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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Beechfield Primary School
Belfast

Inspected: October 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Beechfield Primary School is situated just off the Newtownards Road in east Belfast. Most of the children come from the surrounding area and walk to school. The enrolment has dropped in recent years and stands currently at 63. Approximately 75% of the children are entitled to receive free school meals. Forty-six percent of the children have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. The average attendance for the previous school year was 87%. At the time of the inspection one full-time substitute teacher and one part-time substitute teacher were employed at the school.

1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on the quality of the work in English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, including the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting the learning in these two areas. The schools arrangements for healthy eating and pastoral care, including child protection, were also evaluated.

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 the a representative from the Board of Governors (governors) and a group of children from year 6. Forty-three questionnaires were issued to the parents; 40% of these were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and eight contained written comments. In addition, a parent took the opportunity to come to the school and meet with members of the inspection team during the inspection. The responses from the parental questionnaires indicate that the parents support the work of the school, feel their children are well settled and value the opportunities the school provides for the children outside of the classroom. Five teachers responded to the online questionnaire with three additional written comments. Almost all of the teachers who responded raised concerns in relation to aspects of leadership and management, and communication. In addition, a majority of the returns indicated low morale among staff. The representative from the governors commented on the effective leadership of the Principal, the support of the parents and the important role of the school in the local community. He raised concerns related to aspects of learning and teaching and the standards that the children achieve. The children talked about the many aspects of school life and, from the discussions, there is evidence that they are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their care and well-being.

The Inspectorate has reported to the Principal and the governors the concerns emerging from the parents' and teachers' questionnaires.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

There is a caring and supportive atmosphere throughout the school. The children are well-behaved and there are good working relationships between the children and their teachers. The support staff contribute well to the smooth running of the school. The quality of the pastoral care within the school is good. As identified in the school development plan (SDP),

the school is currently updating and putting in place a number of policies in relation to its pastoral provision, with the help of the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB). As part of this process, it will be important to consult further with the staff, children and parents, and to agree procedures to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the pastoral care policies throughout the school. The recent establishment of the student council gives the children the opportunity to become more actively involved in the decision-making process. The school has established meaningful links with parents and the local community to enhance the children's learning experiences, and is developing ways of assisting the parents in supporting the education of their children.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has satisfactory arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements broadly reflect the guidance issued by the relevant Department but the following minor areas, which the school is currently working on, need to be addressed:

- to agree a code of conduct for all staff which is monitored regularly and included in the revised child protection policy.

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives good attention to promoting healthy eating, for example a cookery club and the provision and promotion of water and healthy breaks. The areas for improvement identified include the need to develop links with external agencies and monitor and evaluate more comprehensively the healthy eating programme.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The children are well-behaved and cooperate well with one another and with their teachers in class. In the lessons observed during the inspection, the children demonstrated a willingness to talk about their learning, however, some children found it difficult to express their ideas and to explain their thinking.

2.2 ENGLISH/LITERACY

There is no coherent whole-school planning for progression in the aspects of talking and listening, and reading and writing to ensure effective implementation throughout the school or across the curriculum.

The children have limited opportunities to develop talking and listening skills. When given the opportunity the children were able to work in groups to discuss aspects of a story, discuss and share ideas and present them to the class. However, on most occasions they participated orally through routine question and answer sessions that limited the opportunities for developing their talking, listening and thinking skills.

The younger children are given opportunities to record their ideas on topics and are encouraged to write independently. The older children use word processing software to support and present their written work and have some opportunities to express their ideas through letter writing and stories. Too often, however there is an overemphasis on a narrow range of writing forms requiring limited responses. There is a need to provide more frequent opportunities for the children to extend and apply their writing skills across the curriculum. Greater consistency is required in addressing the major weaknesses in the children's writing skills including the use of grammar and punctuation, the quality of handwriting and presentation of work.

The children enjoy reading and show an interest in books; for example, the children in foundation stage respond positively to story telling sessions as part of the Sparking the Imagination Project, the school makes use of the local library on a regular basis and the older pupils engage readily in silent reading. Their interest and enjoyment in reading could be stimulated further through the use of a wider range of reading materials and more frequent opportunities to share and discuss the texts.

The school monitors the children's standards in reading through standardised tests. These tests show that a majority of the children tested do not reach a standard of reading competence comparable to children of a similar age and a significant minority are not reading at a level in line with their potential. The provision for reading across the school needs to be reviewed to ensure that more children attain higher standards.

