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Report following the analysis and evaluation of evidence submitted by St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Blackbrook 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.

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Blackbrook (SMBB) is a popular and ambitious primary school with 410 pupils on roll (ages 3-11). The school holds the prestigious CAFOD 'LiveSimply Award' and is a 'PATHS' Model School. These achievements reflect SMBB's commitment to living simply, sustainability and solidarity. Further it reflects the school's unwavering commitment to the facilitation of self-control, emotional awareness and interpersonal problem-solving skills. The school is rightly proud of this. Indeed, SMBB 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. SMBB's vision is that every pupil be inquisitive and confident lifelong learners. This has explicit aims as the foundation and includes:

- Inclusion
- Understanding
- Independence
- Enjoyment
- Achievement
- Psychological wellbeing.

This permeates learning throughout the school (including professional learning). Reflection is held in high esteem and the school's vision is captured by the application of collaborative aspiration. Qualitative and quantitative elements align well, and the Pupil Voice thrives via an expertly led 'Attitudes to Learning' Drive Team. The Headteacher and her senior team are fully versed in terms of Thinking School developments and champion a whole school approach to the leadership and teaching of thinking. SMBB's curriculum is clearly mapped and underpinned by research that embraces the science of learning and metacognitive elements. The explicit integration of Thinking Frames, Higher-Order Questioning, Bloom's Taxonomy (via classroom Thinking Walls) and Growth Mindset reflects the school's wider understanding of the multi-faceted nature of developing a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. Indeed, the integration of metacognitive elements with social and emotional skills (via 'PATHS') together with Rosenshine's 10 Principles of Instruction is a wonderful example of this. There are five separate but integrated expertly led Drive Teams, each with a specific focus. This is unique and highly innovative. The composition of the Drive Teams is excellent and is expertly coordinated. Together, these elements act to operationalise

the school's vision and include the recognition of close links between emotional wellbeing, academic achievement, encouragement of ambition, curiosity, positivity, resilience and parental engagement.¹

Pupil progression through phases has high priority at SMBB. The school's Thinking School journey started in earnest in 2021/2022 when it pursued its Thinking School vision via high-quality training and consultancy. This has continued to intensify and developments have been rapid and impactful. A number of foci have been skilfully introduced. The inclusion of key foci is of particular note in terms of the school's ambition and drive. These include:

- High quality classroom talk
- Supporting pupils with independent reading and interpretation of texts
- Developing thinking skills
- Revising mathematical facts in order to aid calculation and problems solving.

This is illustrative of the school's commitment to foster creative deep thinking for all pupils.² A significant factor underpinning the high impact of the Drive Team is the full support of the Headteacher, Thinking Schools Coordinator/Assistant Headteacher, and Drive Team Leads. Active and committed Governor support is also prominent in the development process. These factors combine to create consistency of approaches via clear and collaborative leadership.³

SMBB is situated in a challenging context. The school faces high levels of deprivation and COVID has taken its toll on attendance rates. This has not phased SMBB and the school has risen brilliantly to the challenge of engaging parents in supporting their children's learning. SMBB 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 the school and not just the end result. Subject specific learning sits alongside wider dimensions such as the development of psychological wellbeing and dispositional growth. There is a clear belief in wider educational development as the core aim and the value of every contribution that services this. Underpinning this provision is a fully inclusive pastoral care provision embracing children, parents, staff and the community. This has the school's vision firmly at its core.⁴

Evidence Base

Thinking Schools @Exeter received the school's submission for accreditation from Julia Ashton (Headteacher) and Nicola Winders (Thinking School Co-ordinator/Assistant Headteacher) evidencing the history of the school's cognitive education development journey and the work that the school has undertaken stemming back to its origin and specifically since 2021 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 base, all of which are clearly linked to the 15 criteria and accreditation rubric. As such, there is a clear aim to make thinking and learning visible. The school has linked this well to its vision and curriculum intent.

