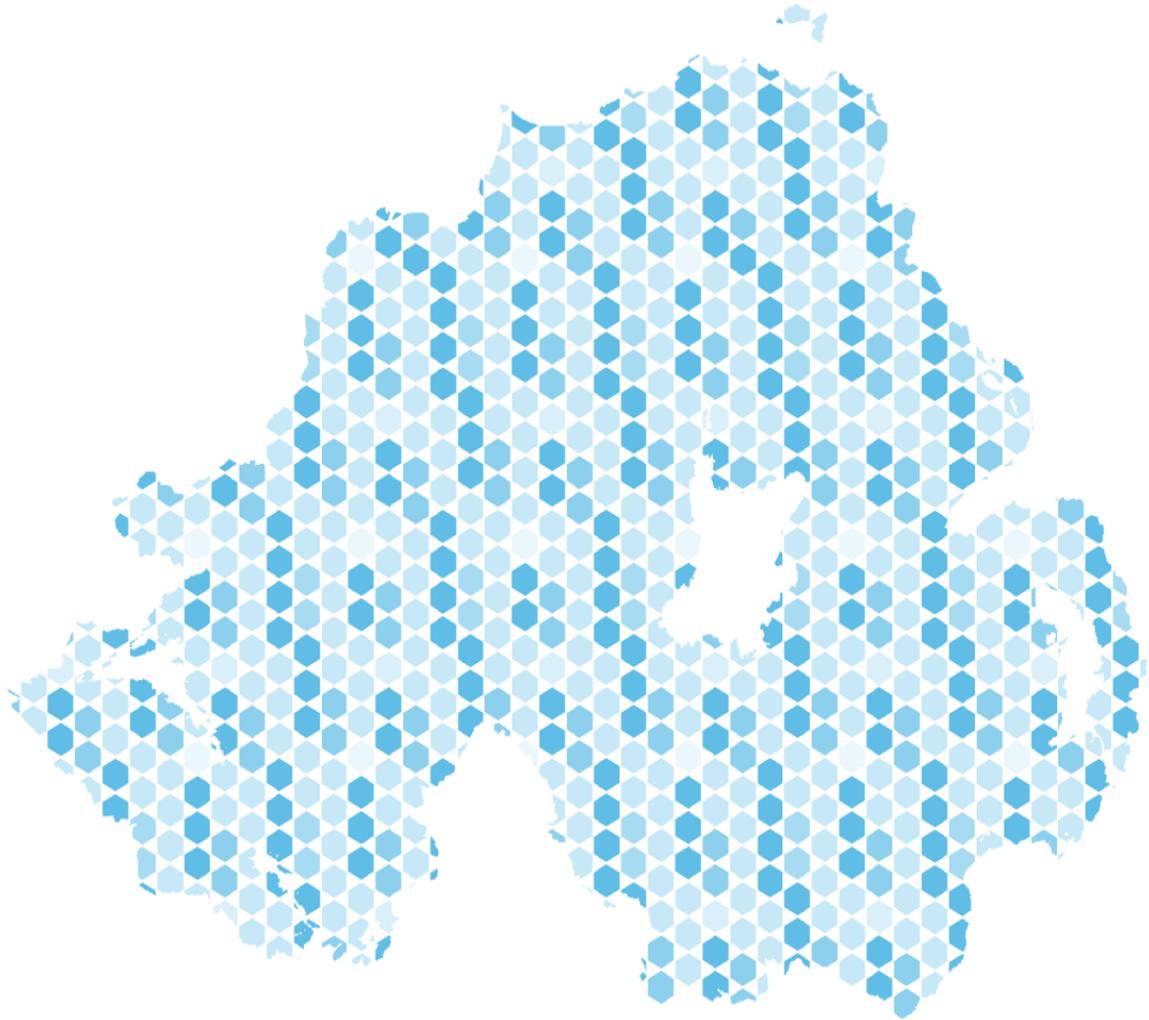


# PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training  
Inspectorate

Gaelscoil na bhFál, Belfast

Report of an Inspection  
in March 2011



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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Gaelscoil na bhFál, is an Irish-medium primary school, situated off the Falls Road in Belfast. Most of the children come from English speaking homes and experience the curriculum through total immersion in Irish. The enrolment in the school has declined slightly in recent years from 213 children in 2006 to the current 180 children. Approximately 38% of the children in the primary school have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Approximately 42% are entitled to free school meals (FSM). Since the last inspection, a single unit nursery unit has been opened as an integral part of the school. At the time of the inspection the Vice-principal had recently retired and a replacement was not yet in post.