The school has appropriately identified priorities for the improvement of reading and writing and has developed action plans which include the implementation of a single common approach to the teaching of phonics.

2.3 MATHEMATICS/NUMERACY

The scheme of work for numeracy provides helpful guidance to ensure appropriate progression in the children's mathematical understanding; however, this is not reflected in the teachers' planning or in the learning experiences provided for the children.

Mental maths sessions were observed in some classes. In the most effective practice the pace was good, the activities engaged and motivated the children, and the teacher used good questioning techniques to challenge the children's thinking and to encourage them to explain their strategies. In the majority of lessons expectations were too low and a slow pace undermined effective learning.

During the inspection, the children demonstrated significant gaps in their knowledge and understanding of important ideas and concepts, for example, estimation, shape and measure. There were only very limited opportunities for the children to develop their mathematical thinking or to engage in effective practical and investigative activities.

By the end of key stage 2, the standards achieved by the children in mathematics are inadequate. It will be important to review the quality of the learning experiences and the attainment of the children in order to provide a more balanced and challenging programme for mathematics. It is appropriate that the school has identified the coordination of numeracy as a priority for development and has put in place action plans to promote improvements in the provision for numeracy.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers plan conscientiously, and in the best practice, the planning focuses appropriately on the intended learning outcomes, teaching approaches and activities. There is a need for teachers to work together to agree a shared approach to planning to ensure progression and to cater for the full range of ages and abilities in each class to meet the individual needs of all the children. There is evidence that the teachers evaluate the planning but there is a need to use the evaluation more effectively to inform future planning. The teachers have identified opportunities for the use of ICT to promote and support the children's learning in English and mathematics, however, there is a need to plan more strategically for the systematic development of ICT to ensure its potential to support and enhance learning and teaching is realised as fully as possible.

3.2 TEACHING

Most of the teaching observed during the inspection was satisfactory or better; a minority of the teaching was inadequate. In the more effective practice, the teachers deployed good classroom management strategies and used a range of teaching approaches to encourage the children to develop and extend their responses, and to reflect on their learning. In the less effective practice, the teaching was over-directed and low expectations resulted in activities which lacked pace and challenge; the teaching did not take sufficient account of the different abilities within the class.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The teachers mark the children's work regularly, and, in the best practice, indicate to the children how their work could be improved. This practice needs to be developed further, implemented more consistently and monitored for its impact on the children's learning. The school has made a good start to using performance data and has begun to track individual children's progress using standardised test scores. It will be important to use this information to inform learning and teaching and to set appropriately challenging targets for the children.

3.4 ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

In the main, the class teachers have responsibility for meeting the needs of the children who have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. A small number of children receive support through outreach programmes. The special educational needs co-ordinator has liaised with the class teachers and assisted them in the writing of educational plans which identify general targets and support strategies. In developing further and effectively the provision, the planned class work needs to be more appropriately differentiated to take account of the individual needs and abilities within the class.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal, who has been in post for two years, is hardworking and committed to the education and welfare of the children and to the ongoing development of the life and work of the school. She sets high standards, demonstrates a good understanding of the curriculum and has put in place a number of important curricular and pastoral initiatives. In order to develop these initiatives further, there is a need for much clearer definition of roles and responsibilities throughout the school and a more collegiate and collaborative approach to review, development and improvement in the interest of the learners.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The SDP meets the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The BELB is working with the school within the Achieving Belfast Programme and this has informed the associated action plans for literacy and numeracy. The challenge now facing the school is to implement the strategies identified to address the issue of low and under-achievement consistently across all of the classes.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the ongoing development of the pastoral provision;
- the meaningful links with parents and the local community to enhance the children's learning experiences; and
- the good start made to using performance data to track individual children's progress.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need to:

- define more clearly the roles and responsibilities throughout the school and develop a more collegiate and collaborative approach to review, development and improvement in the interest of the learners;
- improve the quality of the teachers' planning and practice to ensure progression in the children's learning, provide appropriate challenge and to meet the needs of the children more effectively; and
- raise the standards achieved by the children in English and mathematics.

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 and learning and teaching, which need to be addressed urgently if the organisation is to meet effectively the needs of all of the learners.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period.

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 the staff.

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