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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Hill Croft Special School
Newtownabbey

Inspected: May 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Hill Croft School provides education for pupils aged three to 19 years who have severe learning difficulties. Approximately 20% of the pupils have additional complex medical and behavioural difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties which place additional pressure on the staff in their day-to-day work. The recently opened, purpose-built school is situated in the Mossley estate in Newtownabbey. The Principal had returned to school after a prolonged absence just prior to the inspection.

1.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care included the completion of questionnaires by the parents as well as meetings with members of the Board of Governors (governors) of the school and with some of the pupils. Approximately one-half of the parental questionnaires issued were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and about one-half of these included a written comment. Many of the responses were positive and supportive of the work of the school; a significant minority expressed concerns, and these were brought to the attention of the governors and the Principal. The concerns included comments regarding insufficient therapy support. The governors expressed their strong support for the school. In discussions with the inspection team, the pupils spoke appreciatively of their teachers and classroom assistants.

1.3 The focus of the inspection was on the quality of provision to meet individual needs and the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 Hill Croft School has specialist facilities and resources for meeting the pupils' needs and demonstrates strengths in aspects of its educational and pastoral provision in relation to developing their communication, self-help and independence skills, transition to adult and working life, access to accreditation and pastoral care. The findings of the inspection also indicate important areas for improvement which need to be addressed, including the need to improve the quality of some of the teaching, the restricted school curriculum in some of the classes and the need for the staff to work harmoniously to develop a more collective approach to sharing and disseminating the examples of good practice throughout the school.

2.2 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has many strengths. Attention is given to the development of policies and the implementation of initiatives such as 'healthy week', healthy breaks and water provision, all of which encourage the pupils to adopt healthy lifestyles. There is a developing commitment to promoting healthy eating through use of the home/school diary. The pupils demonstrate a very good understanding of the importance of making healthy life choices and opportunities are provided for all the pupils to participate in a wide range of physical activities.

2.3 The inspection findings indicate the following strengths in achievements and standards:

- the quality of the provision for the pastoral care of the pupils;
- the school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being;

- the provision in relation to developing the pupils' communication, self-help and independent living skills;
- the access to accreditation for the pupils; and
- the high quality of the school's programme for transition and leavers.

3. **QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING**

3.1 The quality of teaching varies considerably; in the work observed, the majority of the pupils responded positively to the activities planned for them, while shortcomings in the planning for approximately one-third of the lessons reduced teaching to a poor level. Of particular note, are the achievements of the pupils in the older classes who experience a good range of course work and practical activities which enable them to apply and develop their skills in work-related and life-skills activities and to gain accreditation. These good practices and standards need to be maintained and promoted in all classes throughout the school.

3.2 For the few pupils with severe, persistent, challenging and violent behaviour, it is evident that, in spite of the strenuous and courageous efforts of the class teacher, the classroom assistants and the Principal to engage them with learning, the pupils fail to benefit purposefully from the current interactions with the staff and appear to be unhappy. The inspection team finds this situation is unsatisfactory and stressful to all concerned and requires urgent action by the school management in consultation with the North-Eastern Education and Library Board and the relevant health professionals to maintain the pupils' inclusion or to provide an alternative and more pragmatic strategy or setting, which addresses the unexpected behaviours, which are often extreme and violent.

3.3 The school has procedures in place which implement fully the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars in relation to pastoral care and child protection. The governors, staff, parents and pupils are fully aware of the school's procedures and have had the opportunity to contribute to a range of helpful policies which guide the work of the school.

3.4 Of particular note is the pupils' involvement in their own assessment of work linked to the Leavers' Programme which enhances their understanding and appreciation of their achievements. The pupils record these achievements in a variety of media and, when appropriate, receive external accreditation for their work. The transition to adult and working life is enhanced by strong links to local and wider community facilities. The school is currently reviewing the learning pathways available to pupils and gives strong priority to accessing meaningful and worthwhile activities in their links to further education. As they prepare to leave school, those pupils participating in the programme show a good sense of independence, good attitudes to further learning and have developed personal and social skills which allow them to participate in community life in a safe and secure manner.

3.5 The majority of teachers, particularly in the older classes, through careful observation and interaction with the pupils, monitor effectively and consistently all aspects of each pupil's development and learning. This careful evaluation of the pupils' experiences and their progress in learning is seen by the staff as an integral part of their work which informs their plans for future provision.

3.6 The inspection findings indicate the following strengths in the quality of the provision for learning:

- the very good quality of the teaching in some classes in the school;
- the school's full adherence to DE's guidance and procedures for child protection;
- the staff's efforts to create a secure and caring environment;
- the confidence expressed by the pupils that the staff will respond sympathetically and appropriately to their needs and concerns;
- the strong links, developing through the Leavers' Programme, between the school and the local and wider community facilities;
- the involvement of the pupils in some classes in the self-evaluation of their work;
- the effective monitoring and evaluation of the pupils' progress in learning in some classes; and
- the regular opportunities which the school provides for the parents to discuss the progress and welfare of their children.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 Much work has been undertaken to identify relevant priorities for the school and the school's development plan outlines sensible areas for improvement. The Principal, management team and staff need to agree a shared vision of their approach to learning and teaching, and to ensure that this is consistently monitored and evaluated. Following the findings of this inspection, the challenge for the school is to involve the staff more purposefully to enable them to observe the quality of learning and teaching across the school and agree and disseminate the good practice in order to meet the needs of all of the pupils more effectively. The roles of the co-ordinators need to be reviewed and clarified for all to understand.

4.2 The inspection findings endorse the areas for improvement identified by the Principal in the school's self-evaluation audit and identify the need to focus more purposefully on raising the quality of some of the teaching and learning to ensure that the good examples observed during the inspection become commonplace and form the basis of further staff development and provide a benchmark by which to measure progress.

5. OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

5.1 The overall effectiveness of the school shows strengths in aspects of the work inspected; these are important areas for development which need to be addressed.

5.2 The inspection has identified many strengths in the school. These include:

- the quality of the provision for the pastoral care of the pupils;
- the school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being;
- the high quality of the school's programme for transition and leavers;
- the very good quality of the teaching in some classes in the school;
- the involvement of the pupils, in some classes, in the self-evaluation of their work;
- the effective monitoring and evaluation of the pupils' progress in learning in some classes; and
- the quality of the support, involvement and commitment of the members of the governors to the development of the school.

6. **AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

6.1 The inspection findings indicate the following areas for improvement. There is a need:

- to develop a systematic, formal and documented approach to the process of monitoring and evaluating the quality and consistency of learning and teaching to lead to further improvement;
- for the staff, individually and in teams, to address the dissemination of good practice across the school; and
- to clarify further the roles and responsibilities of co-ordinators and teams in order to develop clear lines of accountability and shared responsibility.

7. **CONCLUSION**

7.1 In the areas inspected, the school has a few strengths in its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified important areas for improvement, which need to be addressed promptly if the school is to meet effectively the needs of all the learners.

7.2 The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

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