

PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Gaelscoil na Daróige,
Derry

Report of an Inspection
in November 2009

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Gaelscoil na Daróige is an Irish-medium primary school situated in temporary accommodation off the Coshquin Road in the Ballymagroarty area of Derry. Most of the children live in the Ballymagroarty area, with a small number coming from a wider catchment area within a radius of about four miles. The school's current enrolment is 39 children. There are 15 children in year 1; the number of children in years 2 to 5 is very small, and years 6 and 7 have not yet been established. Forty-one per cent of the children are entitled to receive free school meals; and the school has identified just under 13% of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning.

The school was established in 2005 and apart from a six month period during the 2008-09 academic year, has not received funding from the Department of Education (DE). Teachers and other staff in the school have been working largely on a voluntary basis. Department of Education has recently approved funding for the school for an initial period of three years.

1.2 FOCUS

This baseline¹ inspection focused on the children's current achievements and standards in literacy and numeracy; the quality of provision for learning; and the quality of leadership and management. The school's arrangements for pastoral care and child protection were also evaluated.

1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, GOVERNORS 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 a meeting of the inspectors with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors), and the children in year 5.

Thirty-four questionnaires were issued to parents; 15 (44%) were returned to Inspection Services Branch and seven contained additional written comments. The responses from all of the parents' questionnaires and written comments indicate strong satisfaction with the work of the school.

The children in year 5 report that they feel safe and happy in school, and know where to get help in the event of any pastoral concerns they might have.

The present governors are the school's founders and they are also parents of children at the school. Much of their time and attention has been focused on the survival of the school and the welfare of the teachers; they value greatly the commitment and dedication of the Principal and the staff. The governors commended the school's approach to promoting positive behaviour and the very close links between the school and the local and wider community.

All of the teachers completed a confidential questionnaire and their responses indicate a very high level of satisfaction with the school's provision.

¹ This type of inspection establishes the children's achievements at the beginning of the funding period allowing ETI to advise DE more accurately on the actual impact funding has had on pupil achievement at the end of the three year period.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The pastoral care of the children is good. The school is a friendly, caring place and there are good working relationships at all levels in the school. The children's achievements and efforts are celebrated through a range of reward systems, and a good start has been made to developing consultative processes with the children. The children are courteous and well-behaved. The school successfully promotes positive behaviour, and has in place an appropriate policy and procedures to address any bullying issues that may arise.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The teachers provide a caring environment for the children in which the children feel at ease. As an independent school, staff and governors report that they have not had access to formal child protection training. The Principal has received training from Altram², the organisation which gives support to the Irish-medium pre-school sector, and he has trained other staff himself. The school's arrangements for child protection are unsatisfactory and do not reflect the guidance issued by DE and should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

1.6 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND OTHERS

The school has close links with parents and facilitates the very active role they play in the life of the school. There is a wide range of after-school cultural and sporting activities for the children and their parents, including a summer scheme. There are good arrangements for children transferring from Naíscoil Mhaol Íosa.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 IRISH, ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The quality of provision in Irish and English is inadequate. The curriculum in the foundation stage (FS) is delivered through the medium of Irish. Through a planned programme of total immersion in Irish, the school gives appropriate attention to the development of the children's aural and oral skills, maximising their exposure to Irish in carefully considered contexts and ensuring their successful acquisition of the language. The children's level of spoken Irish is very good. The children are formally introduced to English from the third term of year 3. The teachers need to reconsider some of the activities undertaken by the children as part of their early English programme to ensure that it is at an appropriate level and builds on the literacy skills already acquired in Irish.

Reading in Irish is taught systematically using graded reading schemes in the early years. Reading in English is introduced in year 3. A phonics programme has been introduced throughout the school.

In FS the children have opportunities to become familiar with different forms of print, and basic writing conventions are highlighted through play-based learning activities. In key stage (KS) 1 and year 5 the children have opportunities to use a range of writing forms and the children have planned, drafted and edited some of their own work. However, the standard of the children's written work by year 5 is inadequate: written activities in their books are incomplete, inaccurate, lacking in basic writing conventions, and presentation is poor. In order to bring about the necessary improvement, teachers need to plan more appropriately for the range of ability within all classes, challenging the more able and meeting fully the needs of those children who require additional support.

² Altram is an Irish-medium early years organisations which offers external courses and in-school support to pre-school groups.

