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Elaine White
St Mary and St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School
Stella Lane
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Tyne and Wear
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Dear Miss White

No formal designation inspection of St Mary and St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 29 January 2020, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. The findings do not change the overall effectiveness judgement of outstanding from the last section 5 inspection.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for a no formal designation inspection of schools. The inspection was carried out to enable Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to better understand the quality of education in specific subjects provided by outstanding primary schools. The subject in focus was languages.

Main findings

Developing cultural awareness, celebrating difference and exploring the international dimension of education, runs like a rod of iron through the curriculum at your school. European and international projects are central to much of your work. This is mirrored in a full commitment to learning French as a modern language. Your current project, where your school has links with others in Romania, Italy and France, has enabled pupils to develop an awareness of different European cultures and different Romance languages. The 'journey across Europe' project, for example, shares not only local landmarks such as the Angel of the North with schools across Europe, but the report is also available in different languages.

The school has a long-running and deep relationship with partner schools in Shanghai. There are annual reciprocal visits to China for staff and pupils. All of these aspects of the wider curriculum weave together and support pupils' language awareness well.

French is taught to all year groups from Year 2 through to Year 6. All classes are taught for one hour per week by a specialist French teacher. All pupils study languages. You start the formal curriculum for French in Year 2, which is one year earlier than required by the national curriculum. There has been a consistent approach to teaching French for many years. Pupils build upon their knowledge term by term and year by year. Your specialist teacher uses assessment effectively to know where pupils need support or where the curriculum needs to be further tweaked to ensure that pupils achieve well.

Your specialist teacher has an excellent understanding of her subject. She understands precisely the need to ensure that pupils make progress step by step. She knows what this looks like in French. She weaves together exposure to vocabulary with phonological and grammatical awareness. She does this very well.

During my visit, I saw this first hand when she was introducing vocabulary for pets. Due consideration was given not only to the gender of nouns, but also to the French sound–spelling link. Nouns were grouped together to highlight the ‘ch’ and ‘oi’ sounds in French. The teacher made comparisons with English. Pupils showed how much French they already knew and built upon this in the lesson. In one class, pupils were enjoying playing with sounds and language as they laughed at the possibility of having a ‘croissant’ for a pet rather than a ‘poisson’ as they practised the ‘oi’ sound.

Curriculum plans ensure that speaking, listening, reading and writing are used to practise and develop language. Pupils’ writing is well developed. For example, pupils progress beyond writing individual words to sentences and paragraphs. They can link sentences and express opinions. They build on their prior knowledge so that each piece of writing at the end of a unit becomes slightly more complex by way of structure while broadening pupils’ vocabulary.

The vast majority of pupils keep up with the ambitions of the curriculum. They can recall words, sentences and phrases. They do this particularly well when these are connected to actions or songs. They can produce simple sentences from scratch using the language that they know. They have a grasp of high-frequency words to help them to do so. Pupils’ pronunciation is strong and when slips occur they often note this themselves or only require the most modest of prompting.

Teaching assistants are present when the specialist teacher delivers lessons. They then help individuals to catch up if they are struggling. This includes pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) if they need support. Teachers benefit from training to equip them to practise French during the week. This helps them to embed vocabulary and simple phrases in pupils’ long-term memory. Your specialist teacher is part of local networks of language teachers to help her to develop her practice. You and your headteacher peers have included languages in your local monitoring programme. When needed, you use further expertise from

local secondary schools, for example when looking specifically at the structure of the French curriculum.

You are highly ambitious for your school. Only the very best will do for the pupils in your care and this includes the quality of individual subjects. You are fully aware of the few areas where languages can be improved. For example, you had already identified the need to further develop assessment so that it pinpoints even more accurately the next steps for pupils. You know that the ongoing 'drip feed' of French through the week by class teachers and teaching assistants could be even more consistent.

Pupils' achievement is very strong in French. The standards that pupils reach when they leave school are impressive. This is because pupils progress through a very well-designed and implemented curriculum during their time at school. This curriculum focuses on the development of phonological and grammatical awareness in addition to a broadening of vocabulary. In addition, your pupils are delightful, inquisitive and very proud of their school. They work very hard and want to do their best.

Evidence

I met with you, members of the senior leadership team and the specialist teacher of French. I spoke with the senior team about the international dimension at school. I visited French lessons and looked at a selection of pupils' work in French. This included work from lessons that I visited. I spoke with two groups of pupils about their learning in French and we looked at their work together. I evaluated the curriculum plans, policies and development plans for languages.

Context

St Mary and St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School is an average-sized primary school. There are currently 237 pupils on roll. The proportion of pupils who are entitled to free school meals is below average. Overall, the proportion of pupils with SEND, including pupils with education, health and care plans, is below average.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Gateshead. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Michael Wardle

Her Majesty's Inspector