

**Helmsdale Primary School
and Nursery Class
The Highland Council
2 September 2008**

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1. Background

Helmsdale Primary School and Nursery Class were inspected in April 2008 as part of a national sample of primary and nursery education. The inspection covered key aspects of the work of the school at all stages. It evaluated nursery children's and pupils' achievements, the effectiveness of the school, the environment for learning, the school's processes for self-evaluation and innovation, and its capacity for improvement. There was a particular focus on attainment in English language and mathematics.

HM Inspectors examined the quality of the children's experience in the nursery, pupils' work and interviewed groups of pupils, including the pupil council, and staff. Members of the inspection team also met with representatives of the Parent Council, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and groups of parents¹.

The school serves the village of Helmsdale and the surrounding area. At the time of the inspection the roll was 48, including 13 children in the nursery class. The proportion of pupils who were entitled to free school meals was well below the national average. Pupils' attendance was in line with the national average. Over the past two sessions there had been no permanent headteacher in post. There had been two different arrangements for acting headship. At the time of the inspection the present acting headteacher was on sick leave.

2. Key strengths

HM Inspectors identified the following key strengths.

- Polite, well behaved nursery children and primary pupils.
- The welcoming and inclusive ethos.
- Positive relationships between staff and pupils and the attention paid by all staff to pupils' care and welfare.

¹ Throughout this report, the term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

3. What are the views of parents, pupils and staff?

HM Inspectors analysed responses to questionnaires issued to all parents, P4 to P7 pupils, and to all staff. Information about the responses to the questionnaires appears in Appendix 2.

Parents, pupils and staff were very positive about almost all aspects of the school. Parents felt that the school was caring and supportive of their children. Parents expressed discontent about the length of time the school had been without a permanent headteacher. Pupils said they were happy at the school and that the staff made learning enjoyable. The staff enjoyed working in the school and were committed to its further development.

4. How good are learning, teaching and achievement?

Learners' experiences

The overall quality of the curriculum in the nursery class was good. Staff in the nursery class provided children with an appropriately broad and balanced curriculum. Children actively engaged in activities which were appropriate to their individual needs. Appropriate transition arrangements were in place between nursery and P1 which included information sharing, teacher visits and a buddying system with P6 pupils. Staff in the early stages of primary had not yet developed high quality approaches to active learning to build on children's experiences in the nursery. The overall quality of the curriculum at the primary stages was satisfactory and took appropriate account of national and education authority guidance. Visiting specialist teachers made effective contributions to pupils' learning in the expressive arts. All pupils received appropriate physical education and benefited from additional after-school activities organised by the Active Schools Coordinator. Through the programme for personal and social development (PSD), pupils were learning how to keep safe and stay healthy. Pupils received informative talks from the local policeman on the dangers of substance misuse. The programme of environmental studies gave pupils opportunities for learning about local and world topics. The programme did not yet fully ensure the progressive development of pupils' skills. School staff had still to develop the effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) to enrich all areas of the curriculum. Across the school and in the nursery, the quality of teaching and staff interaction was good overall. Nursery staff interactions with children were very well judged and were sensitive to the needs of individual children. They consistently and effectively used questioning and discussion to extend children's thinking and build upon prior learning. At the primary stages, teachers gave clear explanations, used praise well and set appropriate homework. They shared the learning intentions of lessons with pupils. Teachers used questioning effectively and gave pupils encouraging written feedback. Staff did not always use pupils' responses to further develop their learning and did not always give pupils guidance on how to improve.

Children's experiences in the nursery were good and all children took part in a wide range of engaging learning opportunities. Children responded well to the play

experiences offered and almost all showed high levels of motivation and independence. Many children collaborated in activities to succeed in achieving goals. Almost all children were making good progress with their learning. Staff discussed activities with children throughout the session and took account of their interests but did not yet fully involve children in thinking about their learning. In the primary classes, pupils' learning experiences were satisfactory. Pupils were keen to learn and participated well in all lessons. They were well behaved and maintained good concentration. They responded well to questions and were motivated to learn. Pupils had too few opportunities for choice or responsibility for their own learning. Overall, the pace of learning was appropriate. Too many lessons lacked sufficient challenge for the more able pupils. There were too few opportunities for active play and learning within classes.

