

**Report by Dr Judith Kleine Staarman on the application of Maidstone Grammar School for Girls to be re-accredited as an Advanced Thinking School by Thinking Schools @Exeter, University of Exeter.**

**Evidence base**

The criteria for accreditation as an 'Advanced Thinking School' starts from the assumption that all criteria for the first level of accreditation by the University of Exeter's Cognitive Education Development Unit continue to be met within the ongoing practices of the community. The second level of evaluation further assumes that the original criteria for recognition as a 'Thinking School' have now become so embedded that staff and students have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of cognitive education and its impact on both their individual learning and its potential contribution to society. Much of the evidence referenced in this report reflects the significant and sustained progress the school has made in its on-going journey as thinking and learning community and follows on from the previous accreditation as an Advanced Accredited Thinking School in 2015.

The focus for this second level of evaluation turns towards the presentation of evidence as to how the school has moved forward in seeking to achieve those aims. Evidence has been sought on teaching (and support) staff's developing skills as practitioners; their impact on the overall development of the students beyond their technical skills in the use of the tools; and their continuing impact on the community of the whole school and beyond. Five key areas for accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School have been assessed: Dissemination of Practice; Evaluative Research; Professional Development; Differentiation; and Whole School Assessment.

The University of Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation as Advanced Thinking School from Maidstone Grammar School for girls in the form of a Google Drive,

extensively evidencing the continuing work the school is undertaking as an Advanced Thinking School. Evidence includes pupil's work, examples of displays and posters, examples of meeting minutes, research data and student videos, amongst other data. From the evidence provided, it is clear that the school exceeds the Level 1 Thinking School criteria, and the focus of this report will be on continued development of the school on the basis of the Level 2 criteria.

### **The school context**

Maidstone Grammar School for girls is a larger than average selective (grammar) school for girls aged 11-18 in Maidstone, Kent. The school was established in 1887<sup>1</sup> and while students are predominantly coming from a White British background, an increasing number of students come from a range of minority backgrounds<sup>1</sup>. In 2009, OFSTED judged the school as 'outstanding', with 'high academic standards' that help to develop 'confident and articulate individuals'. The teaching and curriculum is judged as outstanding and the leadership is seen as strong.<sup>2</sup> Maidstone Grammar School for Girls was first accredited as a Thinking School in 2012, after which Advanced Thinking School Accreditation followed in 2015. The aim for the school has been to further embed Thinking Tools throughout the school, focusing in particular on developing the schools holistic view on thinking. The school focuses on a range of Thinking Skills and uses a wide variety of Thinking Tools throughout the year groups, as evidenced by the proforma document provided by the school. The school ethos is underpinned by developing students as 'intellectually sharp, agile thinkers who can think creatively and understand the subtlety and nuance of language and argument' and who are 'able to draw upon learning experiences and strategies to help solve problems and questions that they do not automatically know the answers to'.<sup>3</sup> The school has continued to develop the Thinking School approach and the Thinking School ethos is very clearly displayed and explained on the school website and in the prospectus.

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<sup>1</sup> School Website and prospectus

<sup>2</sup> Ofsted Report May 2009

<sup>3</sup> School Website

## **Dissemination of practice**

For this area of accreditation, we assess the way in which the school can demonstrate evidence of sharing their Thinking Schools practice and experiences across subject areas with others. There is much evidence of sharing practice within the school, across subject areas, with all sections of staff participating in regular formal CPD and more informal staff training events. Departments within the school are invited to share their best practice with colleagues, for instance by sharing ways in which Assessment for Learning is used, or how particular thinking tools are used within a department. There is also evidence of outreach activities, in particular with Primary School students, who have attended Thinking Skills mornings, led by 6th Form students with assistance of the Drive Team. In these sessions, Primary pupils engage with a range of Thinking Skills within a number of subject domains. Video and written evidence of Primary pupils indicates their strong enthusiasm for these Thinking Skills mornings, while 6th Form students demonstrate excellent reflective thinking skills in their feedback video, indicating their own learning outcomes from the activities. In response to positive feedback from Primary teachers, the school has created a very helpful Primary Teacher's Guide to Thinking Skills, outlining a variety of Thinking Tools for the teachers and suggesting ways of integrating the tools in lessons and assessment.