¹ Reflective Proforma and Meta-Mirror

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ School's Website, Reflective Proforma and Meta-Mirror

Thinking School Ethos and Culture

From the evidence presented, it is clear that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of SMBB. Curriculum policy documents and plans clearly map out a thinking strategy that subsequently feed into teaching strategies, and so moves thinking approaches from policy to practice. Pivotal to this is the high premium placed on sharing of best practice across the school to include all staff.⁵

SMBB has a prominent and visible thinking culture, and this is due to the excellent organisational structure and visual presentation. The school's website and illustrative materials exemplify the prominence of a Thinking Culture. This is captured well in the school's curriculum where the pursuit of lifelong learning is an integral element. SMBB also demonstrates a holistic approach to this where emotional, physical, academic, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development are prioritised. Sports, Science and the Arts add to this rich educational provision. High quality communications with parents ensure that the thinking partnership between the school and parents is strong. Assemblies and other public forums provide rich opportunities to share children's thinking successes. The high premium placed on celebration and displays further strengthen the Thinking School ethos and culture. Children are explicitly encouraged to become independent learners where the use of metacognitive tools and strategies are the norm. Classroom displays are deliberately uncluttered in order to aid cognitive load. Consistency in terms of the thinking language is wonderfully achieved via elements such as the Bloom's informed Thinking Walls. As a consequence of these actions, the whole learning community is equipped to support children's learning.⁶ SMBB has forged a number of partnerships underpinned by a Thinking Schools focus within the wider Thinking Schools community and is well positioned to be a highly influential 'Hub' Thinking School. The excellent collaboration enables best practice to permeate throughout wider school community. Through its connections with a wide range of stakeholders, SMBB 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.⁷

Senior Management and Whole School Commitment

The Headteacher, Thinking Schools Coordinator (Assistant Headteacher) and Drive Team Leads 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 the strong and focused Drive Teams structure stands as a model of excellent practice. Indeed, the Drive Teams are highly efficient and diverse. Members are judiciously led by the SLT and clearly demonstrate that they are 'Agents of Change'. The Drive Teams collaborate wonderfully. They work closely with a high-quality experienced consultant. The Thinking Schools Coordinator (Assistant Headteacher) also provides exemplary support and feedback

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

based on a comprehensive audit of the key accreditation elements.⁸ The Governors 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 regularly kept up to date about the school's approaches to cognitive education through thorough reports and Governor visits. Indeed, there is a dedicated Governor attached to Thinking School developments and she is actively involved in learning walks and Drive Team meetings. This stands as a model of excellent practice. Feedback indicates a positive shift in pupils' thinking skills together with whole school development as a Thinking School.⁹

The Headteacher and her senior team provide exemplary leadership to support the Drive Teams and staff as a whole. Staff are fully engaged in developments as a result of this. Modelling and communication are excellent as are planning processes including meetings and subsequent developmental actions. Together, these aspects ensure that there is continued dialogue about Thinking Skills so that specific areas of development can be identified and acted upon.¹⁰ There is ample evidence to indicate that SMBB is receptive to change and innovation. The development of cognitive approaches has been part of the school's vision and drive for improvement for a number of years in response to ensuring that the school has an explicit vision based upon inclusive educational values that would serve as the foundation for a strategic move forward.¹¹ A range of ways of scaffolding effective thinking and learning skills have been incorporated into all aspects of the school as appropriate spanning visual tools, thinking dispositions, growth mindset and higher-order questioning linked to an enriching holistic curriculum. The Pupil Voice is instrumental in bringing close involvement of parents and carers.¹²

There is a specific organic development plan designed to secure the wide-spread use of thinking tools across the school. The range of cognitive developments indicates that plans are aspirational and designed to empower children to progressively take ownership of their cognitive development.¹³ Also, plans and CPD provision dovetail well and provide a clear mechanism for ongoing development.

Learning and Teaching

It is clear, from the documentation provided, that Thinking Skills are embedded within the culture of SMBB. Indeed, thinking serves as a 'golden thread' throughout the school. The school's Learning and Teaching approach is built on evidence-based cognitive principles embracing elements such as cognitive science. Planning and Drive Team meetings provide an effective springboard for action in order that all lessons include thinking skills. For example, Thinking Frames are fully embedded including the application of the Reflective Lens. Of particular note, is the integration of Thinking Tools with the rich curriculum offer. The

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Reflective Proforma, School Website and Meta-Mirror

integration of Bloom's (via the Thinking Wall), Thinking Frames, PATHS and Rosenshine's 10 Principles of Instruction is exceptional. SMBB has a clear 'Learner Profile' and thinking language, including innovative elements such as 'Vocabulary Boards'. Excellent support and resources ensure that staff and pupils develop thinking approaches effectively. There is a 'keep it simple and clear' approach. In this regard, the Drive Teams 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 also clearly demonstrates how it is one of the school's main aims.¹⁴

The school's pedagogical approach is informed by clear development planning and CPD underpinned by a firm foundation of research and evidence. 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 provided by the school. These elements, combined with SMBB's commitment to the development of psychological, social and emotional well-being have resulted in learning and teaching that is focused on the holistic development of every child.¹⁵

