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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Ballytober Primary School
Bushmills

Inspected: November 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Ballytober Primary School is situated in the rural village of Ballytober which is approximately six miles from Coleraine and two miles from Bushmills, County Antrim. The children who attend the school come from within a six-mile radius of the village. The enrolment has ranged from 70 to 78 over the last five years and is currently 73. Approximately 18% of the children are entitled to free school meals. Nineteen per cent of the children have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning.

1.2 FOCUS

The focus of the inspection was on the quality of the work in English and literacy and mathematics and numeracy. In addition the report makes reference to the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching. The school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection, were also evaluated; the school was selected to monitor the implementation of the healthy food in schools initiative.

1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, GOVERNORS AND CHILDREN

The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching staff to complete confidential questionnaires prior to the inspection, as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and groups of children from years 6 and 7. Fifty-two questionnaires were issued to parents; approximately 44% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and five contained additional written comments. The responses from the parental questionnaires indicate that the parents feel that their children are well cared for and that the school is well thought of in the community. The few concerns that were raised have been reported to the Principal and the governors. Three of the teachers completed the questionnaire and commented positively on the good working relationships throughout the school, the opportunities for staff development and the promotion of links with parents and the local community. The year 6 children spoke enthusiastically about their enjoyment of school, the care provided by the teachers and support staff and the range of after-school activities. The children are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their care and well-being. The governors expressed their appreciation of the Principal and staff and their involvement in the life and work of the school.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The provision for pastoral care is very good. A strong family ethos permeates the school and there are very good working relationships at all levels. The children are well behaved; they are friendly and courteous to their peers, the staff and visitors. The classroom assistants, secretary, kitchen staff and building supervisor contribute considerably to the positive ethos that is evident throughout the school. The children's learning experiences are further enhanced through a range of after-school activities including an Ulster-Scots Club.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has satisfactory arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements broadly reflect the guidance issued by DE but the following minor areas need to be addressed: the school should continue to review and update relevant policies and further develop strategies for consultation with parents and children.

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, for example healthy breaks and participation in health-related competitions, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The children are motivated and take an interest in their learning; the majority settle quickly to work and display perseverance with tasks. The children work co-operatively and confidently and are increasingly taking on roles and responsibilities within paired and group work. There are opportunities for the children to develop independence and self-management skills both within class and during recreational periods. In literacy and English most of the children are achieving levels of attainment appropriate for their age and a minority are achieving the expected or higher level of attainment. In mathematics and numeracy almost all of the children are achieving the expected level of attainment and a majority are achieving the highest level. In both areas the available data demonstrates an improvement in standards.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

In the lessons observed, the quality of the children's learning experience in language and literacy is generally good. The Literacy Co-ordinator has identified the need to update the Literacy Policy and has carried out an audit of reading resources within the school.

In the foundation stage (FS) and key stage (KS) 1, activities such as 'show and tell', shared reading, play-based learning and the use of songs and rhymes promote the children's oral skills and help develop their confidence. They are keen to talk about their work. The children are acquiring basic reading skills through the development of phonological awareness and experience of shared and modelled reading. By the end of KS1, most of the children read with increasing fluency and competence.

In KS2, the children have regular opportunities to develop their reading skills through guided reading and class novels and most can read with fluency and expression. The school has invested in commercial reading schemes and related sets of books; these need to be supplemented by a wider choice of fiction and non-fiction texts in class libraries to further promote independent reading. The reading partnership scheme to support the less competent readers shows early indications of success in boosting the children's confidence and enjoyment of reading.

