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Mrs S Bell
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Bell

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: early learning

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and children, during my visit on 7 December 2010 to evaluate the provision and outcomes for children in communication, language and literacy, and personal, social and emotional development.

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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with you, the deputy headteacher in her role as Early Years Foundation Stage leader, and the Chair of the Governing Body; scrutiny of relevant documentation, including assessments of children's learning; and observation of sessions in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The effectiveness of meeting the children's communication, language and literacy, and personal, social and emotional learning and development needs is outstanding.

Achievement

- Children start in the nursery with varying attainment. More than half have knowledge, skills and understanding below that expected for their age and a small, but significant proportion have learning and social needs. All children achieve well, especially in personal, social and emotional development. In 2010, the proportion of children who reached the level expected at the end of the Reception year was above the national average

in all three strands. In emotional development, the proportion has been well above the national average for the last three years.

- In communication, language and literacy, outcomes have been more variable. In 2010, for the first time in recent years, the proportion of children who reached the level expected by the end of the Reception year was above the national average in all four strands. In addition, one third of the children did particularly well in language for communication and thinking, linking sounds and letters and in reading. School data show that this cohort of children continues to achieve well in Year 1 with some reading and writing at the level expected of children a year or two older.
- Outcomes in social development, reading and writing dipped markedly in 2009, but school data show that many children had specific needs and that all achieved very well from low starting points.
- Children's achievement is outstanding overall because of several key factors: the headteacher, the Early Years Foundation Stage leader and unit staff know each child exceptionally well. They observe and track children's progress closely, evaluating the learning and ensuring that the provision builds on children's interests and existing knowledge and skills. In a session led by the Reception class teacher, all the Reception children made good strides in recognising that the letters *s* and *h* made the sound *sh* when the teacher linked it to an event in the school nativity, and invited the children to suggest which items might be in her *shiny* box.
- Routines to promote independence and self-confidence are established well. The organisation of the unit ensures that Nursery and Reception children mix freely, get on well together, behave well and learn from one another. Reception and Nursery children worked together very productively and amicably to sieve and stir together flour, fruit and water. They chatted about what they needed and cooperated in pouring and filling cake tins. There were shrieks of excitement as their Christmas cakes took shape. Throughout the unit, all children showed self-assurance in choosing activities, getting what they needed, and talking with other children, staff and visitors. Many chose to play outside and became highly engaged in different activities, including writing *sh* in paint on the snow.

Quality of provision

- The strengths of the provision lie in the detailed planning and evaluation of children's learning; the effective teamwork and creative ideas of staff; the very good relationships between staff, children and their families; and skilful teaching, especially for children in the Reception year.
- The provision is well-rooted in the staff's understanding that young children are active learners. Themes are used well to link specific activities. Staff had used the children's excitement about the snow to explore and talk about the properties of snow, and to pack snow into boxes to make blocks which were then used to build an igloo. This had

been observed and recorded well in photographs, with accompanying commentaries including examples of what children said. The displays gave parents a clear picture of what children had gained from the experience.

- Although the telling of the story of The Jolly Christmas Postman fostered much excitement about sending parcels to the wolf, the quality of the subsequent play and learning owed much to the wealth of relevant resources and to the involvement of the teacher. Props included Christmas wrapping paper and labels, footsteps on the floor to indicate where customers were to queue in Lambton Post Office, scales, a photograph booth and post-people outfits. The teacher's questions and suggestions extended the children's ideas and sustained their involvement when she left. At one point, 18 children were totally engrossed in the scenario.
- Much thought was given to how to ensure that the children experienced and gained an understanding of the cultural aspects of Diwali. Having taken part in different activities and talked with a visitor, Reception children's comments showed a growing awareness of how the festival is celebrated.
- High emphasis is placed on encouraging reading, mark-making and writing. A nursery child was shown how to write a Christmas card and invited to have a go. The children have open access to core books along with boards, characters and simple tape recorders to encourage the retelling of stories. The school follows national guidance in structuring the development of children's awareness of the links between letters and sounds (phonics). There is scope to widen further the involvement of all key persons, and the use of books, texts and print to promote reading, writing and children's skills in reviewing what they have done.
- Parents are encouraged to take home their children's learning journeys, to add their own comments, photographs and things that the children have done, including mark-making and attempts to write their first name. The taking home of soft toy characters has prompted some detailed accounts and photographs showing children's pride, care and attachment.
- The staff use the information from their observations and assessments of each child's progress well to plan the next steps in the child's learning. When particular needs are identified, the school is quick to provide support such as the nurture group and sessions to develop social and listening skills through physical activities.

Leadership and management

- The headteacher and deputy headteacher pool their knowledge and skills exceptionally well in leading, monitoring and evaluating the work of the unit. They share high expectations and a common vision and commitment to ensuring that the children get off to a flying start and enter Key Stage 1 as confident, independent learners. This is exemplified well in the 'non negotiable' use of the outdoors, regardless of the weather. Staff have

consulted other providers and worked together to develop ideas for outdoor play which will promote progress in all six areas of learning. Leaders acknowledge there is work still to do, and the development of outdoor learning remains a priority in the action plan.

- Leaders are confident in their knowledge of what works best in the context of their school. The decision to introduce regular adult-led sessions of structured teaching of letters and sounds is paying off in the children's higher achievement in not only linking sounds and letters but also in reading and writing. As a result, the school is raising its expectations of children at the end of Years 1 and 2. It is also continuing additional support for those children who move into Year 1 some way behind in aspects of social and communication development.
- Data and observational evidence are used well to evaluate the impact of action and to pinpoint where change is needed. Leaders have a clear, well-informed picture of the factors which accounted for the dip in outcomes in 2009, and for variations in children's current progress. They have supported temporary members of staff and sustained a tight monitoring overview to ensure that expectations are met.
- Much is done through events such as the 'come and play' sessions and the teacher-led session on reading, to alert parents to how they can help their children at home. The school is also proactive in supporting families and children through contacts with other agencies and local services.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising the profile of reading even more as part of all activities and encouraging children to apply what they know in recognising new words
- extending routines, such as signing in, and enriching experiences to encourage children to write as part of all activities indoors and out
- fostering children's skills in reviewing what they have done
- monitoring provision and the children's learning journeys even more rigorously to identify strands and aspects of learning where the evidence of children's progress is less secure.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop the Early Years Foundation Stage in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Sonja Øyen
Her Majesty's Inspector