Improvements in performance

The school had successfully improved its performance in a number of important areas. Children in the nursery class were making good progress in developing their communication and language skills. Almost all children could confidently contribute to conversations and make their needs and ideas known to each other and other adults. They listened well to each other and enjoyed listening to stories. Most children recognised their own name in print and a few purposefully practised their emerging writing skills during play. A few children were developing an effective knowledge of letter sounds.

At the primary stages, the overall quality of attainment in English language was good. Most pupils were achieving appropriate national levels in listening, talking, reading and writing. Around half of these pupils were attaining these earlier than might normally be expected. All pupils listened well to their teachers and could follow instructions effectively. They were confident in expressing answers and opinions. At the early stages, pupils were making good progress in beginning to read with understanding. At the middle and upper stages, pupils discussed and answered questions well on the texts they were reading. At all stages, pupils wrote regularly for a variety of purposes. For example, pupils in the early stages were making good progress in writing about their topic. In the middle and upper stages pupils wrote well-structured plays with appropriate stage directions. Pupils' presentation of written work was not of a consistently high standard.

In the nursery class, children were making good progress in early mathematical learning. Most children were able to sort and name shapes in a range of situations and count up to ten. They were developing a good understanding of measure through play activities. They used appropriate mathematical language and engaged with measuring equipment in a meaningful way.

Across the primary stages, standards in mathematics were good. Most pupils were attaining appropriate national levels. Those with additional support needs were making good progress in their learning. Pupils at P1 had developed a very good understanding of early mathematical concepts. Across the school, pupils were able to collect and organise information. Their skills in organising and displaying data using ICT were not well developed. At P4, pupils knew how to work with simple fractions and decimals when recording money or using calculator displays. By P7, pupils' written calculations were

good. They were less competent in mental strategies and calculations involving multiplication facts and decimals. At P2 and P3, pupils were able to place events in time sequences and could tell time using analogue and digital displays. At P7, pupils had a good knowledge of angles, shape and symmetry. They could identify correctly a range of shapes and discuss their properties. At all stages, pupils used a narrow range of strategies in problem-solving and enquiry. Their skills in applying strategies in a variety of problem solving contexts were not well developed.

Children in the nursery class were making good progress in their knowledge and understanding of the world. They were developing investigative skills for example, as they explored the properties of eggs and water. Children worked together well to create large constructions with foam shapes. In their expressive and aesthetic development, children responded creatively to a range of interesting art materials and engaged enthusiastically in role play. They were developing their confidence and skills in balancing, crawling and controlling balls, through a wide range of energetic activities.

At the middle and upper stages, pupils engaged in lively music making and singing linked to their topic. In physical education, pupils at P4 to P7 took part energetically in an effective fitness programme. In technology, they responded well to questions on food additives and how to eat healthily. At the early stages, pupils were confident in discussing their farming topic.

Staff celebrated nursery children's and primary pupils' achievements. However, pupils did not have opportunities to take part in a range of wider activities to develop citizenship. Pupils along with parents and staff had effectively organised fundraising events to purchase and install a new adventure course in the playground. Pupils at all stages gained confidence by performing a concert at Christmas time for the parents and community. The pupil council had been active in planning improvements to the school and supporting positive relationships within the school. The school had achieved the highest award as a Health Promoting School.

Over the last two sessions, the authority had not found it possible to appoint a permanent headteacher. As a consequence, various arrangements to provide acting headship had been put in place. The staff had made some progress in improving aspects of provision identified in the school's improvement plan but overall progress had been slow. While staff had effectively maintained pupils' attainment in English language and mathematics, they had not ensured opportunities for pupils to experience a range of activities to promote personal and wider achievement.

5. How well are pupils' learning needs met?

The arrangements to meet learning needs in the nursery and the primary school were good. Nursery staff knew individual children very well. They made regular observations of children at play and used this information effectively to monitor children's progress and to plan the next steps for learning. They had yet to involve children in this process. Staff were sensitive to the needs of individual children who needed additional support for their learning. In the primary classes, teachers used a range of effective strategies to identify pupils' learning needs. Tasks and activities were mainly well chosen to meet the needs of

pupils. Some activities did not provide sufficient challenge for higher achieving pupils. Individual pupils were very well supported by class teachers, the visiting learning support teacher and pupil support assistants. Teachers received helpful advice and very good support from the learning support teacher. The school had developed appropriate individualised educational programmes for pupils with additional support needs. Staff set clearly stated, and appropriate learning targets for pupils with additional support needs, reviewed progress regularly and met with parents when annual reports were issued.