### 1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on:

- the quality of the children's achievements and standards in literacy and numeracy;
- the quality of provision for learning; and
- the quality of leadership and management.

In addition, the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning; and the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection were evaluated.

### 1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, GOVERNORS, SUPPORT STAFF AND CHILDREN

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching staff to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and a group of the children from year 6.

The responses overall were highly affirmative of the work of the school and indicated a strong sense of community and shared vision among all of those associated with the school.

Forty-four parental questionnaires were returned to Inspection Services Branch; 22 returns included additional written comments. The parents expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the overall educational and pastoral provision provided by the school. In particular, they recorded their appreciation of the hard-working, approachable and dedicated staff, the stimulating curriculum and the progress made by their children.

The responses to the teacher questionnaires were very affirmative of the school. They indicated that the teachers enjoy their work, have a strong sense of teamwork and appreciate both the Principal's leadership role and the development of the middle management tier. The support staff indicated, also, a high level of satisfaction with their work within the school.

The governors reported confidence in the Principal's vision for the school, and acknowledged their appreciation of the teachers' commitment to the care and development of the children, their enthusiasm for the promotion of the Irish language and wider curriculum, the success of former children who had attended the school and their appreciation of the hard-working and professional staff.

In discussions, the children in year 6 talked confidently about their enjoyment of school and, in particular, the regular opportunities they have to engage in extra-curricular activities. They reported that they all feel happy and safe at school and are aware of what to do if they have any concerns.

The six responses from the nursery unit questionnaires were very positive and praised the work of the staff and the good progress being made by the children.

The small number of issues raised through the questionnaires have been shared with the Principal and the governors.

#### 1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in this school and nursery unit is very good. The strengths of the pastoral care provision include the excellent working relationships observed between the staff and the children which develop the children's confidence and self-esteem. The children are friendly and well-mannered; their behaviour is very good. The school provides an excellent range of extra-curricular activities which enrich the children's learning experiences and the inclusive ethos ensures very good integration of children with a wide range of additional needs. In addition, the close links established with Ionad Uíbh Eachach, the neighbouring family centre, helps to support the wider needs of children and families within the school.

#### 1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school and the nursery unit have very good comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education.

#### 1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school and the nursery unit give excellent attention to promoting healthy eating through the effective implementation of their healthy eating policy. The children in the primary school and the nursery unit have regular opportunities to engage in a range of physical activities which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles. The school makes good use of the local facilities for extending the opportunities for the Physical Education of the primary school children.

#### 1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The school has developed many effective links with the parents. Staff communicate using an appropriate range of written information and meetings.

Parents are informed of their children's progress through parent teacher meetings and annual progress reports and they are encouraged to contribute to the school and support their children's learning. The school is exploring appropriately additional methods to engage all the parents with their children's learning. The school has developed effective links with a number of the local primary and post-primary schools to develop further the children's

experiences in drama and sport and has strong links with Ionad Uíbh Eachach, the neighbouring family centre. In addition, the school is developing a wide range of effective links within the local community including a gardening initiative in conjunction with Belfast City Council and working with specialist artists.

## **2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS**

### **2.1 LEARNING**

An analysis of the key stage (KS) 2 assessment data, over the past four years indicates that, in English, the school's performance is just above the Northern Ireland (NI) average and well above the average for other primary schools within the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB). In mathematics, the standards achieved have been consistently below the NI average but in line with the average for other primary schools within the BELB. There is a similar trend in attainment when the school is compared to other schools in the same FSM band. In Irish, most of the children reach the expected levels of attainment.

The majority of the children attain levels in English and Irish which are in line with their ability. While the majority of children are making progress in mathematics, their standards and attainment are less well developed. Those children who require additional support with English, Irish and numeracy are identified at an early stage; they receive well-focused support and are making steady progress in improving their standard of work.