In the FS, the children become familiar with different forms of print and experiment with informal mark making; individual whiteboards are used effectively to promote confidence and support learning. The children's writing experience has also been enhanced by taking part in a 'My First Poem' competition. In KS1, basic conventions such as simple sentence structure and letter writing are developed through shared writing activities, writing frames and worksheets. In KS2, the samples of work available during the inspection indicated that the opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences were overly limited to worksheet and comprehension tasks. There needs to be greater opportunities to promote the children's independent and extended writing. Information and communication technology, such as the interactive whiteboard, was used effectively to support learning; in year 7, the children were using the Internet for research purposes alongside dictionaries, atlases and thesauri.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The provision for mathematics and numeracy throughout the school is good and standards are improving. The school is in the second year of the Raising Achievement in Numeracy (RAIN) programme; a new Numeracy Policy has been implemented, as has a whole-school scheme of work outlining topic areas over three terms and a detailed programme of progression for number which is in line with the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC). These documents provide useful guidance which underpins the learning and teaching of mathematics. The school reports that it has appropriately identified the need to review and update the programmes for processes, measures, shape and space and handling data. The school's involvement in the RAIN programme has enhanced whole-school and class planning, and monitoring and evaluation procedures; there is a need to further embed and sustain this practice to promote school improvement.

In the FS the children are provided with a range of play-based activities; practical resources are used effectively to further the children's understanding of mathematics and they are confident in discussing their work using appropriate language. Sand and dough activities are used effectively to promote pattern making; the interactive whiteboard provides an effective resource to further the understanding of cardinal and ordinal number, and contributes to the development of the children's independence. The teacher and classroom assistants provide high quality interaction with the children and encourage questioning, promote investigative activities and reinforce mathematical language. Regular plenary sessions provide the children with an opportunity to talk about their learning; there is a sense of enjoyment in the lessons and the children are developing positive attitudes to mathematics.

In KS1 the children have opportunities to develop their understanding of concepts and mathematical language through a range of practical activities and appropriate resources. Lessons are based on previous experience and differentiated to meet the range of ability within the classroom. The teacher promotes the children's understanding through effective questioning; however, the further embedding of thinking time would promote greater accuracy in the children's responses. Enjoyment in mathematics and the reinforcement of concepts were enhanced through the use of ICT resources such as Beebots.

In KS2 the children work effectively in pairs or small groups to complete activities. In the best practice observed the learning intention was shared with the children who were then guided through an activity; children were given the opportunity to work in small groups to complete differentiated investigative tasks thus reinforcing concepts. Plenary sessions were

used appropriately to evaluate the extent of learning that had taken place; the children were encouraged to reflect and think before providing verbal responses. The classroom assistant provided effective support for the less able children. The year 7 children talked confidently about mathematics, using appropriate language and were flexible in their approach to investigations. Information and communication technology was used effectively throughout KS2 to enhance learning and promote further understanding; for example, the year 5/6 class was proficient in using calculators to understand place value and the year 7 class was using software programs as a basis for designing a symmetrical school flag.

Throughout the school there is a need to reduce the number of mathematically-based worksheet activities to promote independent recording of mathematical tasks. There is also a need to develop further the integration of mathematics across other areas of the curriculum so that the children are encouraged to understand mathematics in context and transfer skills. An appropriate progressive mental mathematics programme should be put in place to provide consistent and regular opportunities for the children to develop further their mental strategies.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

There is a range of planning formats throughout the school as teachers adapt the learning and teaching programme to the requirements of the NIC. While the majority of the teachers have effective individual planning this good practice needs to be disseminated across all the year groups. Self-evaluation is at an early stage and in the best practice identifies the children's individual needs and informs future planning. The children's interests and ideas should be used further to inform and enhance the planning process.

3.2 TEACHING

The majority of the children are taught in composite classes. During the inspection in the lessons observed, all of the teaching was good with a significant minority being very good. In the best practice there was a clear focus on learning intentions, effective use of group and paired work and learning based on previous experience. Plenary sessions were used effectively to review leaning outcomes, provide opportunities for the children to discuss their learning and assist teachers in the assessment of the children's understanding. In the less effective practice, lessons were over-directed by the teacher, lacking in challenge for the more able and there was little opportunity for the children to talk about their learning.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The teachers are at an early stage of developing assessment for learning; learning intentions were identified in the planning available and during the inspection were shared with the children during some of the lessons observed. The teachers use a range of end of topic and weekly tests to assess progress. Children's work is marked regularly and there is some evidence of marking for improvement; however, there is a need to review the school's assessment policy, including the marking policy, to provide further guidance on providing appropriate feedback to the children to bring about improvement.