2.2 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The quality of provision in Mathematics is inadequate. Throughout the school, the children have opportunities to develop early mathematical language, concepts and skills and their learning in mathematics is consolidated through the use of practical activities. Mental mathematics activities were observed in some classes. In the most effective practice the pace is good and the activities engage and motivate the children. In the less effective practice, the mental mathematics tasks are focused on individual children while the majority of the children are not engaged in meaningful work. The use of mathematics is integrated into everyday life experiences. During the inspection, for example, the year 5 children prepared and sold sandwiches to raise funds for local charities. They kept a careful record of all costs, the number of sandwiches prepared and sold, and the profit made. Good literacy work arose from this activity in the form of discussions centred around risk-taking, advertising and persuasive writing. While the teachers provide a good range of learning experiences, in the majority of classes expectations in mathematics lessons are too low, the children are engaged in routine tasks and there are only very limited opportunities for the children to discuss their work and develop their thinking.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers are hard-working and plan for the children's work across the curriculum. However, the planning currently lacks coherence and consistency, and does not address adequately the needs of all the children. Whole-school planning should be updated to ensure that it identifies clearly the intended learning outcomes in terms of skills, curricular content and language, and that the learning needs of all of the children in the classes are met consistently. The teachers need to evaluate their planning more effectively in order to ensure better progression from year to year and to take account of the progress of individual children.

3.2 TEACHING

The quality of teaching in the lessons observed during the inspection ranged from good to inadequate with a majority being satisfactory or better. In the most effective lessons observed, the children were well-motivated and actively engaged in their learning; there was a range of teaching strategies, including whole-class, group, paired and individual work; intended learning outcomes were shared with the children at the outset of the lesson, and plenary sessions were used effectively to encourage discussion and consolidate and evaluate learning. Too often, lessons were over-directed by teachers; whole-class work predominated; and there was an over-reliance on worksheets. The school's provision for play-based learning is inadequate and needs to be reviewed to ensure that it builds effectively on the children's pre-school experiences.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The school's approach to assessment is inconsistent and lacks rigour; the link between assessment, teachers' planning and classroom practice is not strong enough. While teachers mark work regularly and include occasional personal comments and praise the children's efforts, the marking is generally superficial and does not outline clearly how the children might improve their work. When advice is offered by the teachers, the children often fail to act on it, and teachers do not follow this up with the children.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The school has identified five children who require support with aspects of their learning. Appropriate education plans have been prepared for these children.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The quality of leadership in the school is inadequate. The Principal has been in post since the school opened in September 2005. He is hard-working and dedicated to the work of the school. To date his focus has been on satisfying the DE criteria for funding. In leading the school, the Principal now needs to become more strategic in working with teachers: to plan for ongoing school improvement; to address the weaknesses in the school's provision; and together with the teachers, to improve the children's experiences and raise their levels of attainment.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school's procedures to plan for development and improvement are inadequate. The school development plan does not comply with the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and does not address adequately the current priorities of the school. It should be reviewed thoroughly in light of the findings of the inspection.

4.3 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The Principal reports a good level of support from the Irish-medium inter-board Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) team and the educational psychology service of the Western Education and Library Board. The school will need external support to identify its training priorities to promote improvement and raise standards.

4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The school's accommodation comprises mobile classrooms; one of the classrooms is also used by the children to eat their lunch. The school does not yet have access to C2k but has provided laptop computers and internet access in classrooms to broaden the children's experiences. Resources for outdoor play and other activities are very limited. The current accommodation falls significantly short of modern standards and does not support adequately the delivery of the curriculum.

4.5 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The governors are committed to the life of the school and, with the rest of the school community, they have worked hard to get the school established. The governors will need to continue to support the school in the years ahead so that the school's Principal and teachers can focus their attention on improving provision for the children and so raise standards.

It will be important that the governors and the staff plan for and manage issues related to the sustainability of the school provision and school budget, in order to address the current and future needs of the children and the school.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the courteous and well-behaved children;
- the quality of the arrangements for pastoral care;
- the dedication and commitment of the staff; and
- the strong support of parents and governors.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to develop strategic leadership to improve provision, ensure continuity and progression in the children's learning and so raise standards.
- to ensure that the school's arrangements for child protection reflect the guidelines outlined in the relevant DE circulars; and
- to review the school's arrangements for play-based learning to improve the experiences of the children.

5.3 In almost all of the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is inadequate; the areas for improvement outweigh the strengths in the provision. The inspection has identified significant areas for improvement in standards, in learning and teaching, and in leadership and management, which need to be addressed urgently if the school is to meet effectively the needs of all of the children. The school will require well-focused, external support to help them take forward the areas identified for improvement.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period. The school's arrangements for child protection will be reviewed within six weeks of the inspection. The Department of Education will monitor the actions being taken by the school and the progress reported by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

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