The school has heavily invested in metacognitive development and special events such as the 'Thinking Schools Roadshow' supplement half-termly assemblies linked to Thinking Schools. Thinking School Ambassadors are integral to giving pupils a voice in their learning development. The aim is clearly 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. Where feasible, the school has personalised and contextualised visual displays and strategies 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. SMBB has clear evidence of developing learning and teaching and the appreciation of wider elements via the outstanding holistic curriculum it offers. This has shifted practice from a teaching approach to a pedagogical culture.¹⁶

Training

The values-led Headteacher and her team have fully embraced cognitive education and have ensured that finance and resources are geared towards high quality training for all staff. Governors fully endorse this line of school development. The Drive Teams are well versed in the theory, application and assessment of cognitive education and psychological wellbeing. The Drive Teams are highly experienced due to maintaining a healthy depth in terms of their

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

composition. The highly trained Drive Teams have undoubtedly influenced the focus on establishing a common thinking language and approach across the curriculum.¹⁷ 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. The co-coaching approach to lesson observations (Cycle of Lesson Study) is exceptional. Here, staff are placed in small teams with a representative from SLT and each phase. This approach has a clear focus on effective questioning, application of Rosenshine's Principles, and application of metacognitive strategies (eg. Thinking Frames and self-regulation). This makes excellent use of Action Plans and feedback. The school's approach to CPD is one of professional growth. There is a clear overview of staff training charting professional development activities relating to Thinking Schools and more widely. The integrated and collaborative approach is exceptional. SMBB has aligned training with their core aspiration to take a whole-school approach to the teaching of thinking and the school community work closely with a high-quality training consultant. There is a cycle of lesson study in place that has had a recent focus as outlined in the aforementioned reference to co-coaching. The responsive and adaptive nature of this in terms of next steps is excellent. 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 in the school's communications. Staff are encouraged to work collaboratively and to provide mutual support through the development of thinking generally and through particular foci. Good practice is shared widely and learning walks are used supportively to evaluate and share good practice in a climate of mutual aspiration. The customised training approach extends the reach of professional growth. Moving forward, this would benefit from the further extension of practitioner research to embrace the SPARE model of evaluative action research, and the Drive Teams are well placed to lead on this aspect.¹⁸

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 observations, classroom artefacts and a range of surveys. This is serviced well via a range of evaluative opportunities including baseline data. Reflection is integral to the assessment process at SMBB, and the voices of staff and pupils are integral. Reflection is aligned closely to peer and self-assessment. The use of Reflective Journals is an excellent example of this. Assessments indicate largely high cognitive and self-perception development together with signposting strategies for further improvement. SMBB makes excellent use of the PASS survey. Here baseline data is collated and the subsequent impact of interventions is analysed and acted upon. The Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS) embraces the EEF Four Levels of Metacognitive Learner, and this does much to further embrace the role of the pupil voice. Figures and data are impressive over the Thinking Schools implementation period indicating that SMBB is an impactful and attractive place to learn. Achievement outcomes for key areas show an impressive rate of growth. SMBB demonstrates excellent use of qualitative and quantitative indicators, and this is an example of excellent practice. SMBB also demonstrates

¹⁷ Reflective Proforma, School Website and Meta-Mirror

¹⁸ Ibid

a healthy 'data informed' (rather than data led) approach to assessment to avoid assessment becoming the master of the curriculum rather than the servant.¹⁹

The school is clear that the focus on cognitive development through a whole school consistent approach to learning has improved children's attitudes, improved their enjoyment, developed their independence, contributed to high quality teaching and led to better pupil progress.²⁰ There is qualitative data from a range of sources about how the development of learning behaviours are associated with positive outcomes for pupils, academic outcomes and improved motivation.

