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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by The Charles Dickens School for the purpose of accreditation as a Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.**

### **Starting point: the school context**

The Charles Dickens School (CDS) is a popular and successful medium sized (1000 students on roll) 11-16 mixed secondary school, and part of the Barton Court Academy Trust (BCAT), comprised of 3 secondary schools. CDS has higher than national levels of deprivation with 50% of students being eligible for Pupil Premium. Currently, the school's Ofsted status is 'Requires Improvement' having previously been 'Inadequate' and student achievement has been low historically. Despite these significant challenges, CDS is on an upward developmental trajectory with a clear mission to develop responsible lifelong learners. This mission is built on 4 pillars: compassion, aspiration, resilience and enthusiasm. The overarching ethos is one of care, compassion and high expectations dedicated to the holistic development of every student as lifelong learners, equipped for the challenges ahead. This commitment to securing high achievement for all students has been formally recognised by the Pride in Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Award. In addition, CDS has also recently been recognised for its high-quality mentoring of Initial Teacher Training trainees, gaining the Canterbury Christ Church University Mentor Award. CDS's curriculum is clearly mapped around giving all students autonomy over their studies together with ownership for their learning. By doing so, there is an explicit focus on the development of thinking. Specifically, this involves a clear integration of 8 elements:

- Thinking Maps
- Thinking Hats
- Habits of Mind
- Thinkers Keys

- CoRT Thinking
- Philosophy for Children
- Higher Order Questioning (based on Bloom's Taxonomy)
- Thinking Routines

CDS keeps abreast of research and evidence and this acts to operationalise the school's mission in a coherent and informed manner.<sup>1</sup>

Student progression through phases has high priority at CDS. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and there are strong support structures in place embracing aspects such as Autism Spectrum Condition, Dyslexia and Processing, Sensory Circuits, Social, Emotional and Mental Health Wellbeing, Speech, Language and Communication. In addition to this provision, CDS has a rich extra-curricular offering designed to build children's cultural capital.<sup>2</sup> Achievement continues to rise across the school with behaviour, progress and attainment all showing improvement over time. The school is very astute in attributing this impressive trend to a rich blend of educational provision whilst recognising the contribution of its whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. Teaching and Learning data also shows year-on improvements and this aligns well to students' overall development. This would strongly suggest that CDS is an attractive place for children to learn.<sup>3</sup> The school's Thinking School journey started four years ago and was based on the firm foundations of significant developments in the area of student attitudes and behaviour. Since then, CDS has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.<sup>4</sup>

CDS has a highly effective and well led staff Drive Team supplemented by an inclusive Student Drive Team. Both teams have been in place for over five years. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full and inspirational support provided by the Executive Headteacher and Headteacher. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> School's Website and Reflective Proforma

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Reflective Proforma and Digital Portfolio

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Reflective Proforma and School's Website

## **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Warren Smith and Alastair Weller (Headteacher of CDS, Thinking Skills Coordinator respectively) evidencing the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its Thinking School origin, when the focus moved towards embedding metacognitive strategies for learning, enhancing consistency, reducing cognitive load and improving pupils' ownership of their learning.<sup>6</sup> The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and captured clearly in a digital portfolio.<sup>7</sup> The evidence on the school's website is evidence based and rich in resources. Within each of the metacognitive domains there is ample explanatory information and exemplar materials linked to the school's curriculum policy and development planning.

