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Mrs Dorrie Shenton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Shenton

Short inspection of Heron Cross Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 October 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, your leaders, staff and governors have transformed the school since its previous inspection in 2012 by enriching the creative curriculum and continually improving teaching and learning. You and the deputy headteacher provide strong and highly effective leadership. The school is a vibrant and positive learning community. As a result, pupils are enthusiastic and very well behaved learners. The staff value pupils' work and efforts and have created a 'can do' culture that inspires and motivates pupils to succeed and enjoy their education.

I walked with you and your deputy headteacher into an oasis of high-quality displays of fine art, sculptures, three-dimensional models and stories written by pupils and presented as their own books or 'novels'. We also looked at pupils' work across all curriculum subjects, which shows that the staff continue to build on the effective creative curriculum described at the time of your previous inspection. What was particularly impressive was the way you and your staff incorporate classic and modern literature into the work and displays that adorn every part of the school. It was like walking into Hobbiton as we passed through the main hall depicting a wonderful diorama representing J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth from *Lord of the Rings*. Your personal commitment and that of your deputy headteacher and staff is clearly reflected in the extra mile you go to make sure, for example, that every pupil learns to play a musical instrument. It is impressive that you have a school

orchestra because of the investment you and governors put into helping pupils experience and play musical instruments.

Nearly all the parents I spoke to were very positive about the work that you and your staff do for their children. This was also reflected in responses by text to Ofsted's regional office and those from the online questionnaire, Parent View. You and your leaders recognise, rightly, that there is still more that can be done to encourage more parents to support the work that pupils do in school. Your staff provide regular workshops, helping parents understand what their children learn and do in school. However, when you plan workshops for parents to share in their children's work and achievements you do not always get enough responses from parents who are hard to reach or engage with.

You are ambitious for pupils to succeed. Assessments show that many disadvantaged pupils currently in the school achieve as well as other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally and where this is not the case, differences are diminishing. Last year's assessments also show that the most able pupils achieve well across the school. For example, a significant proportion of the most able pupils, particularly in reading, reached higher than age-related standards by the end of key stage 2. Early reading skills are improving well in key stage 1. The most recent (2016) national phonics screening tests confirm these improvements, as the large majority of pupils in Year 1 reached the expected standard. Disadvantaged pupils did less well but these pupils and similar pupils in the school are catching up. The phonics results in 2015 showed a dip in performance compared with the previous year. I checked this and found that a significant number of pupils in that cohort had additional learning needs. Some strong teaching and effective support helped them to catch up by the time they finished Year 2, as the vast majority reached the required standard in phonics by then.

There has been good progress since the school's previous inspection in 2012. More consistently good or better teaching helps the vast majority of pupils in all classes, including children in the early years, to achieve well. Pupils write extensively about a range of subjects and topics. Although there are many examples of finished drafts of pupils' writing that are impressive, in some classes pupils make unnecessary spelling and punctuation errors when writing independently. The quality of pupils' handwriting is consistent and improves well as pupils move up the school. More attention is now needed to improve pupils' spelling and punctuation skills.

You and the deputy headteacher are passionate about securing the best outcomes for pupils by helping teachers to become successful practitioners. Senior leaders make sure that teachers have regular opportunities to work together and share effective practice. The deputy headteacher monitors pupils' work and progress diligently and has made sure that assessment has improved since the previous inspection. You and the staff make good use of regular checks, or as you call them, 'state of the nation' reviews, of pupils' progress and performance. This approach has been particularly beneficial in creating a culture where staff share and discuss pupils' learning and progress so that they can intervene sooner if pupils fall behind. This too is an improvement since the previous inspection. Assessment information is

accessible to governors, who are able to challenge and check and hold you and your staff to account for pupils' progress and performance. Senior leaders, particularly the deputy headteacher, take a strong lead in helping to improve teaching and assessment. However, the evidence from brief visits to lessons and pupils' work in books show that there should be a continued focus on ensuring that in all lessons teachers offer the right level of challenge.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding and staff vetting procedures are robust. Leaders and governors ensure that there is an effective culture of safeguarding and child protection. Governors and staff keep up to date with training, including first aid and risk assessments of all indoor and outdoor activities. Leaders, governors and staff comply fully with the requirement to complete training as part of the government's 'Prevent' strategy. You are all fully informed and understand the issues related to the risks that pupils and families may face when exposed to extremism, racism, bigotry and radicalisation. The pupils who talked with me during breaktimes were particularly complimentary about their personal, social and health education lessons. They said that they feel very safe in school, including when using the stimulating outdoor areas such as woodlands, gardens, adventure areas and climbing frames. The parents and pupils I spoke with and comments made by text to Ofsted during the inspection show that they trust the staff to keep pupils safe in school.

