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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Holy Cross Boys' Primary School
Belfast

Inspected: November 2004

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Holy Cross Boys' Primary School is situated in the Ardoyne area of north Belfast. The vast majority of the children come from the immediate neighbourhood that has suffered from acute civil and social unrest over many years. The enrolment has declined slightly in recent years; it stands currently at 359. Around 56 per cent of the children are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 The attendance rate for the previous school year was 95 per cent; this is above the average for primary schools in Northern Ireland. A strong feature of the school's policy and procedures is the emphasis placed on home visits and the setting of targets for the attendance of individual children falling below an acceptable level.

1.3 The inspection focused on English, information and communication technology (ICT), and on the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection.

1.4 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with the Board of Governors, and with a small group of children in year 6. The parents' views on aspects of the life and work of the school were also sought by means of a questionnaire. It is clear from the responses to the questionnaire that the school has gained the confidence and approbation of the community it serves. The parents and the governors alike hold the school in high esteem; they commented favourably on the fair treatment given to the children by the helpful and dedicated teaching staff, the many academic and sporting successes and the good communication with and the inclusion of the whole community in the school's range of activities. In addition, they expressed a strong endorsement for the excellent leadership provided by the Principal. The inspection findings confirm emphatically these views.

2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 The school is characterised by its strong sense of community and by its warm and welcoming atmosphere. Relationships at all levels are excellent. The teachers know the children well; they promote effectively their self-esteem and they are aware of their emotional needs. The children are confident and mannerly; they show respect for their teachers and they co-operate well with one another. They are interested in their work and are motivated to learn. The standards of behaviour are exemplary.

2.2 There is a good team spirit and a common sense of purpose amongst all of the staff. The teachers and ancillary staff are highly committed to the children. The teachers are dedicated and hard-working, and they create an orderly atmosphere and promote a climate of care and concern. The classroom assistants are deployed effectively and make a valuable and worthwhile contribution to the children's education and welfare.

2.3 The classrooms contain attractive displays of the children's work on a range of current topics. The school is well maintained; the quality of caretaking and cleaning is excellent.

2.4 The school offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities and places a strong emphasis on developing the creative and expressive curriculum. The children have many

opportunities to perform music, song, drama and dance in the annual productions. Notable successes have been achieved by the school choir comprising children in years 4-7, and in the Belfast Irish Language Feis. Many children receive tuition in the tin whistle, recorder, bodhran and violin and an instrumental ensemble has been set up. In sport, the school has gained a formidable reputation in table tennis, handball, Gaelic football and soccer.

2.5 The school has recently appointed a member of staff to work full-time on the development of community links across a number of areas. The highly committed co-ordinator, in conjunction with the school management team, has planned carefully a series of useful initiatives. There are suitable courses organised for the parents, based on an audit of their needs and those that the employers in the area deem useful. In partnership with Ardoyne Youth Club, the school has set up a successful peer-mentoring scheme to support some of the children. There is a strong cross-community link with a controlled school. The school has plans to develop further links with other schools and agencies, in order to benefit the children and the community, and to facilitate the parents in playing an increasing role in the education of their children.

2.6 The excellent quality of the pastoral care is a significant feature of the school and supports the stated aim of providing a caring community within which each child is valued. The school is implementing fully the procedures in circulars 1999/10 and 2003/13 issued by the Department of Education (DE) with regard to pastoral care and child protection. There is a range of helpful documentation which covers all areas in respect of the welfare of the children, and the children state that they feel safe and secure in the school. The designated teachers provide good support and updates for their colleagues; there is regular communication with parents. Within the classrooms there is evidence of the pastoral care policy through the encouragement and support given to all the children by the teaching and ancillary staff; the contribution of each child is clearly valued. There is a well-balanced system of rewards and sanctions understood by the children. The school makes every effort to work in partnership with parents to support the children in their learning.

2.7 The quality of almost all of the teaching was good, and the majority was excellent. It was characterised by the high expectations and the high degree of challenge set by the teachers within the lessons. The teachers know the children very well; they respond to their various learning styles, matching well the resources and materials to their interests and abilities, and ensuring that the teaching takes place at an appropriately purposeful pace. The children enjoyed their work and showed great willingness to take part in the practical activities organised for them and the opportunities they had to co-operate in groups and in paired activities. In the best practice, some teachers shared the intended learning with the children and rounded off the lessons with a meaningful plenary session to consolidate the learning.