The school has disseminated their expertise and experiences at the Thinking Schools International Conference, and have received colleagues from Oslo, Norway, to help them develop their Thinking School journey. In addition, visitors from a variety of countries have engaged in lesson observations and met with members of the drive team to discuss and experience the Thinking School ethos at Maidstone Grammar. Plans are being made to receive visitors from Sweden, following a visit from Zoe Harris and Louise Tucker in which information and guidance was being shared between Swedish and UK colleagues.

While it is clear that outreach activities are already taking place and collaborations with other schools are developing, the school seems more than ready to take on an even stronger leadership role in disseminating good practice and experiences in relation to Thinking Schools. The school may consider leading INSET days or Twilight sessions for other (local) schools or engage in school-wide research to help systematically evaluate and disseminate the impact of Thinking Skills on students' learning and well-being.

## **Evaluative research**

This area of evaluation is particularly concerned with the ways in which staff is seeking evidence of positive outcomes of the Thinking Schools approach and how this evidence is used to develop whole-school learning. Based on the evidence of Level 1 criteria, there is a continuing and wide-ranging programme of evaluation within the school, particularly through Drive Team meetings, department meetings and staff surveys. Evidence from Drive Team meeting minutes suggest that staff is engaged in classroom-based research about various approaches related to Thinking Skills and how these are used (or can be used) within the school. Results are reported back to the Drive Team and in whole school meetings. Evidence is presented that demonstrates the ongoing collection of data related to Thinking Skills across the school, in particular with respect to how well Thinking Skills are embedded within the school system and what the impact is on students and staff. An example of this would be the evaluation of marking codes for Habits of Mind, which were trialled and evaluated by members of the Drive Team. In addition, staff are continuously encouraged to engage in research projects and results of these are disseminated amongst colleagues and the Teaching Development Group. It is clear that there are effective strategies in place across subject areas that encourage and support evaluation and reflective practice of learning and teaching approaches and outcomes.

The Teaching Development Group acts as an intermediary group within the school, in which new ideas for teaching and learning are explored, researched and, if successful, fed back to the rest of staff in whole school meetings. A range of approaches and ideas have been discussed and evaluated, including Growth Mindset, EEF foundation research and Sutton Trust guidance. Furthermore, Thinking Skills are part of ongoing evaluations of student progress, continuous school improvement plans and student mentoring; providing further evidence of the ongoing evaluation of Thinking Skills approaches throughout the school. It is important to note in this respect, that students are also routinely consulted as part of ongoing evaluations and are involved in the evaluations, and evaluations are structured and undertaken with the help of the Thinking Tools that are used in the school.

An important factor within the continuous evaluation of the outcomes of Thinking Skills approaches is the evidence of the development of student resilience and self-reflection, as

well as a sense of shared responsibility towards one another, the community of the school and the wider community. This element is clearly evidenced in the documentation provided by the school, and it is evident that responsibility towards one-another and sense of community forms an important part of the school's ethos. There are numerous examples of ways in which students have engaged extremely positively with other students, with staff and with the wider community and the examples show students' (self) reflective skills, resilience, confidence and respect for others, amongst other positive attributes, and this is a particularly strong aspect of school life.

### **Professional development**

Evidence of professional development concerns two key issues: technical, in the practical application of a range of thinking tools; and qualitative, demonstrated by the quality of staff as mediators.

In terms of technical development, it is evidenced from the induction programme that new members of staff are routinely trained in Thinking Skills. Similarly, the NQT training programme includes not only a stand-alone session on Thinking Skills, but student thinking has been incorporated in many of the topics covered. Participating in staff observations is routine for not only NQTs but all staff, and the school's CPD programme includes topics around Thinking and Thinking Skills. It is important to note that the materials provided as evidence, focus not so much on the use of specific Thinking Tools, but provide a strong background and rationale for Thinking across subject areas, which demonstrates an excellent understanding and awareness of Thinking as a pedagogic strategy throughout the school.