## **Thinking School Ethos and Culture**

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of CDS. Curriculum policy information and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. This has a judicious blend of metacognitive elements and wider curriculum disciplines. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.<sup>8</sup>

The school provides parents with rich, clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through the newsletter, presentations, school website and parents' evenings. Parents also receive termly Knowledge Organisers outlining the knowledge students need to retain together with guidance on metacognitive strategies to support thinking and learning. Excellent displays around the school further convey CDS's thinking approaches to parents, visitors, and school community in a visual and interactive way. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning at home.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reflective Proforma

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

CDS has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus in order to further disseminate and embed a thinking culture. The BCAT is a good example of how to secure a common metacognitive ethos whilst retaining school individuality. CDS has a firm commitment to raising aspirations through cultural capital in order to develop social mobility and the inclusive ethos of the school, together with its Cultural Capital Programme, is at the heart of this. Through its connections with a range of stakeholders, CDS 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 excellent visual displays across the whole school such that there is a real sense of CDS having a real thinking environment and culture.<sup>10</sup>

### **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. This whole school commitment has galvanised CDS's development.<sup>11</sup>

The Governing Body explicitly supports the thinking ethos in full and demonstrates a good understanding of how this approach enables children to think through their curriculum in order to bring learning to life. This is achieved through actively underpinning CDS's curriculum intent and implementation. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education, particularly through dedicated Thinking School agenda items.<sup>12</sup>

The Drive Team is comprised of a rich blend of staff and is extremely well structured and led. The Drive Team Lead has high status and Thinking Schools developments are core to their job description and responsibilities are distributed well. The Student Drive team is equally effective and has a clear remit so that the student voice is an integral part of the school's development. As a result of this combined leadership approach, the Drive Teams are highly qualified and able to deliver the highest standards of training, support, mentoring and

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<sup>10</sup> Reflective Proforma, Digital Portfolio and School's Website

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

coaching. Collectively, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.<sup>13</sup>

There is ample evidence to indicate that CDS is receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for over four 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.<sup>14</sup> An impressive range of cognitive approaches have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning visual tools, thinking dispositions, reflective tools (Thinking Hats, Thinking Keys and Frames of Reference), and memory tools.<sup>15</sup>

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 progressively take ownership of their cognitive development. The overarching focus is clearly geared towards transforming the life chances of all students.<sup>16</sup> Plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development in this respect.

## **Learning and Teaching**

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of CDS. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. In this regard, the Drive Team takes a collaborative approach to leading developments and there is an underlying focus on what works best, for whom and how. This, aligned to excellent communication, ensures that good practice is shared judiciously with all staff to develop their classroom impact. There is a universal staff belief that all students 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.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Reflective Proforma, School's Website and Digital Portfolio

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by the innovative CDS Teaching Taxonomy and high-quality ongoing CPD. This extensive CPD provision is focused and is built upon firm metacognitive foundations. Specifically, this includes thinking tools and dispositional development, together with CPD relating to Teach Like a Champion, Retrieval and Retention, and Cognitive Load. 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 CDS'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. Weekly briefings, led by the Executive Headteacher and Headteacher, serve to celebrate Thinking School approaches and weekly Friday Showcase events combine to further highlight the effective use of Thinking School elements.<sup>18</sup>

Recent learning and teaching developments include memory training. This has a comprehensive and thorough coverage of key memory elements such as retrieval, spaced / distributed practice, interleaving, dual coding, concrete examples and elaboration. The aim is to reduce students' cognitive overload in order to free up capacity for higher order thinking. Higher order thinking qualities are nurtured in a way that allows wider opportunities to flourish. The highly effective use of displays enriches the learning environment by encouraging a common language for learning and fostering self-regulation of thinking and learning. This is another example of how CDS has established cognitive education as an integral part of the learning culture. Of particular note is the interactive quality of displays and resources 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, resources, and tools to aid consistency, recognition, and application of Thinking Skills. CDS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the current focus on developing consistency across the school reflects an unswerving commitment to carefully embed cognitive approaches within lessons to encourage children to increasingly move out of their learning comfort zone. This may provide an interesting area for continued development, perhaps through formalising some of the successful tools and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

dispositional approaches to embrace thinking routines into self-regulatory strategies for moving out of a 'I am stuck' moment.<sup>19</sup>