2.8 The school is involved in the Northern Ireland Literacy Strategy (NILS) development programme. This work is led skilfully by the experienced and committed co-ordinators, and supported actively by the Principal and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). The teachers have benefited from both external and school-based in-service training (INSET) related to the Literacy Strategy. The school has identified appropriate priorities for development, and thorough and insightful monitoring and evaluation of progress is informing its work.

2.9 In all classes, the children are keen to respond orally to the teachers' questions. In the best practice, the teachers use skilful questioning to help the children express clearly their thoughts and answers. During play, the interventions made by the teachers and the classroom assistants promote the children's speech and broaden their vocabulary. During the literacy sessions, the children talk readily about the stories and characters they study, listening attentively to each other's contributions. In key stage (KS) 2, teacher-led discussion is the main emphasis of oral work. The children participate well and many offer their views willingly, although their contributions are often confined to brief responses to the teachers' questions. In a few lessons, the children have opportunities to discuss their ideas in groups, subsequently reporting their conclusions to the rest of the class. These lessons help to improve the children's ability to express their ideas with greater clarity. In order to improve their fluency and confidence in the use of oral language, the children would benefit from more opportunities to make longer spoken contributions in class and to use talk in a wider variety of formal settings, including debates and presentations.

2.10 The school accords a high priority to the teaching of reading and the teachers use a wide range of techniques and approaches to improve the children's reading. The school has built up a comprehensive and varied stock of fiction and non-fiction books and has held book fairs to raise the profile of reading among the children and their parents. The overall good standard of reading in the school is evidence of the beneficial impact of this work. The initial teaching of reading is well-organised and thorough; it provides the children with a good foundation in the basic skills and helps them to acquire an interest in reading from an early age. In KS1, the teachers make effective use of bright and interesting 'big books' for shared reading, and sessions of group reading are used to provide for the children's individual differences in ability. In many of these sessions, the children display high levels of participation, enjoyment and sustained concentration. In KS2, the children are introduced to reading novels, and they have access to a range of reading materials matched well to their needs and interests. They develop independence through periods of silent reading. The children's comprehension is tested in various ways, including through taking part in discussions, responding to a range of questions and writing brief appreciations of books or stories. The older children develop appropriate study and research skills. By the end of KS2, the majority of the children are reading to a satisfactory or good standard and have a positive attitude to reading.

2.11 In the early years, writing arises naturally from the children's interests and experiences, both at home and in school. The children become interested writers who are proud of their ability to present work neatly and accurately. By the end of KS1, the children are developing independence in writing, often supported by the use of word banks. This work is built upon in KS2 as the children write for a wider range of purposes and audiences. The standard of handwriting and presentation of work is generally good throughout the school. As part of its work on the Literacy Strategy, the school is placing a greater emphasis on extending the breadth of the children's writing. There is evidence that this work is proving productive. Across the school, the children's writing activities include reports of events and visits, letters, short poems, factual, imaginative and empathetic accounts, personal responses, play scripts and descriptions of processes. The school magazine provides a useful vehicle to display the quality and variety of the children's writing. To improve further the children's writing, there is scope for them to engage more in revising and editing their own writing, using ICT, where it is appropriate. In addition, in KS2, the teachers need to strike a better balance between the practice of grammatical and vocabulary skills, and fostering extended writing across the curriculum.

2.12 The school management team has demonstrated considerable commitment to the development of ICT within the curriculum. The school achieved a number of prestigious local and national awards in recent years for the use of ICT in teaching and learning. A notable feature is the extent to which ICT is integrated into many aspects of the children's learning experiences. All classes use the well-equipped computer room. In addition, the school has three classrooms equipped with modern interactive whiteboards. During the inspection, a number of very good examples of the use of ICT were noted; the interactive whiteboards were exploited effectively to demonstrate skills and to enrich whole class teaching; the younger children worked in small groups on computer games to consolidate their learning and to gain confidence in the use of the mouse. The children in year 5 participated in a video-conferencing session with their peers in a rural school during which they exchanged information about life in their area. All the children in year 7 participate in the Information Technology Accreditation Scheme at KS2 organised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

2.13 In recent years the school has introduced a second computer suite to accommodate a computer assisted learning program, 'Success Maker'; it is aimed at raising the children's achievements in mathematics and English. The co-ordinator of this project is highly motivated and committed to its success. He has worked tirelessly, with notable success, at involving the parents and local community in this developmental work. A key feature of the program is the extent to which the children's progress, and any difficulties they may experience, is reported back to the class teacher along with suggestions for appropriate follow-up work. There is clear evidence to support the school's view that the children are benefiting from their participation in this program.

