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

**Starting point: the school context**

The Mountain Cambridge School (MCS) is a popular and highly successful small school comprised of three schools within the MCS banner. Together, they provide a rich 'all-through' educational experience for approximately 350 children between the ages of 3 and 18. 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. Specifically, 6 core values guide the school's development, namely:

- Hard work
- Honesty
- Respect
- Discipline
- Trust
- Enthusiasm

Within this lies a clear ethos of 'I do. I understand.' 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. There is a palpable 'Culture of Thinking', 'Culture of Excellence', 'Culture of Discipline', and 'Culture of Care'. MCS's Thinking School journey started in 2010 and gained impetus in 2013 when the school aligned its development with Thinking Schools South Africa (TSSA). The Drive Team was established in 2015 and is still

headed by the inspirational Executive Headteacher. Other Drive Team members include Deputy Headteachers, middle Leaders, teachers, and a specific dedicated Accreditation Co-ordinator. As a result of this rich blend of staff, the 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 the International Cambridge Curriculum and associated assessments. Of particular note, is the curriculum focus on pupil-centred development as this fits exceptionally well with the philosophy of being a Thinking School. MCS is research-informed, and this embraces knowledge / skills, Thinking Routines (and associated Growth Mindset), Habits of Mind, Bloom's Taxonomy, Thinking Maps and Thinking Hats. Together this acts to 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.<sup>1</sup>

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at MCS. Since beginning its Thinking School Journey in 2013, MCS 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 to 'develop and deeply embed thinking tools into our school life and curriculum' is a reality. This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster deep thinking for all pupils.<sup>2</sup>

Pupils at MCS have an history of excellent pupil achievement and consistently achieves above world averages (Cambridge International Curriculum and Assessments). 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 MCS 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

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<sup>1</sup> Reflective Proforma and Evidence Platform

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff, and the community. MCS has gained the high accolade of Eco School Platinum status and as such clearly takes its environmental role very seriously.<sup>3</sup>

### **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Carolina van Heerden (Executive Headteacher) 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 2013 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 exceptional and is a model of excellent practice. MCS maintains a 'golden thread' throughout the holistic educational process and has a particular focus on 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.

### **Thinking School Ethos and Culture**

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of MCS. 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.<sup>4</sup>

MCS has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. The 3-way conference led by pupils is based on their reflections regarding strengths and weaknesses in their learning such that it is subsequently shared with teachers and parents. This ensures that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Indeed, parents are invited to workshops to share

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<sup>3</sup> School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Evidence Platform

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

in their children's thinking successes. They also get an opportunity to actually see their child's work via open mornings, book look sessions, topic events and parents' evenings. The high premium placed on awards, celebration opportunities and displays further strengthen the Thinking School ethos and culture. The Primary School Awe and Wonderment Evening, where Thinking Tools are showcased, is a wonderful example of embedding a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. As a consequence of these actions, the whole learning community is equipped to support children's learning.<sup>5</sup>

MCS has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus. This outstanding collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout the partner schools and also more widely. Through its connections with these stakeholders, MCS 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **Senior Management and Whole School Commitment**

The Executive 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 the strong senior leadership structure comprised of the Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and Thinking Schools Co-ordinator stands as a model of excellent practice. The collaborative and integrated leadership model includes the Thinking Drivers who provide exemplary support and feedback based on a comprehensive audit of the key accreditation elements.<sup>7</sup>

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 Executive Headteacher being a core member of the Board. This stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

indicates a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.<sup>8</sup>

The Thinking 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 Learner Thinking Drivers (pupil Drive Team) meet bi-weekly and champion the school's thinking culture via interactive assemblies, 'thinking boards' and mentoring (in the form of an innovative 'buddy system'). The integral and active involvement of the pupils 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.<sup>9</sup>

There is ample evidence to indicate that MCS is receptive to change and innovation. The school's Thinking Brochure provides the wider 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 a decade 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 thinking routines.<sup>11</sup>

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 MCS's 'Big Hairy Audacious Goals' (BHAG) development framework for continuous whole school improvement. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational and designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development.<sup>12</sup> Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Reflective Proforma School Website and Evidence Platform