Inspection findings

- Your leadership and that of your deputy headteacher is strong, ambitious and visionary. Through effective training and professional development the school has a cohesive team of teaching and support staff.
- Improvements to teaching are made through regular monitoring, support and challenge. Your and the deputy headteacher's evaluations of teaching include 'state of the nation' reviews, accurate analyses of pupils' work in books, assessments of their progress over time and early identification of pupils who fall behind.
- Assessments are used well to check when pupils need special interventions or catch-up programmes, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is an improvement since the previous inspection.
- Assessments show that many disadvantaged pupils achieve well, including those that are more able, and where differences exist, these are diminishing.
- National assessments show that from low starting points in the early years the large majority of pupils make good progress and reach age-related standards in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage 1.
- In the early years teachers and support staff provide stimulating and varied indoor and outdoor activities. These encourage children to talk, role play and experiment with practical resources to improve their language and mathematics skills.

- At a very early stage Reception children enjoy trying out their early writing skills independently. The effective teaching of phonics enables children to identify combinations of letters and to sound them out while forming and writing letters. This consistent practice extends into Years 1 and 2 so that reading and writing skills develop well from the early years through into key stage 1 and are improving through key stage 2.
- The most recent national test results for Year 6 pupils (2016) showed that pupils made slower progress in writing compared with reading. Although standards are improving, more focus is now required on improving the accuracy of pupils' writing, particularly spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- The quality of teaching has improved since the previous inspection but there are still occasions when teaching does not provide enough challenge for pupils. The questions posed by teachers do not always expect pupils to think harder and the challenge tasks provided do not always extend pupils' understanding.
- There is a real sense of achievement displayed in every nook and cranny of the school. You promote high expectations for behaviour and learning and it is appropriate that the phrase 'seek thou the stars' is emblazoned on the front entrance of the school.
- There is a very good balance between the themes and topics studied by pupils and the skills and knowledge they acquire through these topics, covering all the subjects and core skills of the national curriculum.
- Outstanding use is made of outdoor areas, such as woodlands, sensory gardens, the school farm where pupils care for chickens, and the wonderful information technology room, which I believe is soon to be named the 'Starship Enterprise'.
- Fine art and sculptures made by pupils and visiting artists adorn every wall, corridor and classroom. I can see why pupils are very proud of their school and why so many told me they love coming to school.
- Classic and modern literature from a wide range of authors is studied in every class. Books play a very important part in promoting and developing pupils' love of reading. I observed early years children 'going on a safari'. This stimulated responses from the children as they recited parts of the story of the same title. Older pupils happily told me that they love reading to each other and often take books home each day. There is a real thirst for reading that is being promoted very well and accounts for pupils' good achievement.
- The curriculum and teaching make an outstanding contribution to pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development. You are right when you say that you want pupils 'to be more resilient learners'. We saw this in lessons as pupils try hard and persevere with tasks.
- The staff try very hard to engage with parents. There is potential to build on this by adopting a broader range of strategies to engage with those parents who are hard to reach. Some events and programmes do work. For example, last summer's multicultural week was a popular event with parents. The event combined the work pupils do in humanities (geography, history and religious education) and teaches important British

values of tolerance and respect for different faiths, customs and traditions.

- Pupils' personal development is further enhanced as part of the 'junior cadet' programme in partnership with the local police. This is successful in teaching personal responsibility and improves their social and team-building skills. The children's university enables pupils and families to celebrate success through a well-devised 'graduation' programme.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- you continue to focus on improving teaching further by making sure that all teachers provide the right level of challenge in lessons
- staff improve the accuracy of pupils' writing, for example spelling, punctuation and grammar
- leaders, staff and governors engage with even more parents and carers to enable them to contribute to pupils' learning so that it supports and complements the work that pupils do in school.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the deputy headteacher and a teacher responsible for mentoring newly qualified teachers. I reviewed and discussed with you and the deputy headteacher the self-evaluation document and improvement plan. We visited some classes to observe teaching and learning and spoke to pupils during lessons. I also spoke to pupils during lunch and breaktime to discuss their views about the school, their work and progress, as well as how safe they feel. I spoke to some parents at the start of the school day and considered 30 responses sent by text to Ofsted's West Midlands regional office, as well as 32 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. I met with two members of the governing body, the chair and vice-chair, as well as the local authority school improvement adviser, to discuss the school's performance. I scrutinised assessment information setting out the most recent national test results and checked safeguarding and staff vetting procedures.

During this short inspection I tested four lines of enquiry:

- The extent to which children in the early years and pupils in Year 1 make

progress in early reading, writing and phonics.

- The quality of teaching and the extent to which it has improved since the previous inspection.
- The extent to which leaders and staff are reducing the difference between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others who are not disadvantaged.
- The impact of the school's creative curriculum and the extent to which parents and carers are helped to support their children's learning at home.