The excellent holistic pupil growth indicates impressive 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.²¹

Evaluation of Programmes

There is a continual review of the range of cognitive tools, strategies and resources employed, with specific reference to their impact on pupils' meta-cognition and the transfer of skills, strategies and learning behaviours. SMBB makes implicit use of the SPARE model of Illuminative Evaluation, and outcomes from judicious assessments inform school developments. As a result, quantitative and qualitative data relating to thinking, attitudes and behaviour are integrated as part of the evaluative process. These evaluations are excellent and draw on a range of indicators including observations and learning walks undertaken by the SLT, Drive Teams and Governors. Thinking Schools Action Plans are evaluated annually and sit within the whole school three-year plan. Drive Teams meet twice per half term and outcomes inform the Drive Team Lead meetings. The Thinking Schools Coordinator (Assistant Headteacher) meets at least termly with the Headteacher to collate and synthesis evaluations via Headteacher reports and action/development plans. These action plans have a clear structure and focus on priorities, reasons, steps, actions, person responsible, impact, monitoring, and evaluation. This is a model of exemplary evaluative practice. Staff are fully involved in the collation of data and peer observations are particularly impactful in terms of evaluating pedagogy. Of particular note, is the highly effective use of the Pupil Voice in the evaluation process. Through a collaborative approach to leadership, the Drive Teams 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', and this is clear evidence of the drive to create a culture of thinking. The development plan is an organic collaborative, document and the voices of the entire school community features prominently in the evaluative process. External reviews and high-quality QA Charter Marks further add to the evaluative blend. There is a clear evaluative focus on developing the transfer of thinking skills and strategies and the collaborative nature of all evaluative elements is a model of excellent practice. SMBB is well placed to become a 'Hub' Thinking

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Reflective Pro-forma, School Website and Meta-Mirror

²¹ Ibid

School and future attainment of Advanced Accreditation. This reflects SMBB's ongoing ambition to develop an exceptional whole school approach to the teaching of thinking.

Ownership

There is no doubt that SMBB 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. Indeed, progress in developing a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking has been rapid and purposeful since 2021. The external training and support has been exceptional and has allowed consistency and individual creativity to flourish. Together, these elements combine to effectively promote the educational growth of all children and the professional growth of staff by providing them with excellent support and ownership over their own development.

SMBB is an exceptional school on many levels. The school's approach is one of promoting holistic lifelong learning and the skilful integration of metacognitive approaches with other curricular dimensions is wonderful. SMBB truly lives up to its vision of every pupil being inquisitive lifelong learners. SMBB's consistent drive for 'next steps' clearly illustrates that it is a responsive educational community that celebrates inclusion, understanding, independence, enjoyment, achievement, and psychological wellbeing. It places the individual needs of all children at the heart of everything it does. Leadership is excellent at all levels and the Headteacher and Drive Team Leads are at the heart of this. The integrated Drive Team model is excellent and blends individual talent with a shared drive to maximise holistic educational growth. The school is relentless in its commitment to living its vision and aims. Developments are evidence informed and implemented with drive, purpose and care. Thinking thrives because reflection, action and aspiration are intertwined. External evaluation and support are welcomed and responded to. Self-control, emotional awareness and interpersonal problem-solving thrive as a result of the school's thinking culture where people collaborate at every level. As a result, the whole school community flourishes in a climate of care and mutual respect. SMBB is wonderful example of a child-centred and family orientated Thinking School where holistic lifelong learning is nurtured and flourishes.

Conclusion

The range of evidence submitted undoubtedly indicates that St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Blackbrook meets the criteria set by Thinking Schools @Exeter as a Thinking School and demonstrates a true commitment to the continued development of a whole school approach to the teaching of thinking. I therefore recommend that accreditation be awarded until October 2027.

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 exemplary 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:

- Continue to further develop and maintain staff development through ongoing external and internal training geared towards rationalising what works best by fine-tuning the already best practice. This combination of training will secure a balance of internal self-improvement with an external freshness and perspective. This requires getting underneath cognitive tools and dispositional development to identify the underlying meta-cognitive processes that enhance children's learning and thinking.
- Further integrate thinking processes with questioning, visual tools, dispositional development, deliberate practice routines, assessment of process, assessment of product, evaluation of process and evaluation of product. This could take the form of an overview for how these elements are integrated.
- 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.
- Move from evaluation to evaluative research to further foster the development of staff as researching professionals. 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.
- Consider the use of five key questions for evaluative purposes: What works best? For whom? Under what circumstances? How? Why? These can feed into the 'E' of the SPARE model of evaluative research.

- Use the criteria of an Advanced Thinking School to frame future developments in order to deepen and extend the understanding and expertise of St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Blackbrook. 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.
- Consider introducing and aligning Thinking Routines (already aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy) with lesson objectives to aid targeted planning and teaching/learning. This will also help to service the further development of dispositional elements.
- Further consider the place of metacognitive approaches in the curriculum design. For example, research has shown that higher levels of impact occur when a 'blended' approach (separate provision *and* integrated in subjects) is taken.
- Develop the school's website to further reiterate the core position of Thinking Schools in the educational provision and offer.



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