Most children are well motivated and generally have a positive attitude to and enjoyment in their learning. They listen attentively to the teachers and are developing good self-management skills within the classroom. A majority of the children are making progress in working collaboratively though group and paired work. At times they need to listen more closely to one another's responses. The significant number of children identified on the special needs register is well integrated into all aspects of school life and work.

### **2.2 IRISH, ENGLISH AND LITERACY**

The overall quality of provision for Irish, English and literacy is good.

The teachers promote well the development of the children's oral communication skills. In the foundation stage (FS) and KS1, the teachers make good use of stories, songs and rhymes in Irish to develop the children's understanding and appropriate attention is given to the acquisition of key vocabulary. Whole class approaches with the younger children impeded effective engagement at times and there is scope to make better use of smaller group oracy sessions. In KS2, the children's participation in drama festivals, debates and inter-school quizzes has increased their confidence, and a majority of the children can participate in high level discussions on a growing range of topics. Across all key stages, there is a suitable emphasis placed on talking and listening through whole-class questioning and the teachers encourage extended oral responses from the children with varying degrees of success. The children develop their spoken Irish gradually as they progress through the school and have good levels of proficiency by the end of KS2.

The teachers have created a rich culture of literacy throughout the school. There are well-stocked libraries for each key stage containing a wide variety of suitable reading materials, including newspapers and magazines in both Irish and English. In addition, the literacy co-ordinator organises an annual 'Reading Week'. The younger children are introduced to early reading and they enjoy shared and guided reading activities which are reinforced with a structured phonics programme for Irish. The teachers make good use of several commercial reading schemes and novels in both Irish and English and daily periods of silent reading to encourage the children's interest and concentration. In order to cater for

the wide range of reading abilities across the classes, groups of children are withdrawn for reading support. In the best literacy practice observed, the teacher spent considerable time with each group supporting the children and developing their understanding while the other children worked productively on suitable writing activities linked to their reading. By the end of KS2, a majority of the children are reading at satisfactory to good levels but a minority of children require further in-class support. In order to raise further the children's standards in reading, the teachers need to respond more effectively to the wide range of the children's individual needs, monitor more closely their progress in reading and to set individual targets for improvement.

In the FS, the children experiment with letter and word formation in the context of their play based learning, and by the end of KS1, they can write simple sentences and paragraphs in Irish, on a range of topics. The older children enjoy a wider range of writing tasks and are able to write in a variety of styles and for different audiences. Much of the written work in KS2 is linked appropriately to cross-curricular topics and the children's own experiences and interests. In both languages, the children engage in letter writing to pen-pals, poems, project work on geographical and historical subjects, playscripts and diaries. By the end of year 7 the standards achieved by a majority of the children in writing are satisfactory to good.

The initial preparation for the introduction of English, taught as a separate subject, begins during year 4. The school delays the formal introduction of English, the first language of almost all of the children, until they have reached the age of seven or eight years old in order to ensure that their levels of competence in Irish are established firmly. The parents are encouraged to read to their children from a young age. In year 4 they are encouraged to give more focused support to reading in English with their children and to provide suitable reading materials for them. The school has identified, in common with many schools with a similar catchment area, a significant number of children, who present with language and communication difficulties. The school should review its approach to the starting age for the introduction of teaching English to these children to help address their language and communication needs.

The current priorities in literacy identified by the co-ordinator include the emphasis placed on Irish language enrichment for all the children, the renewed focus on phonics in KS2, and further support for the middle ability groups of children. There is an on-going focus by the teachers on enhancing the Irish language experience for the children in KS2. The school has identified that by year 5, a sizeable proportion of children rely on a limited number of language patterns and structures in their spoken Irish. In order to enrich the children's second language acquisition and expressive capacity, the teachers model a range of speech forms.

The literacy co-ordinator has produced a useful guide which helps the teachers evaluate their work across a range of important indicators. The work in literacy benefits considerably from the thoughtful leadership and capable management of the co-ordinator.

The school has made a modest start to incorporating ICT into aspects of the children's literacy programme. The use and potential of ICT to support learning, teaching and to develop standards in both Irish and English are under-developed.

## 2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The quality of the provision for mathematics and numeracy is satisfactory.

