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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Providing Inspection Services for
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Holy Cross Primary School Attical

Inspected: May 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Holy Cross Primary School, Co Down, is situated in a picturesque area on the southern side of the Mourne Mountains, in the small village of Attical. Most of the children who attend the school live in the village or in the surrounding rural area. The school population has been increasing and has shown a rise from 80 children in 2003 to the current figure of 102; it is anticipated that with further new housing developments planned for in the area, the enrolment will increase. Approximately 1% of the children are entitled to receive free school meals; just over 14% has been identified as having special educational needs (SEN).

1.2 The inspection focused primarily on the work in mathematics and numeracy and the effectiveness of the school's SEN provision. In addition, the inspection evaluated the work in information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching in mathematics. The inspection also evaluated the school's procedures for pastoral care, including child protection.

1.3 The arrangements for the pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents and teachers to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meeting with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and a group of children from year 6. Sixty-seven questionnaires were issued to parents; 55% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) of which twelve contained additional written comments. Almost all the responses from the parental questionnaires were positive in their support for the school and in particular highlighted the welcoming ethos and the dedicated and supportive staff. The small number of concerns expressed by parents was discussed with the Principal.

1.4 The four full-time teachers completed a confidential questionnaire, their responses were very positive on many aspects of the school, commenting favourably on its ethos, inclusiveness and on the school's current leadership.

1.5 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with the governors. The governors expressed their confidence in the school and referred particularly to the leadership of the new Principal especially in relation to empowering the staff, effective communication and in promoting a culture of self-evaluation. In addition, they highlighted the high regard in which the school is held by the local community.

1.6 The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection has important strengths. The school has procedures in place which implement the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars.

1.7 Among the strengths in pastoral care and child protection are:

- the warm and welcoming climate throughout the school;
- the well-behaved, courteous and friendly children;
- the quality of the working relationships throughout the school;

- the developing climate of inclusion and opportunities afforded to the staff, children and parents to become involved in the decision-making process;
- the contribution made by the support staff to the well-being of the children and their learning experiences;
- the children's participation in the wide range of extra-curricular activities provided by the school; and
- the increasing links with local schools and the wider community.

1.8 The school has been part of the local community for over a century; many of the governors and parents of the children, are past pupils themselves. The school works hard to involve its parents in its life and work and has successfully established a Parent Teacher Forum to obtain their views about the school. The parents and local residents have been generous in their support of the school; they have added much to the resourcing of the school especially in ICT and in leasing additional land for play areas. Auditing the opinions of parents and of the children is a growing feature of the school. The school is committed to providing additional curriculum advice to parents so that they are aware of the school's academic work and may be more able to assist with their own children's learning.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 The school's pastoral care programme and child protection arrangements, together with its strong Catholic values, play a central and effective role in shaping the ethos of the school. The children are enthusiastic, courteous, listen attentively and co-operate with their teachers and with one another. The children are very content, happy and relaxed in the school and value the work of their teachers; the year 6 children, to whom the inspectors spoke, gave the school a great deal of praise. The children settle well to their work and show good levels of perseverance with the activities they are set; they display a genuine interest in learning, participate well in discussions and in the practical activities.

2.2 With the exception of the year 1 class all of the teachers have a composite class made up of two year groups. Morale is high among the full-time teaching staff who are conscientious and hard-working. Harmonious working relationships are evident and the quality of most of the teaching observed was good and occasionally excellent. There is much consistency in the teaching throughout the school due to whole-staff debate discussion and agreed planning. In the best lessons observed, the teachers employed a range of appropriate teaching strategies, their work was well paced, matched to the needs and abilities of the vast majority of the children and provided good opportunities to extend the children's learning. A variety of teaching approaches such as whole-class, group work and practical activities were employed effectively; lessons were well resourced and the materials were employed imaginatively. There was effective use of ICT and, in particular interactive white boards, in supporting learning and teaching. The classroom assistants worked effectively and energetically with the teachers and gave excellent support to the children. In contrast to all of the good learning and teaching just described, there was occasion when the quality of the teaching was not satisfactory and the children were not sufficiently engaged nor challenged; in the lessons observed, the children carried out comprehensive type tasks under supervision and little or no teaching occurred.

