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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin
Belfast

Inspected: April 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin is situated in Wyndham Drive, just off the Cliftonville Road in Belfast. The children who attend the school come from the surrounding neighbourhoods and from the wider area of north Belfast. The school's enrolment has remained fairly stable in recent years and stands currently at 132. Approximately 32% of the children are entitled to receive free school meals.

1.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the completion of questionnaires by the parents as well as a meeting with a group of the children in year 6. Prior to the inspection, 96 questionnaires were issued to the parents; around 29% of these were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and ten contained additional written comments. The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) met with a number of the school's Board of Governors (governors) on the first day of the inspection. The responses to the questionnaire and the many supportive comments that were included, indicate the high esteem within which the school is held by both parents and governors alike. They praised especially the commitment of the Principal and the staff to the school, and the care and respect shown by the children. In addition, they mentioned the sense of community that permeates the life of the school. A major area of concern expressed by the parents and governors is the deplorable state of the accommodation and the unsuitable location of the school. These issues will be dealt separately in two appendices at the end of the report.

1.3 The Inspectorate also held discussions with a group of year 6 children. The children report that they feel safe and happy in school and know to whom to turn if they have any concerns. They talked about the many aspects of school, including the extra-curricular activities that they enjoy; but they also expressed disappointment at the poor state of the school building.

1.4 The school has a few strengths in its provision for pastoral care and child protection but there are important areas for further improvement which require prompt action to ensure that the procedures are fully in line with the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars. In particular the school needs to ensure that:

- all members of staff are vetted; and
- there is an agreed Code of Conduct for all staff which is monitored regularly.

1.5 The programme for the promotion of health and wellbeing has some sound features. Attention is given to the development and implementation of initiatives which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles, such as healthy break, water provision, cookery club, and an art workshop on healthy eating. There is a developing commitment also to promoting healthy eating through the newsletter and external agencies. The children demonstrate a basic understanding of the importance of making healthy life choices and there are opportunities for all children to participate in a wide range of physical activities both during and after school. An assessment of the nature and quality of the arrangements for health and wellbeing practices within the school should be included in the school development plan (SDP) to comply with statutory regulations.

1.6 The inspection focused on literacy in Irish and English, including the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in supporting literacy, the provision for special educational needs (SEN), and on the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection and health and wellbeing.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 The quality of the working relationships between the teachers and the children are, in most instances, good. Most of the children respond positively and work with high levels of motivation and interest. Many of the children are articulate and talked about their learning and experiences with confidence. A number of children present with challenging behavioural difficulties and the school has sought the support of outside agencies in order to deal more effectively with these issues.

2.2 The teachers have made a good effort to create a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms. In addition, they make good use of the hall and the corridors to celebrate the children's work and to reflect the recent developments in the life of the school, including the review of the anti-bullying policy involving the children and the establishment of the school council.

2.3 There is a good team spirit developed among the staff; the teachers work well together and there is a strong sense of community. Communication with the parents is good and they receive regular newsletters. A parent-teacher group is well established and, in addition to fundraising, is becoming involved increasingly in the life of the school. Good links have been established by the teachers in key stage (KS) 1 to keep the parents informed about the children's work and homework. At KS2, a number of parents have been involved with the Reading Partnership Scheme and have visited the school for an update on the phonics system. The school should consider developing more fully ways of assisting the parents in supporting the education of their children.

2.4 In the majority of the lessons observed, the quality of the teaching was always at least satisfactory, contained many good features and in some instances, it was good. A minority of lessons observed had significant weaknesses. In the best practice, the teachers deployed effective classroom management strategies, used a variety of teaching approaches and engaged the children in a range of meaningful and challenging activities. In these instances the children were motivated and involved actively in the learning. In contrast, where the teaching was less effective, poor planning and unstructured lessons failed to involve the children and they remained passive and inattentive.

2.5 The children in years 1 to 3 have regular sessions of structured play. The teachers' planning for play is based on an appropriate range of themes and topics and takes into account the children's learning across the curriculum. Although the accommodation limits the opportunities for outdoor play, the teachers make good use of the available space in the classrooms and the hall. The lessons observed were well managed and the adults interacted well with the children to develop their ideas and language. The children cooperated well with one another and were engaged in their learning. It will be important to put in place a policy to guide and inform learning and teaching through play.

2.6 The school has completed its involvement in the Northern Ireland Literacy Strategy development programme. The planning for literacy is good. The co-ordinator has devised a comprehensive policy and there is an appropriate action plan which sets out helpful priorities for development. The half-termly schemes of work provide useful guidance for the teachers.

2.7 All of the children have opportunities to take part in talking and listening sessions in a variety of contexts across the curriculum. The younger children report back to their peers at the end of structured play and take part in Circle Time activities. Some of the younger children have opportunities to talk in pairs. The older children are involved in debates and whole-class discussions; occasionally they give oral presentations to their peers. On a few occasions, they are encouraged to talk at greater length but too often, short answers and phrases are accepted. Overall the children have limited opportunities for extended talk in small group situations. A small number of children are achieving good standards; the majority of children, however, achieve average to low standards and require further support and development in this important area.