## **Learning and Teaching**

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of MCS 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, Thinking Maps are fully embedded including the highly effective application of the Frame of Reference. Further, Thinking Hats are used for reflection throughout the school. Of particular note is the innovative customisation of thinking tools. For example, the school has given names / characters to Thinking Hats so that pupils can more readily engage with them. Excellent support and resources ensure that staff and pupils develop thinking approaches effectively. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple and clear' approach. Termly ESTEAM projects, based on Engineering, Science, Technology, English, Art, and Mathematics, make full use of thinking tools in order to design projects based on deep thinking and wide application of knowledge. MCS places a high premium on the mental health of the whole learning community. 'Thinking Solution Meetings' provide valuable feedback to parents regarding pupil progress and emotional wellbeing. There is ample provision for pupils who need support, and 'Tea with the Principal' is based on Habits of Mind. The Thinking Drive Team meetings and Learner 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 universal staff belief in the importance of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking and that all pupils 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.<sup>13</sup>

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the school's 6 core values as its foundation. Specific research-informed elements include Thinking Maps, Thinking Hats, Habits of Mind and Thinking Routines. 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

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

provided by the school. These elements, combined with MCS'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.<sup>14</sup>

The school has heavily invested in character development and children receive recognition such as 'The Feather in the Cap Award' 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. The 'Wonder Wall' is an excellent example in this regard. 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. MCS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of elements such as Growth Mindset has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.<sup>15</sup>

## **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.<sup>16</sup> 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 a cycle of lesson study in place that centres on core elements. The Innovative Hub Meetings along with Staff Champions, provide a rich source of professional dialogue based on thinking reflections. The leadership of the school is committed to creating and maintaining world-class teachers. Indeed, the Executive Headteacher is actively involved in writing for publications such as the

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<sup>14</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Reflective Proforma, School Website and Evidence Platform

Cambridge Outlook journal. Staff routinely take part in TSSA and Association of Cambridge Education in Southern Africa (ACESA) workshops and roadshows in order to maintain a healthy external freshness to staff training. It is clear that staff model life-long learning and 'Growth Mindset'. The staff Thinking Handbook is aligned to an excellent coaching and mentoring programme. This is highly innovative and takes a holistic approach embracing peer modelling, peer guidance, peer support and peer review. Of particular note is the full inclusion of auxiliary staff in Thinking Schools training. 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 the development of thinking generally and also through particular foci such as Assessment for Learning. 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.<sup>17</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. These include internal ongoing practical surveys and judgements that inform next stages in the learning of pupils. The innovative 3-way conference is led by pupils and based on their reflections regarding strengths and weaknesses in their learning. Outcomes are then shared with teachers and parents. This is another example of exemplary practice. Assessments, including attendance and behaviour, indicate high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. MCS 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

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

by the work of Ron Ritchhart (Harvard University) in his book 'Making Thinking Visible' may also provide further avenues for assessment development. Outcomes MCS are consistently above world averages (International Cambridge Curriculum and Assessment) indicating that pupils 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. MCS demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of good practice. MCS 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>18</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 pupil progress.<sup>19</sup> There is qualitative data from staff, pupils, parents and Directors about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils and are associated with high academic outcomes and improved motivation.

The excellent pupil achievement 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.<sup>20</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. MCS makes excellent use of an Annual Staff Reflection Form in order to capture developmental impact via a one-to-one meeting with a Deputy Principal. Other evaluative processes include curriculum reviews, class visits, book 'controls', weekly team action plan meetings, moderation of assessments, and staff reflections / appraisals. Pupils are integral to the evaluative process via the innovative 3-way conference

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Evidence Platform

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

system together with pupil reflections. 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 pupil voice features prominently. 'Tea with the Principal' makes excellent use of thinking tools to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of taking a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. There is a clear evaluative focus on developing the transfer of thinking skills and strategies and the collaborative nature of learning walks is a model of excellent practice. It is clear that MCS 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 MCS 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 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 'I do. I understand' ethos is alive throughout the school and has done much to ensure that learning is an active process. Teachers, pupils, 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 MCS has moved from being an educational process to being an exemplary pedagogical culture such that the school stands as a beacon of meta-cognitive excellence.

MCS is a truly inspirational 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 collaboration are exceptional. MCS places a high premium on continuous whole school development and innovation. This places MCS at the cutting edge of educational provision. 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 The Mountain Cambridge School 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 November 2025.

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.
- 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.

- MCS 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.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of MCS. 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**

**November 2022**