The mathematics' co-ordinator worked closely with the former Vice-principal to develop mathematics within the school. She has assumed responsibility recently and is making a good start to auditing the developmental needs of the staff and to analysing the performance

data in order to identify key priorities. It is timely that she has sought advice and support from the mathematics advisers of the BELB to develop the area of problem solving and application of mathematics to real life contexts in KS2. While the school has provided in-service support for aspects of mathematics, including mental mathematics there have been limited opportunities for training and staff development focused on teaching and learning in mathematics since that provided for the Numeracy Strategy. The staff is working hard throughout the school to broaden the range of enjoyable and meaningful practical mathematical experiences for the children. The current action plan identifies practical work as the key priority in KS2. The action plan, however, needs to identify more clearly the link between the purpose of the planned practical activities, the learning to be promoted and how the outcomes for the children will be evaluated. The continuing development of mathematics at FS and KS1 needs to be included.

There is a broad school overview of the coverage of all five attainment targets to guide staff with their planning and this is supplemented by a commercial scheme for mathematics. The leadership and management need to monitor more carefully the implementation of the scheme across year groups to ensure sufficient challenge, coherence and progression in core numeracy skills.

The teachers' planning needs clearer intended learning intentions, success criteria and opportunities for assessment to guide their day-to-day teaching.

In the best practice, the teachers make effective evaluations of the planned programme to assess the quality of the children's learning, and use the information to tailor their scheme of work and improve their teaching strategies to meet the needs of all of the children. This approach needs to be used more consistently to inform classroom practice throughout the school.

In the FS, the children count, sort and make patterns as they engage in a range of teacher led and self-initiated play based activities which at times extend the children's mathematical thinking and develop their mathematical language. By the end of the FS most of the children are making steady progress in their understanding of the key mathematical concepts and language. Songs, rhymes and stories are used very effectively to support early mathematics throughout the nursery unit and FS.

As the children progress through KS1 and KS2 they continue to develop their mathematical language and acquire an increasing understanding of number and concepts through a range of appropriate practical experiences. In the best practice, the children are provided with opportunities to engage in challenging work which is well-matched to their ability and they have good opportunities for meaningful investigative work.

In discussion with the children most could make simple mental calculations, have a secure understanding of concepts such as shape and expressed an enjoyment of mathematics. There were elements of the mathematics programme in which many of the children were less secure in their knowledge such as measurement and time. The quality of the children's written work indicates inconsistencies in expectation of presentation and accuracy, and, at times, a lack of sufficient breadth and progression in all areas of learning. The staff needs to review the balance between whole class teacher-led lessons and giving greater emphasis to more sustained and focused approaches with smaller groups in order to facilitate discussion and the assessment of the children's understanding of key concepts. By the end of KS2, a majority of the children achieve satisfactory standards in their work.

The learning support teacher works very effectively with small groups of children who require additional support with their learning in mathematics. These children are making very good progress in a short time. The approaches being used by the learning support teacher should be disseminated and integrated more fully into class teaching to benefit all of the children.

The use of ICT as an integral part of teaching and learning in mathematics is in the early stages of development.

### **3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING**

3.1 The school provides a broad and balanced programme which is broadly in line with the Revised Curriculum. The teachers link effectively a wide range of topics and connect the learning across the areas of science, technology and art. A particular emphasis is given to independent learning and small project work at KS2. A notable feature is the school's participation in STEM (Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics) related activities to heighten the younger children's awareness of science around them. The curriculum offered is supplemented by numerous opportunities for the children to participate in a wide range of extended clubs and sporting activities which widen their horizons and raise their achievements outside the classroom.

#### **3.2 PLANNING**

The whole school planning provides a useful framework for the implementation of the curriculum. The teachers are hard-working and plan their work conscientiously. The topic-based planning promotes a cross curricular approach which identifies connections in the children's learning. In a few classes the children are beginning to contribute to the planning process. There is a strong emphasis on planning for the progressive promotion of the Irish language throughout the curriculum. Children on the register for special educational needs have appropriate individual learning plans which are used effectively to guide small focused group work and, in the best practice, there is effective planning for differentiation in class. It is appropriate that the School Development Plan has identified the use of data as an area for improvement; the effective use of internal performance data to guide class and individual target setting for the full range of children is at an early stage of development. In a significant minority of the teachers' short-term planning the shorter term evaluations need to be focused more sharply on the extent and quality of the children's learning.