2.8 The school accords a high priority to the teaching of reading and the teachers use a range of approaches to support the children's reading. The school has built up a comprehensive stock of fiction and non-fiction books and has held book fairs to raise the profile of reading among the children and their parents. In KS1, the teachers make effective use of 'big books' for shared reading, and sessions of group reading are used to provide for the children's individual differences in ability. In these sessions, the children participate well but some children lack sustained concentration. In KS2, in addition to a wide range of reading schemes in Irish and English, the children are introduced to reading class novels. The children's comprehension is tested through taking part in discussions and responding to a range of questions. It will be important for the teachers to review aspects of their approaches to reading and to provide greater access to reading materials and more challenge in the tasks set. In both key stages there are wide variations in the children's reading abilities; by the end of KS2, the majority of the children are reading to a satisfactory standard but a large minority experience difficulties with simple texts.

2.9 The current literacy focus is on the promotion of the children's writing skills. The younger children are beginning to write phrases and sentences, and, by the end of KS 1 they are capable of writing short paragraphs in Irish using their own words. The older children are introduced to a variety of forms of writing. They have the opportunity to write short stories, poems, reports and diary entries. Project and topic work in both languages has allowed the children to research and present information using ICT. The literacy co-ordinator has monitored the effectiveness of this initiative and has retained samples of writing from each year group. There is scope for the children to respond more fully to the novels they read and to engage in further, meaningful writing activities linked to their reading. In addition, there is scope for other subjects to be used as a vehicle for extended writing.

2.10 A substantial number of children have difficulties with their letter formation and hand-writing skills resulting in a delay in the introduction of cursive writing, much illegible writing and poor presentation of work. The teachers are attempting to address these issues by concentrating on improving the fine motor skills of the younger children and by reviewing their approaches to hand-writing for the older children. In addition, they have introduced recently a phonics programme throughout the school which is having a positive effect on the children's accuracy in spellings and in their ability to tackle unfamiliar words.

2.11 The school has identified the need to appoint a co-ordinator to lead the development of ICT in order to enrich the children's learning experiences and to support more fully the promotion of dual literacy. The children in year 7 participate in the Information Technology Accreditation Scheme at KS2 organised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.

2.12 Supporting children with their learning and behavioural problems is a key priority of the SDP. Almost one-quarter of the children have been identified as requiring additional support with their learning and behaviour, and the majority are at stages 1 and 2 of the Code of Practice. The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) has devised a useful draft special needs policy and register. The policy focuses on early identification and intervention strategies. Individual or group withdrawal sessions are provided for the children in need of additional help with aspects of their literacy development in Irish, and English. Extra assistance is provided also for a small number of children through outreach programmes. Comprehensive education plans have been drawn up in consultation with the class teachers. The children learn in a warm environment and they respond positively to the encouragement given to them by their teacher. The SENCO monitors the children's progress closely, targeting help where it is most needed. The majority of children make slow progress but a few children are making steady improvements. It will be important for the school to broaden its range of provision. It will be necessary also to review the arrangements for SEN provision and to involve more teachers in this work in order that more regular and intensive reading and phonics support are given to the increasing number of children presenting with learning difficulties.

2.13 The staffing comprises the Principal, who is in her third year in post, and six assistant teachers, one of whom is on induction and another who is in her second year of Early Professional Development. There are co-ordinators for most curricular areas and they are encouraged to take more responsibility for the development of their subjects. The Principal has observed lessons as part of the current focus on writing and has begun to monitor the teachers' planning and the outcomes in the core subjects. She is restricted by her many other duties which include teaching special needs for four mornings each week, and acting as SENCO and as teacher tutor. She will require more time to provide greater strategic direction to the work of the school.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the friendly and welcoming children;
- the good working relationships between the teachers and the children;
- the positive response of most of the children to their work and their high levels of motivation and interest;
- the hardworking teachers and the strong sense of community that permeates the school;
- the quality of teaching in the majority of the lessons observed which was satisfactory or better;

- the opportunities for children to contribute to decision making through the school council and the recent review of the anti-bullying policy; and
- the increasing range of extra-curricular activities and clubs.

3.2 Areas for improvement:

- the need to comply more fully with the DE circulars, in particular, with regard to the vetting of teachers and the Code of Conduct;
- the need to focus more sharply on raising the standards of the children's work in literacy; and
- the need for management to provide greater strategic direction to the work of the school.

3.3 In the areas under focus, the school has a few strengths in its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified important areas for improvement which need to be addressed promptly if the school is to meet effectively, the needs of all the learners. A follow up inspection will report on the school's progress on the areas for improvement.

ACCOMMODATION

- The school is housed in an old church hall; in addition there are three temporary classrooms.
- The school's accommodation is inadequate and falls far short of acceptable standards. The current facilities do not support the children's learning. The premises are dilapidated and bleak; they are unsuitable and do not meet the needs of the children, teachers and other users, and do not contribute towards raising standards of education.
- Despite the teachers' best efforts, the inadequate accommodation affects the quality of learning and teaching by impinging adversely on the morale of the teachers and children.
- In addition, there is poor quality accommodation for school administration and inadequate storage space.

HEALTH & SAFETY

- The dropping off and picking up of children at the school entrance should be reviewed to ensure that these operations do not present a risk to the children, their parents and others. The narrowness of streets adjacent to the school and the volume of the traffic is resulting in this situation becoming more hazardous.
- In the immediate vicinity of the school the presence of broken glass on the street, uncollected rubbish in the nearby entry and graffiti on the walls are not only unsightly and contribute to an overall unsuitable location for a school, but are, in some instances, a health hazard for children.

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