6. How good is the environment for learning?

Aspect	Comment
Care, welfare and development	Nursery staff provided effective care and support to children appropriate to their age, ability and confidence. Children enjoyed a range of healthy snack options and were involved in an oral health programme. Staff in the primary school provided pupils with very good pastoral support. Children and pupils were very well looked after. The caring and committed staff knew the nursery children and primary pupils well and were sensitive to their physical, social and emotional needs. A clearly stated child protection policy was in place. All staff had received relevant training and were knowledgeable in procedures. Systems were in place to keep pupils safe and deal with the recording of accidents and incidents of bullying and racism. Health promotion and healthy living, including the involvement of a wide range of agencies, were strong features of the school. Transfer arrangements from nursery to P1 and from P7 to Golspie High School were well managed.

Aspect	Comment
Management and use of resources and space for learning	<p>The learning environment was good overall. Children in the nursery had regular access to a secure area for outdoor play. Pupils in the primary school benefited from an attractive playground. All classrooms were spacious, bright and colourfully decorated. The school had good disabled access and security arrangements were appropriate. The gymnasium and stage provided good areas for physical education and drama. The library had been recently refurbished and doubled as a well resourced music room. The unused secondary school wing and playground were unsafe and posed a potential hazard to pupils.</p>
Climate and relationships, expectations and promoting achievement and equality and fairness	<p>In the nursery class, relationships between staff and children were positive and supportive. Children's work was displayed to good effect and staff regularly celebrated achievement and successes. There was a warm, welcoming atmosphere in the school. Staff had very good relationships with pupils and there was an ethos of mutual respect. There were regular assemblies, supported by the local minister. These provided good opportunities for religious observance and for celebrating pupils' achievements. Equality issues were discussed as part of the PSD and health education programmes. School staff did not do enough to effectively promote diversity and racial equality.</p>
The school's success in involving parents, carers and families	<p>Staff successfully involved parents in the life of the school and kept them suitably informed about their children's progress. Parents worked closely with the school to raise funds. School concerts and parents' evenings were well attended. Parents were appropriately consulted on sensitive health issues. The Parent Council and PTA were active in supporting the school to improve its provision and facilities. Staff had established effective links with the community. These included a link with local businesses to promote tree planting in the playground and helpful links with the local heritage society. Parents supported pupils' reading at the early stages through a home/school diary.</p>

7. Leading and improving the school

Appendix 1 provides HM Inspectors' overall evaluation of the work of the school.

Helmsdale Primary School and Nursery Class provided a positive and supportive learning environment for its children and pupils. Staff were caring and committed. Nursery children were happy and making good progress in the key areas. Primary pupils were hard-working. They attained good standards in reading, writing and mathematics but there was headroom for further improvement. Overall, there were important weaknesses in the school's provision. Limited progress had been made in taking forward important national initiatives, including developing the curriculum. Staff did not always ensure that pupils' learning experiences were stimulating and innovative. Some higher attaining pupils were capable of improving their performance and required further challenge.

The school had been without a permanent headteacher for the past two sessions. The acting headteacher had managed the day-to-day running of the school effectively. She had maintained good relationships and a positive ethos within the school. However, there were important weaknesses in the education authority's strategic leadership of the school which had limited the school's capacity to improve. There had been no support from the authority towards helping the school to develop its provision to ensure pupils made appropriate progress in all aspects of their learning. Overall, the school's arrangements for evaluating its work were weak. There had been limited progress in implementing the recommendations in the school's improvement plan. The school had not yet developed systematic arrangements for monitoring the curriculum and tracking pupils' progress. With appropriate support from the education authority, the staff have the capacity to improve.