#### **3.3 TEACHING**

Most of the teaching observed was good or better. In the remaining lessons, there was a need for improvement.

In the best practice observed, the teachers explained clearly the intended learning, ensured that this was understood by the children and revisited the success criteria at the end of the lesson. The use of effective questioning encouraged the children to think and provide extended oral responses. The lessons were well-paced and included an appropriate balance of whole class and group activities which were well-matched to the children's interests and abilities. The lessons took appropriate account of the children's prior experiences and knowledge ensuring progression in their learning. In addition, the children were provided with stimulating and enjoyable learning experiences and they engaged fully in their learning.

In the less effective practice, there were ineffective classroom management approaches that did not afford the children sufficient opportunities for sustained engagement in smaller groups with the teacher. At times the work was not matched appropriately to the full range of ability within the class leading to a lack of learning and participation.

### 3.4 ASSESSMENT

The use made of performance data to promote improvement is at an early stage of development. The school uses one standardised test for English and mathematics, and has collated limited quantitative information on the children's progress. It will be important for the school leadership team to continue to develop its approaches to gathering, analysing and using data more effectively in order to inform teaching and enhance the children's learning outcomes.

In order to improve target setting for individual children, the teachers need to gain a deeper understanding of how to assess their needs and use this information more effectively to raise their levels of attainment.

The teachers mark the children's work regularly and, in the best practice, add positive comments to encourage the children in their efforts. However, the school needs to consider introducing a more consistent system of marking for improvement in order to set out more clearly how the children can improve their written work. In addition, some of the children are capable of neater work and the teachers need to set higher standards of presentation across the areas of learning.

### 3.5 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The school's provision for the children with special education needs is good.

The school has identified just over 38% of the children with additional learning needs or with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, including a few children with statements of educational need. Over one-half of these children are at stages 2 and 3 of the Code of Practice. The majority of the children on the Special Needs Register are from KS1; over one-third of the children are in years 5-7. Just over one-quarter of the children in KS2 experience mild or moderate difficulties with English, and in some cases, with both Irish and English.

In the main, the children requiring help are withdrawn for Irish language, English literacy and numeracy support sessions. In addition, a small number of children are taught individually for extra support with language difficulties by teachers from the various peripatetic services of the BELB Outreach Services. Further thought should be given to the timings of the withdrawal sessions to ensure that children do not miss important class work.

The individual education plans are mostly effective. In the best practice, they set out realistic steps and strategies to help the children access the learning in a thoughtful manner. The plans need to set out more clearly the strengths and achievements of each child. The children's progress is evaluated regularly.

The special needs teacher provides a caring environment and intensive support for small groups of children. They are involved in a suitable range of literacy and numeracy activities. The numeracy sessions provide good opportunities for the children to consolidate early number work using a range of practical equipment. A significant minority of the children make steady progress in reading, writing, spelling or number work. In these instances, support has been discontinued. For the other children progress has been slower and sustained support is still required.

## **4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

### **4.1 LEADERSHIP**

The overall quality of leadership and management within the school is satisfactory.

The Principal has been in post for 20 years. She knows the children, their families and the community they come from very well. She is strongly supportive of the teachers and has the confidence of the governors.

She has a clear vision for establishing an educational community with a distinctive Irish language ethos. She has provided a good lead on the pastoral care within the school and at the time of the inspection was also the acting special educational needs co-ordinator.

There are important curricular leadership and management issues that need attention. The processes for the systematic self-evaluation of teaching and learning leading to improvement are at an early stage of development. It will be important for the Principal to provide a strategy which prioritises more clearly improvements in the learning and teaching across the key stages.

### **4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT**

There is evidence of improvement and development since the last inspection in 2001, including the implementation of a broader range of curricular and extra-curricular experiences for the children, and improvements in the provision for the children with special educational needs. However, the quality of the processes for whole school development planning lack sufficient rigour and focus on important aspects of improvement. While the school development plan (SDP) identifies a number of relevant areas for future development, overall there needs to be a clearer, strategic focus on curricular development and raising standards, in particular, in mathematics. The SDP supporting action plans do not prioritise sufficiently or set out clearly enough the important steps for taking the school forward and for making the necessary improvements in the children's standards in learning. It is not supported sufficiently by a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development.