2.3 In mathematics, the staff are working together in drawing comprehensive overviews and documents to guide planning and teaching. This thorough planning is strongly focussed on matching the work to individuals and groups of children. Mathematical themes and topics are planned for and taught regularly and a broad range of mathematical experiences are provided. Currently, the teachers employ a useful eight week planning framework with the last week dedicated to revision and consolidation. It would, however, be useful if the planning format is amended to include more opportunity for evaluative comment. In the last two years, the full-time teachers have shown their commitment to improving their teaching and the children's learning, both of which are reflected in: the significant amount of personal development in which the teachers have engaged; the broad range of teaching strategies and ICT which they have integrated successfully into their classroom practice; the children's progression in learning and their obvious enjoyment of the mathematics lessons.

2.4 Across the school, the teaching approaches used ensure that there is a suitable balance between whole-class teaching, practical activities and talk about mathematics. The very good range of resources available to the children, including computer programmes, are used well to stimulate their interest and learning in mathematics. Cross-curricular links is a good feature of the teaching. The children are able to talk about their work using the language of mathematics. The teachers work hard to support the learning needs of all the children who are making steady progress in mathematics.

2.5 There is a wide range of mathematical resources available and good use is made of these resources to enthuse the children's interest in their work. The teachers know the children well and are clear about their individual learning needs. Effective use is made of ICT in supporting whole-class teaching which is carefully planned to ensure that all the children understand the key elements of the work being taught. The follow-on work is well matched to the abilities of the children who are able to experience success at a personal level. By the end of key stage (KS) 1 the children have a firm grasp on basic mathematical concepts and the end of KS results confirm this progress. By the end of KS2 the children have a secure knowledge of mathematical concepts and their standards of achievement are sound.

2.6 It is evident that the children enjoy their mathematics work. In class the children focus very well on their teachers' exposition of new concepts and they are keen and willing to work on the many and varied practical and written tasks that they are given. The children are enthusiastic and work hard to be successful; in both key stages there is a high quality in the presentation of work in the children's mathematics books. The well-planned integration of mental mathematics into lessons provides an additional source of enjoyment and allows the children many opportunities to consolidate and extend their learning. It is the view of the teachers that the emphasis placed on mental mathematics is having a very positive effect on the children's interest in their work and in their confidence in dealing with mathematical activities. The inspection team confirms these views. A good start has been made by the school to ensuring progression in mathematical learning; further, there is increasingly effective use made of assessment data in setting targets. In addition, more attention should be given to seeking ways of developing more investigative activities into the mathematics programme, emphasising more strongly the value of mathematics for life and enabling the older children to develop more flexibility in their thinking and in problem solving.

2.7 It is appropriate that the school has identified ICT as a developmental area for supporting teaching and learning across the curriculum. Recent progress in ICT provision has been good. With the installation of Classroom 2000 (C2k), the school has acquired a large number of new computers, which are dispersed throughout the classrooms. The recent acquisition of interactive whiteboards, and further training have improved greatly most of the staff's level of confidence and competence in the use of ICT; many worthwhile aspects of ICT are used in all classes and much of the teachers' planning and the school's administration are being produced and retained on computers. In their planning the teachers are identifying opportunities for the use of ICT which is linked appropriately into supporting work in numeracy and is having a notable impact on classroom practice.