Nursery staff were aware of the implications of the Scottish Social Services Council's Codes of Practice. At the last Care Commission inspection of the nursery class there was one requirement that the provider required to action in relation to procedures for the safe recruitment of staff. This had been addressed. There was one recommendation relating to support for staff training which had not been actioned.

Main points for action

The school and education authority, in liaison with HM Inspectors, should take action to ensure improvement in:

- the quality of the curriculum to ensure pupils' progress in all aspects of learning;
- monitoring, evaluating and planning the work of the school in order to improve the educational experiences of all pupils;
- the overall quality of leadership in the school; and
- pupils' safety within the school playing areas.

What happens next?

The school and the education authority have been asked to prepare an action plan indicating how they will address the main findings of the report, and to share that plan with parents. HM Inspectors will engage with the school and the education authority to monitor progress. They will publish an interim report on progress within one year of the publication of this report. HM Inspectors will continue to engage with the school and the education authority in monitoring progress, and will undertake a follow-through inspection. This will result in another report to parents, within two years of the publication of this report, on the extent of improvement that has been achieved.

Pat May
Managing Inspector

2 September 2008

Appendix 1 Indicators of quality

The sections in the table below follow the order in this report. You can find the main comments made about each of the quality indicators in those sections. However, aspects of some quality indicators are relevant to other sections of the report and may also be mentioned in those other sections.

How good are learning, teaching and achievement?	
The curriculum	satisfactory
Teaching for effective learning	good
Children's experiences (nursery class)	good
Learners' experiences (primary stages)	satisfactory
Improvements in performance (nursery class)	good
Improvements in performance (primary stages)	good

How well are pupils' learning needs met?	
Meeting learning needs (nursery class)	good
Meeting learning needs (primary stages)	good

How good is the environment for learning?	
Care, welfare and development	very good
Management and use of resources and space for learning	good
The engagement of staff in the life and work of the school	satisfactory
Expectations and promoting achievement	good
Equality and fairness	satisfactory
The school's success in involving parents, carers and families	good

Leading and improving the school	
Developing people and partnerships	weak
Leadership of improvement and change (of the headteacher)	weak
Improvement through self-evaluation	weak

This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors:

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

Appendix 2 Summary of questionnaire responses

Important features of responses from the various groups which received questionnaires are listed below.

What parents thought the school did well	What parents think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensured children were happy in the school.• Provided helpful and informative parent evenings.• Treated children fairly.• Explained how parents could help with homework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide parents with a clear idea of the school's priorities for improving education.
What pupils thought the school did well	What pupils think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers explained things clearly and helped them enjoy school.• Teachers helped them with class work, told them how they were getting on and how they could improve.• Helped pupils stay safe and healthy.• Allowed pupils a say in how to improve the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There were no significant issues.
What staff thought the school did well	What staff think the school could do better
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintained good relationships with the community.• All staff enjoyed working in the school.• The school showed care and concern for all pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The school needed leadership to promote teamwork.• Facilitate continuing professional development.

How can you contact us?

If you would like an additional copy of this report

Copies of this report have been sent to the headteacher and school staff, the Director of Education, Culture and Sport, local councillors and appropriate Members of the Scottish Parliament. Subject to availability, further copies may be obtained free of charge from HM Inspectorate of Education, Longman House, 28 Longman Road, Inverness, IV1 1SF or by telephoning 01463 253115. Copies are also available on our website www.hmie.gov.uk.

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If you have a concern about this report, you should write in the first instance to our Complaints Manager, HMIE Business Management and Communications Team, Second Floor, Denholm House, Almondvale Business Park, Almondvale Way, Livingston EH54 6GA. You can also e-mail HMIEComplaints@hmie.gsi.gov.uk. A copy of our complaints procedure is available from this office, by telephoning 01506 600200 or from our website at www.hmie.gov.uk.

If you are not satisfied with the action we have taken at the end of our complaints procedure, you can raise your complaint with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). The SPSO is fully independent and has powers to investigate complaints about Government departments and agencies. You should write to the SPSO, Freepost EH641, Edinburgh EH3 0BR. You can also telephone 0800 377 7330 fax 0800 377 7331 or e-mail: ask@spso.org.uk. More information about the Ombudsman's office can be obtained from the website: www.spso.org.uk.

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