### **4.3 ACCOMMODATION, RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE**

The school accommodation is excellent and the staff makes very effective use of attractive displays and photographs to celebrate the children's work. The shared areas are under constant review to make best use of the available space for practical and activity-based work. The school makes regular use of the Willowbank All-weather Sports Area and is developing a gardening area in conjunction with Belfast City Council. Staff report that the nursery children have regular access to the FS playground to provide further space for energetic physical play. The outdoor space adjoining the nursery unit is restrictive. The playgrounds adjoining the school building are currently underdeveloped as a learning environment.

The school has a very good range of resources to support learning and teaching, including an increasing range of resources developed by the staff within the school for the promotion of Irish. Resources to support the use of ICT as an integral part of teaching and learning for all children are more limited.

The school currently has a significant budget under spend. The leadership and management should give consideration to how this money can best be spent to benefit the current children within the school.

The governors take a close interest in the work of the school and are committed to its continued development and improvement.

## 5. **CONCLUSION**

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the very good quality of the pastoral care provided for the children;
- most of the teaching observed which was good or better;
- the good standards achieved by the children in literacy by the end of KS2;
- the excellent range of extra-curricular activities provided which enrich the children's learning experiences;
- the very effective links made with the adjoining Ionad Uíbh Eachach to meet the wider needs of the children and families within the school community; and
- the enthusiastic and dedicated staff and the emerging leadership and management qualities being demonstrated by the co-ordinators.

5.2 The main area identified for improvement is:

- the need for the leadership and management to develop more rigorous and systematic self-evaluation processes which focus more sharply on improving the children's learning and attainment across all areas of the curriculum.

5.3 In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is good. The school has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the school has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) will monitor the school's progress on the areas for improvement.

## 6. THE NURSERY UNIT

6.1 The nursery unit is situated in two bright, attractive classrooms within the school building. The teacher in charge has been in post for six years. The unit offers 26 full-time places and there are two nursery assistants.

6.2 The main strengths within the nursery unit's educational and pastoral provision are as follows:

- there is a caring and inclusive atmosphere in the nursery unit where the contributions of individual children are valued. The confident, well settled children display good levels of independence, high levels of motivation and enjoyment of learning and an ability to play collaboratively;
- the staff implements a broad and balanced pre-school curriculum; in particular, there are very good opportunities for the development of language and mathematics and well-planned role play activities which engaged the children in sustained, imaginative play;
- there were many very good interactions of the staff with the children which supported effectively the children's learning through planned play activities;
- there is a very good level of understanding of spoken Irish displayed by almost all of the children and progress is being made by most of the children in beginning to speak Irish in response to questions posed by staff;
- the staff is developing useful cluster groups, engaging in suitable staff development, and have made good links with Ionad Uíbh Eachach; and
- the teacher-in-charge displays commitment to the children and the work of the nursery unit. She is a good role model for the nursery assistants and the staff work together effectively as a team.

6.3 The main area identified for improvement is:

- the staff needs to develop further the methods of planning and assessment to ensure sufficient challenge and progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

6.4 In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this nursery unit is good. The nursery unit has important strengths in most areas of the provision.

6.5 The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the nursery has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Inspectorate will monitor the nursery unit's progress in the areas for improvement.

## STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON GAELSCOIL NA BHFÁL NURSERY UNIT, BELFAST

### 1. Details of Children

Number of children:	Class 1	Class 2
Attending full-time		
Attending part-time		
Under 3 years of age*		
With statement of SEN**		
At CoP stages 3 or 4***		
At CoP stages 1 or 2***		
With English as an additional language		

\* On 1 July.

\*\* Special Educational Needs.

\*\*\* The stages refer to those set out in the Code of Practice for the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

Percentage qualifying under DE admission criteria 1 or 2.	
Average attendance for the previous year.	

### 2. *Duration of Sessions*

Full-time	Part-time: am	Part-time: pm

### 3. DETAILS OF STAFF

Number of:	Full-Time	Part-Time
Teachers		
Nursery Assistants		
Qualified Nursery Assistants		

Number of: ****	
Students	
Trainees	

\*\*\*\* Total placements since September of current year

### 4. Parental Questionnaires (to be completed by Inspection Services Branch)

Number issued	
Percentage returned	%
Number of written comments	

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