2.8 The school shows a strong commitment to providing support for those children with special educational needs in all year groups; in this work it has been largely successful. While some withdrawal and peripatetic support is available, mainly for literacy, appropriately and increasingly, each teacher takes responsibility for supporting all the children in class in both mathematics and literacy. Early identification is strong with good links with the local pre-school group. Work is continuing to ensure a precise identification of learning needs, and a more effective measurement of progress. In some classes, the teachers have identified specific targets for each child this good practice should be more widespread. The timing of the sessions of withdrawal should be reviewed to match more closely the teaching within class and to minimise disruption.

2.9 The school has appropriate arrangements in place for monitoring, recording and reporting the progress of each child. Assessment processes have a high profile in each classroom and outcomes are used to inform the teachers' planning for whole-class and individual work. The children's work is marked and there are helpful comments which help them to understand better what they need to do; however, an agreed marking policy and set of procedures has the potential to ensure greater consistency across the school and will assist in raising standards in the children's work.

2.10 The Principal has been in post for two years and manages his teaching and administrative duties well; in his teaching he is an effective role model. He is energetic, dedicated and committed to the life and work of the school and to the well-being of the children and staff. Furthermore, the Principal has a vision for the school and in achieving this, he has recognised the professional development needs of himself and the staff and has shown his commitment by facilitating whole-school and individual staff development in line with the identified needs of the children and the school. In their work, the Vice-principal and the teaching and ancillary staff support the Principal effectively; a collegiate style of management and whole-school planning is being promoted. Those teachers who, in addition to their teaching duties, have other responsibilities, are fully committed to carrying out their roles.

2.11 A strong focus on self-evaluation has been introduced by the Principal. With the staff he has developed a range of self-evaluative audits for the teaching staff, parents and children which are used to guide the work of the school; this information has influenced the current School Development Plan which sets clear priorities for a wide range of important issues; it is well laid out supported by appropriate action plans which are sensibly paced.

2.12 The school building is attractive and well maintained; the standard of caretaking is good. Three of the main classrooms are quite small and a temporary classroom is used for play activities but it requires repairs or replacement, further, the dining area is being used as a classroom. With the expansion of the enrolment and the lack of a suitable teaching base for another teacher, this matter needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency; some additional minor works are also planned. There are some health and safety issues and deficiencies in the accommodation; these have been outlined in the Appendix.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 Strengths of the school include:

- the very positive ethos and the high quality of the pastoral care;
- the conscientious and hard-working staff;
- the strong support of the parents and the Governors and, the school's high standing in the community;
- the quality of much of the teaching, including the many examples of good practice observed during the inspection in the teaching of mathematics and numeracy;
- the good progress made in the use of ICT in supporting learning and teaching; and
- the vision, dedication and commitment of the Principal to the future development of the school and his success in developing a self-evaluative culture and a collegiate style in managing the school.

3.2 Area for improvement is the need to:

- review the deployment of the principal release teacher. The current arrangements are not satisfactory and need to be resolved in the best interests of the school. It will be necessary for the governors and management of the three schools in which the teacher is employed and the employing authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to agree on improved arrangements and to ensure that the responsibilities of the teacher are clearly defined.

3.3 In the area inspected, the school has major strengths in its educational and pastoral provision. The educational and pastoral needs of the learners are being well met. The parents and local community can have confidence in the school's capacity for sustained self-improvement.

No follow-inspection is required.

HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES

- As the school lies outside the village of Attical, it is not subject to appropriate and very necessary speed restrictions. The road fronting the school is becoming increasingly busy with both heavy and fast traffic. The lack of, an appropriate speed restriction, visibly prominent road signs, road markings or speed calming devices to warn motorists of the location of the school, are a serious safety hazard.
- Parking at the front of the school is potentially hazardous and should be monitored; in spite of recent improvements the parking facilities for parents, staff and buses around the school are insufficient.
- The use of the senior classroom as a canteen is unsatisfactory.
- There are some maintenance issues relating to the children's washrooms; in addition, with the expansion of the school, the number of toilets available to staff and children should be reviewed.
- There is currently no security access system in place at the main entrance door to the school.

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