## **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.<sup>20</sup> 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 formative cycle of lesson study in place with a clear remit and focus. The recent focus has been on helping students record their learning in order to support retention and retrieval over an extended time frame. A subsequent focus on Thinking Routines has also been formatively designed and has impacted positively on students in terms of improved levels of confidence, engagement and understanding. The CDS training model has created a very supportive lesson study climate that has undoubtedly fostered creative and innovative practice. 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, school environment 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, training would benefit from further developing a practitioner research approach to data collection, analysis and application and the Drive Team are well placed to lead on this aspect in this respect. Mapping the Ofsted curriculum focus of Intent, Implementation and Impact onto the SPARE model of evaluative research would be a good way of driving this as the Planning, Action and Reaction/Results match directly. It would therefore extend the Ofsted model by taking the Setting into consideration and also adding

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Reflective proforma, School's Website and Digital Portfolio

Evaluation in order to set out the next steps. CDS is well placed to adopt this approach as it would extend current practice further towards enabling staff to develop as reflective, researching practitioners.<sup>21</sup>

### **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. AfL is well established and aligned to the CDS Teaching Taxonomy and the use of thinking tools. The CDS Teaching and Learning Survey is used formatively to aid reflection on the school's four-year journey to accreditation and acts as a feedforward to drive further developments. The overall picture is extremely positive and reflects an equally positive student profile gleaned via other indicators. The student voice is very much a part of CDS's culture and is intrinsic to securing the holistic learning gains of all students. Thinking tools are used to structure self-assessment, and this further illustrates that CDS has embedded a whole school thinking approach. Assessments, including attendance, behaviour, progress and attainment indicate high holistic student development. CDS 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.<sup>22</sup>

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 student progress.<sup>23</sup> There is qualitative data about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for students and are associated with academic outcomes and improved motivation. The evidence provided indicates impressive achievement growth.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive achievement trend together with dispositional and psychological wellbeing growth.<sup>24</sup>

### **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. The SPARE model can be easily aligned to the Ofsted curriculum focus on Intent, Implementation and Impact areas together with the school's development plan structure. 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. A wide range of mechanisms are used to gain reflective feedback from staff and students. The innovative CDS Teaching Taxonomy is a model of excellent leadership and teaching practice, serving to integrate learning, teaching, assessment, evaluation, and metacognitive development. CDS has a real thinking culture across the school. There is a genuine feel that 'this is the way we do things around here'.

### **Ownership**

There is no doubt that CDS 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 committed to distilling and integrating 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. Inclusion is a high priority for the school, and it leaves no stone

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

unturned. The focus on social, emotional, psychological, sensory, and physical dimensions is testimony to this. Through the careful and progressive introduction of cognitive tools and CPD geared towards developing teachers as 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. CDS is an inclusive, caring, and inspirational organisation. The school stands as a model of excellent practice for holistic educational provision geared toward the development of lifelong learners. It's long and hard development journey stands as an example of organisational resilience, vision and belief in achievement for all.

## **Conclusion**

The wide range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that CDS meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School and demonstrates an unswerving commitment to the continued development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until September 2025.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base 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 and possibly inform a development workshop to further aid action planning. This might include:

- Further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best, for whom and how, 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, assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This would benefit from an overview for how these elements are integrated and could build on the CDS's Teaching Taxonomy model already in place and act as a means of providing a concise overview. Thinking Schools@Exeter is well placed to support this via a bespoke workshop.
- Consider further focusing lesson observations on 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.
- 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.
- Further develop evaluative research to continue the development of staff as researching professionals. To gain accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School (a suggested next step), 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 and could easily be applied to the Intent, Implementation and Impact approach to curriculum development given the alignment of PAR to Intent, Implementation and Impact. The addition of the Setting (S) and Evaluation (E) would enhance current practice without having to re-invent it.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of CDS. 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. CDS is well placed to be a centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking and radiate best practice out to infant, primary and secondary schools in the Trust and beyond. The pursuit of Advanced Accreditation would support this vision.



**Dr Dave Walters**

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

**September 2022**