There is strong evidence of the continued focus of staff on the development of their own knowledge and understanding of Thinking and Thinking Skills approaches in general, and Thinking Tools more specifically. Thinking Skills approaches are continuously evaluated throughout the school and staff is routinely asked to reflect on their use of Thinking Tools. This again provides strong evidence that the use of Thinking Skills and the language around Thinking is strongly embedded within the school, the teaching practice and its overall ethos and it is clear from the evidence provided that new staff is immediately made aware of this

ethos and practice. Importantly, staff are given the time and resources to train and to work with colleagues through cycles of lesson observations.

### **Differentiation**

This area of accreditation includes the value of thinking tools in the education of specific individuals and groups. This includes a sensitivity to the individual needs of all the children in lessons, and a focus on developing autonomy and individuality in students' approaches to problem-solving. The pro-forma mentions that many differentiation strategies go toward gifted and talented, yet there is much evidence of sensitivity to the individual needs of all students. A variety of Thinking Tools is used adaptively, to suit the abilities of different students, for instance, through the strategic use of Thinking Hats. Questioning strategies are used effectively to differentiate, for instance through the use of Q-Matrices, which enable students to ask and answer questions they would normally avoid, as well as help teachers to gain insight in prior knowledge of students. In KS4, Thinking Strategies such as Habits of Mind and Mindset are used to develop, analyse and evaluate students' personal learning targets and behaviour goals.

### **Whole School assessment**

This aspect of the accreditation relates to pupils' and teachers' reflections upon their own and others' and peer formative assessment procedures, as well as critical reflection on Thinking Tools. Evidence is sought for the reflective processes of staff on their own professional practice and development. As mentions under the header 'differentiation', students are encouraged to use Habits of Mind to develop and reflect on their own personal learning targets. The A-level Mindset used throughout the school, focuses specifically on developing student attitudes, dispositions and reflective practice towards their own learning, helping them to identify their own learning needs and dispositions. There is limited evidence of the ways in which students differentiate between learning strategies and assessment procedures and this would be an area to develop further in the school. Staff are encouraged to reflect on the use of Thinking Tools and strategies and evidence demonstrates continuous critical reflection on the implementations, use, and effectiveness of Thinking Tools. Annual departmental self-evaluation using aspects of Habits of Mind focuses on assessment, in addition to other criteria such as outcomes and student personal development. In addition,

as mentioned under the heading 'Evaluative Research' the Drive Team engages in ongoing critical reflection and evaluation of Thinking Tools and strategies used within the school, setting research targets for staff and reporting back to both teachers and senior management.

Overall, it is clear that there are continuous formal and informal critical evaluations of Thinking Skills, Approaches and Tools taking place throughout the school, which include a large variety of stakeholders. This is a clear indicator of the way in which a culture of thinking has developed within the school. While it is important to continue this process, the school might consider developing a systematic research study of Thinking Skills, involving teachers, students and external stakeholders.

### **Points for further consideration**

The submitted evidence has enabled the accreditor to identify the following areas for further consideration during the 3-year period of accreditation. Thinking Schools @Exeter would welcome your response to these points and whether they might provide the focus of the moderation and support visit from a member of our team at a time to be mutually agreed.

- Expansion of the outreach activities, focusing on the dissemination of best practice and CPD activities with other schools
- To provide a wider range of evidence of the opportunities for developing student voice and student contribution to evaluation.
- To consider how Thinking Skills can be systematically evaluated throughout the school, perhaps through a coordinated programme of school-based research.
- To consider how technology can help to develop Digital Thinking competencies across the school.

### **Outcome**

The substantive evidence provided by Maidstone Grammar School for Girls creates a very clear picture of a Thinking School in which Thinking Skills are at the heart of school life. It is

clear that Thinking Skills are fully and effectively integrated in both teaching and assessment, as well as in staff development and evaluations and a variety of tools are used very effectively to engage students in deep learning and to develop students' higher order thinking and questioning skills. The school has a very visible and strong ethos, in which students are encouraged to develop as articulate, critical, creative and reflective thinkers, and it is evident from the examples provided, that Thinking Skills approaches are central to student learning and development.

In conclusion, the application has provided compelling and comprehensive evidence for accreditation and I therefore recommend that accreditation as an Advanced Thinking School be awarded until October 2021. Congratulations to Maidstone Grammar School for Girls for an outstanding achievement!



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