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Mr J Mackay
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Mackay

Ofsted survey inspection programme: English

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 March 2009 to look at work in English.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit included a focus on our current survey theme of creativity in English. The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of three lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are average and achievement is good.

- Children have lower skills than is typical when they join the combined Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 class. By the end of the Reception year, their skills in communication, language and literacy demonstrate progress although they remain below the expected level.
- By the end of Key Stage 1, standards are in line with the national average. Progress over time has been better in reading than writing. This was reflected in last year's assessments, when more pupils in Year 2 reached the higher levels in reading than was typical nationally, but writing scores were below average.
- Across Key Stage 2, progress has improved, especially in writing, and is now good. Inspection evidence indicates that standards of writing in

Key Stage 2 are now at least average. Pupils write with thought and care.

- Last year's Year 6 pupils converted their overall average outcomes in Key Stage 1 into above average performance in both reading and writing, based on provisional results in national tests. This marked an improvement on the progress made by pupils in previous years.
- The school's progress tracking shows that pupils are currently making better than expected progress in English through Key Stage 2. This includes those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Based on moderated assessments, the school expects a further increase this year in the number of pupils reaching Level 5 in reading and writing. Inspection evidence indicated that pupils are well motivated and equipped to reach their targets.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

Teaching and learning in English are good.

- Pupils made generally good progress in the lessons seen. Basic reading and writing skills are soundly taught, and as continuous provision is being developed for the younger pupils, some opportunities are being taken to encourage speaking and listening and independent writing.
- A key strength observed in lessons was the use of lively, talkative activities which engaged the interest of both boys and girls. This provided good practice in higher level language skills in preparation for writing. For example, a teacher, acting in role, skilfully brought to life the world of the war time diary the class was reading. Pupils' empathetic response was well channelled into rehearsing their own first person writing.
- Observation indicated some ways in which the use of speaking and listening could develop further. Several pupils do not listen well to their partners' ideas and find it hard to explain themselves clearly or at length. Though teaching assistants play a valuable role in helping pupils to take part in speaking and listening activities, they could sometimes do more to support the school's policies for encouraging clear and extended talk.
- Assessment is used effectively to match teaching to pupils' needs. Teachers help pupils to understand their learning objectives, but pupils are not always confident about success criteria. Marking does not always clearly indicate which criteria have been achieved and pupils do not always follow directions about what to do next.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The school places strong emphasis on pupils reading substantial books. Pupils talk with pleasure about the good variety of play scripts, novels

and non-fiction they experience. Many boys and girls regularly borrow books from the school's shelves and some older pupils spoke knowledgeably about a range of authors and genres. The school takes an enterprising approach to involving parents in talking about books with their children as they grow older.

- Teachers develop pupils' literacy across the curriculum, as written work clearly demonstrates. Schemes are planned to cover the breadth of English and activities are suitably matched to pupils' stage of learning and interests in the mixed age classes.
- Learning about English feels relevant to pupils because the curriculum increasingly reflects modern media and their concerns. They enjoy classroom drama and the opportunities to learn in practical and fun ways. The school uses its resources well to enrich pupils' opportunities, for example, making the most of visits from police and fire brigade officers or staff in role as visitors from the past.

Leadership and management of English

Leadership and management of the subject are good.

- You and the subject leader have worked well together, with support from the local authority, to improve provision in English. A clear direction for the subject has been set out. Resources have been improved with good awareness of pupils' interests. The strengths of the teaching team have been enhanced through new recruitment and relevant professional development.
- Pupils' progress has been more closely and precisely monitored. Clearer expectations of lesson planning, interventions and assessment have been established. As a result, standards and achievement have risen for both boys and girls.

Creativity in English

Teachers at Thornhill School believe in taking creative risks in the classroom to stimulate spoken and written language. In an observed lesson, a teacher used the interactive whiteboard very well to create a newsroom scenario, prompting intense discussion between pairs of pupils as, in their role as editors, they made sense of scraps of information and structured sensible questions and notes. The teacher built well on pupils' questions and hypotheses. As a result, pupils found out for themselves how to communicate effectively for a clearly understood purpose. Teachers use role play in the classroom to encourage pupils to interact. Throughout the curriculum they find realistic and purposeful contexts for communicating. For example, pupils published effective public information leaflets about how to manage the health risks of micro organisms, based on their scientific research.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- involving pupils in clarifying more precisely what counts as good achievement of the learning objectives
- considering how to develop the quality of pupils' speaking and listening from the Early Years Foundation Stage upwards.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term and made available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Susan Bowles
Her Majesty's Inspector