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**Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by Stretford High School 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.**

Stretford High School (SHS) is a popular and highly successful coeducational LA funded Trafford secondary school with 954 students ages 11-16 on roll. Although SHS has larger than national average levels of deprivation, progress is excellent and students leave the school with attainment figures that are significantly above national benchmarks. The school has a clear vision outlining its beliefs and how to achieve them. The overarching focus is on learning and growing as a collaborative community. As such, the vision is straightforward and embraces Community, Aspiration, Resilience and Education (CARE). SHS's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by an explicit focus on the development of thinking. Specifically, this involves a highly innovative overall framework comprised of Learning Journeys (individualised developmental pathways), Perkin's Quad (independent learning foci), Thinking Moves (common vocabulary) and Reflective Journals (self-regulatory monitoring and development). Meta-training for staff has been in place for over three years and it is clear that these elements are fully embedded throughout the school. These Thinking Skills are built on a clear and firm foundation of dispositional development and include elements such as curiosity, empathy, ambition, resilience, focus, good judgement, initiative, risk-taking, and flexibility of mind. New curriculum foci embrace these elements, and the highly innovative CARE programme is a good example of this. Here, students are encouraged to take their learning beyond the constraints of the classroom through a contextual thematic approach rooted firmly in the community. The Student Council plays an active role in leading developments via delegated CARE foci responsibilities. Within the metacognitive domain, SHS clearly has a focus on wider dimensions. SHS keeps abreast of research and evidence and this acts to operationalise the school's mission in a coherent and informed manner. There is a clear and explicit recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing and academic achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Student progression through phases has high priority at SHS and the school is unwavering in its pursuit of exceptional educational provision for all students. It is clear that continuity and progression underpin these ambitious plans. Mental health and psychological wellbeing also have a high profile at the school and there are strong support structures in place. In addition to this provision, SHS has a rich extra-curricular offering designed to build children's cultural

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<sup>1</sup> School's Website, Reflective Pro-forma and Meta- Mirror

capital.<sup>2</sup> This would strongly suggest that SHS is an attractive place for children to learn.<sup>3</sup> The school began its Thinking School journey over three years ago when a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking was operationalised via an innovative process of meta-training. Since then, SHS has gone from strength to strength with its work surrounding metacognitive development and additional foci have been skilfully introduced and embedded.<sup>4</sup>

The School Council and Governors have been actively involved in shaping the values of SHS. Under the overarching banner of 'Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow', SHS's CARE provision captures and operationalises four key pillars. This values-based focus has done much to create a firm foundation for developing holistic lifelong learners. The school's values fully reflect the Thinking Schools approach and have family, respect, creativity, independence and drive at the core. This has created an ethos where children develop metacognitive skills in alignment with independence, self-regulation, perseverance and initiative. SHS has a highly effective and well led Drive Team. A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full and inspirational support provided by the Headteacher. In addition, the full inclusion of the student voice adds significant value to the learning environment. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.<sup>5</sup>

## **Evidence Base**

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Nicola Doward and Rowena Kidd (Headteacher and Thinking Skills Coordinator respectively) evidencing the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school had undertaken stemming back to its origin and also specifically since 2020/21 when the focus moved towards further embedding metacognitive strategies for learning.<sup>6</sup> The evidence for accreditation is skilfully woven into the reflective proforma and captured brilliantly on the school's evidence 'Meta-Mirror' (Digital Portfolio).<sup>7</sup> This structure is a model of excellent practice. The evidence on the school's website includes an overall curriculum development structure together with a separate (but aligned) Thinking Curriculum referencing core elements. In addition, the school's thinking approach is illustrated by a wealth of related resources 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> School's Website and Meta-Mirror

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

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

<sup>6</sup> Reflective Proforma

<sup>7</sup> School's Website

<sup>8</sup> Meta-Mirror and School's Website

## **Thinking School Ethos and Culture**

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of SHS. 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. This has a rich blend of elements including Learning Journeys, Perkin's Quad, Thinking Moves, Thinking Frames and Reflective Journals. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.<sup>9</sup>

