practice routines, 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 (ideal 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.

- Move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. Shift 1 is to move from 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 this at all levels of leadership and classroom practice.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of MJS. 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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