2.14 The year 1 classes have been involved since September 2004 in an 'enriched curriculum' approach to play and have daily opportunities for free play; training has been provided by the Belfast Education and Library Board's (BELB) Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS). The teachers plan carefully for the children's play and provide a wide choice of appropriate and challenging activities through which the children are encouraged to observe, explore and be imaginative and creative. The play sessions are based around class themes that promote the children's use of language and help to develop their mathematical and scientific thinking. The children participate purposefully and enthusiastically, and with sustained attention. They co-operate well with one another and many talk confidently about their play. The teachers and classroom assistants interact effectively with the children, providing sensitive and helpful support, and extending the children's language and ideas. The children's experiences in play in the early years contribute very well to their personal and social development and to their early learning in many areas. The teachers make good use of photographs to record examples of the children's work.

2.15 The school has identified just over one-quarter of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning and behaviour. There is a wide and coherent range of provision throughout the school to support the children experiencing difficulties with reading. A number of children in years 2-3 have embarked upon the Reading Recovery Programme and others take part in the Linguistic Phonics programme. Three classroom assistants have been trained to administer the Reading Partnership scheme each term involving several children in years 3 and 7. In addition, assistance is provided for a small number of children

through a number of outreach programmes. The children are gaining much from this well-structured programme of basic reading and writing.

2.16 Realistic education plans have been drawn up in consultation with the class teachers. Effective support from both outside agencies and within the school is provided for those children with emotional or behavioural difficulties. A series of measures has been instigated to ensure that these children can access the full curriculum. Art therapy, primary movement, counselling and 'Circle Time' are employed successfully for this purpose. The school Liaison Group, comprising the Education Welfare Officer, school nurse, social worker and education psychologist, meets with the Principal and the SENCO each term in order to monitor the progress and welfare of vulnerable children.

2.17 For the children in need of additional help there are regular sessions of either in-class support or individual and group withdrawal. In these lessons, the children learn in a warm environment; they respond well to the encouragement given to them by their teachers. The approaches are well matched to the children's learning needs and interests, and there is a suitable balance between talking and listening and reading and writing tasks. The teachers monitor the children's progress closely, targeting help where it is most needed. The majority of children make steady progress and a few children are making very good progress. The work in this area of the school's provision is benefiting immensely from the capable management and thoughtful leadership of the SENCO.

2.18 Considerable attention is given to devising and implementing systematic assessment, recording and reporting arrangements across years 1 to 7. Assessment is carried out using a variety of standardised tests and internal tests; these are used to get an overview of the children's performance, to guide the planning for special educational needs (SEN) and to monitor overall progression and improvement in standards. A significant feature of the assessment procedures is the extent to which the detailed analyses of the outcomes are used by the school's management to inform the future planning for teaching and learning and to set appropriate targets for improvement. The parents are kept informed of their children's progress through comprehensive annual reports at the end of the school year and through parental interviews in the middle of the year. The children's work is generally marked conscientiously and in a small number of instances written comments are used very effectively to provide guidance on how work can be improved and to involve the parents in supporting the work of the children. On occasion, however, the marking is not rigorous enough to bring about improvement in the children's work. There is scope to develop further this aspect of the school's work.

2.19 In spite of the best efforts of the school authorities, there are a number of aspects of the accommodation which are poor and which restrict unduly the range of teaching strategies that can be employed. In particular, many of the classrooms are too small and lack sufficient storage space; the staff facilities and office accommodation are inadequate and the access for children with physical disabilities is very restricted.

2.20 The Principal, who is in his ninth year in post, was awarded recently a prestigious prize for Educational Endeavour. He provides realistic and strategic leadership based on a sound knowledge of and vision for the school. He is ably assisted by the Vice-principal and school management team in reviewing rigorously the school's own assessment data. He ensures the effective monitoring of the work of the school as a basis for evaluating and improving provision and practice. He has established a culture of collegiality and a team

approach to curricular development. His main focus has been on the priority of raising expectations and on the setting of high standards of learning, teaching and on the pupils' attainments; in this, he has been highly successful.

3. **CONCLUSION**

3.1 The school has many strengths which include:

- the excellent relationships;
- the high standards of behaviour;
- the strong sense of team-work and the hard-working teachers;
- the many opportunities provided for the children to participate in music, drama and sport;
- the well-established links with the parents and community;
- the high quality of the pastoral care;
- the excellent quality of the majority of the teaching;
- the high quality provision for special educational needs and for ICT;
- the effective work on reading throughout the school;
- the excellent leadership of the Principal;
- the strong support of the members of the Board of Governors and the parents.

3.2 The quality of education provided in this school is very good. The educational and pastoral needs of the children are being well met.

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