The school provides parents with clear and helpful information relating to the thinking curriculum through documentation, presentations, school website, and parents' evenings. Of particular note is the public emphasis placed by the Headteacher on holistic lifelong learning. This has done much to ensure that metacognitive developments are fully embraced by the parent community. Resources for parents are excellent. SHS has a dedicated Thinking Schools drop-down menu on its website outlining the context and also how metacognitive approaches are applied and integrated. Reflective Journals are shared with parents as are Curriculum Booklets and CARE Curriculum Booklets. Students work in partnership with parents and the community in order to undertake and complete extended pieces of work and this provision is a wonderful example of collaborative learning. As a consequence of these actions, parents are well equipped to support their children's learning fully.<sup>10</sup>

SHS continues to forge partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus and is actively seeking to extend this via networking with like-minded schools. SHS is a core member of the Thinking Schools Network and also a key organisation in the Schools Partnership Programme. In relation to the latter, Extended Deep Dive events provide an excellent vehicle for sharing best practice. The school has extended its partnerships over time and has over 17 formally recognised partnerships. Various open days are used to great effect in order to illustrate the school's metacognitive pedagogy widely and the school continues to extend its reach to include dissemination of metacognitive approaches. Displays and signage around the school are of exceptional quality and provide a rich source of celebratory illustration for Thinking Schools and tools. Governors provide exemplary support and are extremely supportive of Thinking Schools developments. Through its connections with these stakeholders, SHS conveys a positive, caring and creative atmosphere, demonstrating that careful thought has been put into its organisational structure and visual presentation. Indeed, feedback is wonderfully positive and indicates extremely high satisfaction in relation to the holistic qualities of SHS students.<sup>11</sup>

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

The Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher are high profile and give 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 documentations, development reports, newsletters, school communications, school

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<sup>9</sup> Reflective Proforma, Meta-Mirror and School's Website

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

website, parent presentations and meeting agendas/minutes. This whole school commitment has galvanised SHS's development.<sup>12</sup>

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 in order to bring learning to life. Governors are kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education, particularly through implementation monitoring activities. Governor partnership with the Drive team secures their active and informed role. Feedback indicates that children not only develop their learning significantly, but also their capacity to think independently and develop their opinions leading to positive mental health and wellbeing. This is an impressive positive shift in students' holistic educational growth springing from SHS's whole school development as a Thinking School.<sup>13</sup>

The Drive Team has evolved significantly over the years and includes a rich blend of staff. The full integration of the student body in the leadership of school developments is a model of exceptional leadership practice. This structure, together with the excellent leadership of the Drive Team Lead / Deputy Headteacher, has had a significant influence on the school's positive development as a Thinking School. Of particular note is the high active profile of the *entire* Drive Team. Staff lead on training activities and Governors are fully involved, including research and development elements. The clear distributed responsibilities have secured coherence and stands as a model for other schools to emulate. 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>14</sup>

There is ample evidence to indicate that SHS is receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for many 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>15</sup> An impressive range of cognitive approaches have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning thinking tools, thinking dispositions, reflective tools and self-regulatory elements.<sup>16</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. Plans clearly set out the developmental agenda with the overarching current focus being to further develop aspirational lifelong learners.<sup>17</sup> Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Meta-Mirror

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

## Learning and Teaching

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of SHS. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that lessons include thinking skills. This is largely due to a 'keep it simple and focussed' approach. In this regard, developments 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 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>18</sup>

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by ongoing CPD which has the core elements of metacognition and learning science 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 SHS'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. The CARE Programme is just one of many examples of how this is an integral part of the educational provision at SHS.<sup>19</sup>

SHS has worked hard to develop a common thinking language that is appropriate to both age and stage. Students are routinely engaged in metacognitive talk. The student voice is integral to every stage of school development, and this serves to embed the Thinking School approach across the school. The aim is to develop a learning approach where higher order thinking qualities are not only nurtured but in a way that allows wider opportunities to flourish. The extended curriculum is exceptional and promotes, challenge, high aspiration and self-regulatory thinking. 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 and thinking tools 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. SHS has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the current focus on developing aspirational independent learners reflects an unswerving commitment to carefully embed metacognitive approaches within lessons to encourage children to increasingly move out of their learning comfort zone.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