Parents are kept informed of their children's progress through two parental interviews each year and a written report. The school has recently introduced new standardised tests in literacy and numeracy and is at an early stage of recording and analysing the results. It will be important that the performance data obtained is appropriately analysed to provide information on individual pupil progress enabling the school to build up comprehensive individual pupil profiles which can be used to track progress in learning, identify specific need, inform future teaching and learning and provide information on whole-school improvement.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Approximately 19% of the children have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning and behaviour. The school is committed to meeting the needs of these children with an inclusive approach within the school community.

The school has only just begun to use diagnostic testing; previously the identification of children requiring additional support depended on the observations of class teachers who reported concerns to the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO). The inspection team endorse the school's decision to introduce the more rigorous system of diagnostic testing.

The class teachers liaise with the SENCO to develop individual education plans (IEPs) which set out effective targets and strategies to address individual children's needs. The introduction of diagnostic testing will help inform future IEPs and ensure sharper targets. The teachers show a strong commitment to meeting the needs of the children in a sensitive and supportive manner, providing suitably differentiated activities which take account of the range of abilities within the class.

Withdrawal sessions are provided for some of the children. Good links are maintained with various external support agencies and these provide valuable assistance to individual children. The school efficiently deploys and utilises the very good support provided by the classroom assistants.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal has been in post for two years. She is hard-working and committed to the well-being of both the children and the staff; she fosters collaborative decision-making and has established a sense of collegiality within the school. She has been effective in raising the profile of the school in the wider community. In addition to her leadership role she has responsibility for the pastoral care and child protection provision and is responsible for co-ordinating literacy, geography and assessment throughout the school.

All of the teaching staff have responsibility for co-ordinating aspects of the work of the school; the school development plan (SDP) appropriately identifies the need to develop the roles and responsibilities of the co-ordinators to ensure monitoring and evaluation, and dissemination of good practice to further raise standards and bring about school improvement.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school's process for improvement is satisfactory and there are some effective policies in place. A whole-school self-evaluation audit was carried out by the Principal and teaching staff to provide a baseline for school improvement; this procedure needs to be more formal to provide more systematic and manageable procedures to guide staff in the evaluation of strengths and areas for improvement. Action plans need to be more clearly focused and regularly reviewed with alignment between whole-school targets and individual subject targets. The SDP should be developed through consultation with all key members of the school community including children and parents in order to meet fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

4.3 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The school has a Staff Development Policy; the teachers and classroom assistants have availed of a variety of training opportunities which are linked to the SDP. Staff have benefited from training for the NIC and are disseminating and implementing strategies and procedures.

4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The building supervisor works very hard to maintain the ageing school building. Many of the classrooms are small but the staff make appropriate use of the space available; there is insufficient space for storage. A number of health and safety issues were identified during the inspection of the primary school; these are appended.

4.5 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The Board of Governors are supportive of the Principal and staff and take an active role in the work and life of the school; they manage the school finances effectively and are cognisant of the variable enrolment pattern. The school is well resourced; the Ballytober Primary School Parents' Association regularly raise funds for prioritised equipment and resources.

It will be important that the employing authority, school 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 staff.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the positive family ethos which permeates the school;
- the friendly, responsive and well-behaved children;
- the strong sense of team-work and collegiality promoted by the Principal;
- the good and improving standards in literacy and numeracy;

- the quality of the teaching in the lessons observed which was always good and, in a significant minority very good; and
- the good work of the SENCO and the effective support provided by the classroom assistants.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to develop the role of the co-ordinators in monitoring and evaluation, and in disseminating good practice to help bring about school improvement; and
- to use performance data more effectively to inform planning and set targets for improvements in learning and teaching.

5.3 In the areas inspected the quality of the education provided in the school is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in leadership and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the children are to be met more effectively. The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress on addressing the areas for improvement.

APPENDIX

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- There is an urgent need to remove the condemned storage area in the playground.
- The pond within the school grounds requires a protective grid.
- The secure access system on the main entrance is disabled.

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