## **Training**

The Drive Team are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of metacognitive 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>21</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. All staff have been involved in a three-year metacognition training programme spanning Learning Journeys, Journaling, Thinking Frames, Thinking Moves and Perkin's Quad. This is wonderfully supported by an excellent toolkit of resources that supports high-quality professional growth. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that has evolved over time. This makes excellent use of Perkin's Quad and is aligned to a clear and progressive development focus relating to reflection. The Talk for Teaching (T4T) cycle is brilliantly set out and supported. This recent focus has been undertaken to great effect in terms of encouraging greater pedagogic impact. The use of Thinking Moves and Reflective Journals continue to be an area of ongoing development, and this too shows great impact. SHS places a high premium on professional reflection and this dovetails well with the Thinking Curriculum. The peer observation 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 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 further developing 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. This would fit well with the focus on becoming a reflective practitioner. Staff feedback in relation to training is extremely positive and indicates clear improvements to learning and teaching.<sup>22</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. The aim is to enable students to assess themselves as learners. The Reflective Journals feeds nicely into both assessment and evaluation processes and serve to enhance and extend thinking skills. Indeed, the use of Reflective Journals is exemplary and outcome/impact indicators point to increased levels of student self-efficacy, self-motivation and autonomy. The use staff/student/parent surveys provides an additional lens. This continues to be an ongoing and formative process for school development along with a variety of other sources of assessment. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. SHS demonstrates excellent use of qualitative indicators, particularly classroom artefacts and again this is an example of

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<sup>21</sup> Meta-Mirror, Reflective proforma and School's Website

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

excellent practice. Subject specific outcomes and progress assessments align well with this and serve as a model of excellent multi-method assessment practice. Indeed, progress and attendance has improved significantly and place the school in a very strong position. This is even more impressive when children's initial starting points and national attendance concerns are taken into consideration. SHS 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>23</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>24</sup> There is qualitative data and quantitative data to support this indicating that 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. The school's own internal analysis and presentation of these outcomes reflect a positive achievement trend together with dispositional and psychological wellbeing growth. The use of a wide range of child-centred indicators has ensured that students have a voice in this process. Indeed, an exceptionally high premium is placed on student voice across the school.<sup>25</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 students' meta-cognition and the transfer of skills, strategies and learning behaviours. All staff undertake self-evaluation routinely. SHS uses a Talk for Teaching process closely aligned to the SPARE model. This makes excellent use of the Perkin's Quad and there is a moderation cycle that runs twice per year. The clear and targeted focus on developing self-reflection is highly impactful. This is highly representative of the model of illuminative evaluation on which the Thinking School approach is based. The SHS/SPARE model would benefit from continued dissemination and alignment at all levels (from leadership to individual teachers) in order to further develop 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. Evaluation is based upon the implications of change and includes a judicious blend of approaches and dimensions. Personal reflections are highly effective in terms of feeding into the evaluative process and school development reports provide an excellent mechanism for gathering, analysing and summarising evaluations. The SPP process and links with high quality metacognitive consultancy organisations provide excellent quality assurance. Student, staff and parent feedback relating to Thinking Skills is placed at high premium and is a real evaluative strength. Students are integral to the evaluation process at SHS and regular reflection opportunities are provided. Again, this is a model of excellent

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

practice. SHS 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 absolutely no doubt that SHS 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. Collaboration is a high priority for the school, and it leaves no stone unturned. The focus on social, emotional, psychological, 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. The vision for ongoing change has been expertly developed and operationalised via a clear roadmap for delivery, agreed with a range of stakeholders. Progression processes are highly effective and visual displays exemplary. SHS is a true beacon of metacognitive excellence where the drive for holistic educational provision geared toward the development of lifelong-learners flourishes. The standards met under all criteria categories are exceptional and the school is poised to be a world-class educational establishment. As such, Advanced Thinking School accreditation is well within its grasp.

## **Conclusion**

The huge range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that SHS 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. It has been a privilege to undertake this evaluation. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until February 2027.

I would like to thank the school for the clear and judicious evidence base, expertly 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 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 develop lesson observations with a focus on key 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.
- Consider further developing the Thinking Schools menu on the school's website in order to capture the rich range of resources and developments.
- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments, in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of SHS. 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. SHS is well placed to be a Gold Standard centre of excellence for the teaching of thinking and radiate best practice out to a wider educational audience. The pursuit of Advanced Accreditation would support this vision.



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**On behalf of the University of Exeter, UK**

**February 2024**