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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**Sion Mills Primary School and Nursery Unit
Strabane**

Inspected: November 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sion Mills Primary School is situated in the village of Sion Mills, two miles from Strabane in County Tyrone. Most of the children come from the local area; a small number travel by school bus. The enrolment has remained steady over the past four years; at the time of the inspection it stood at 259. Approximately 24% of the children are entitled to free school meals. The school has identified 23% of the children to be in need of additional support with aspects of their learning.

1.2 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with the Board of Governors (governors) and a group of children in year 6. The parents' and teachers' views on aspects of the life and work of the school were sought by means of confidential questionnaires: of the 128 parental questionnaires issued, 63 (49%) were returned to the Department of Education (DE); 27 included a written comment. Almost all of the parents' responses and comments were positive, and included references to the caring and supportive atmosphere of the school, the hard work of the teachers and the wide range of experiences provided for the children. Almost all of the teachers completed the on-line questionnaire; their responses were wholly positive; no written comments were received. The governors commented favourably on the dedication of the teaching and support staff, the quality of the pastoral care, and the high standing of the school within the community. The year 6 children reported that they feel safe, enjoy school and know what to do in the event of a concern. The inspection endorses these positive views. The few issues raised by parents were discussed with the Principal and the governors.

1.3 The inspection focused on English, including information and communications technology (ICT), the provision for special educational needs (SEN), and on the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection. The inspection also included the quality of the provision in the school's nursery unit.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 A very welcoming and positive tone is evident throughout the school. The children are well behaved and friendly; working relationships between the staff and the children are very good. The school environment is stimulating and bright; circulation areas have been enlivened with photographs, murals and examples of the children's written work, while the classrooms contain interest areas and displays of recent topic and art work.

2.2 A feature of the school is the strong emphasis on promoting the children's self-esteem and confidence; opportunities are sought regularly to acknowledge the children's efforts and achievements through, for example, 'Pupil of the Week' awards, merit cards and commendations at school assemblies. The school pays particular importance to the celebration of diversity and to the children's awareness of their cultural heritage.

2.3 The children's experiences are enriched through regular visits to places of educational interest, by a wide range of visitors to the school and through participation in local competitions and festivals. An extensive after-school programme offers sporting, musical and drama opportunities for the children.

2.4 Parents are kept well informed about the life and work of the school through regular newsletters and meetings with the teachers. Information on individual children's progress is provided through the annual written report. In addition, further opportunities for contact with the school are offered through meetings about the curriculum and by a variety of after-school classes for parents. The school has developed extensive links with the community, including imaginative initiatives such as the involvement of the children's grandparents in activities such as golf and knitting.

2.5 The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the school is very good. The school has procedures in place which fully implement the guidance outlined in the relevant DE circulars. The governors, staff, parents and children are fully aware of the school's procedures and have had an opportunity to contribute to a range of effective policies which guide the work of the school.

The strengths of the pastoral provision include:

- the caring and supportive ethos throughout the school;
- the effective range of policies which guide the pastoral provision;
- the implementation of reward systems to promote self-esteem;
- the contribution made by the support staff to the children's well-being and their learning experiences; and
- the structures in place to promote pupil consultation and develop pastoral responsibility amongst the children.

2.6 The school gives excellent attention to promoting health and well-being, including opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. There are effective policies and programmes in place which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles, including, for example, the promotion of healthy breaks, healthy lunchboxes and achieving the Health Promoting Schools gold award on three successive occasions.

2.7 All of the teachers prepare diligently for their work; intended learning outcomes, classroom activities and resources are appropriately identified in the medium-term planners. In the best practice, the planning is clearly differentiated to take account of the range of abilities within the class, and insightful evaluations of the outcomes of the teaching are used effectively to plan for future work.

2.8 The teachers are hard-working and committed to the children's education and welfare. The quality of the teaching observed was always satisfactory, and, in the majority of occasions, was good or better. In the best practice, the teachers employed a good range of teaching approaches, including practical activities and group or paired work; the children had opportunities to discuss their learning and clear connections were made across different curricular areas. In addition, resources, including ICT, were used effectively and the classroom assistants directly supported the children's learning. Instances of less effective teaching included work not being matched appropriately to the ability level of the children, tasks that lacked interest and failed to promote learning, or lessons that were over-directed by the teacher.

2.9 The children settle well in class and respond enthusiastically to their work; most are capable of sustained periods of concentrated effort and, when given the opportunity, work co-operatively on shared tasks. In the best practice, the children's independence is promoted through activities which allow them to make choices about their learning and to apply their skills and knowledge to new contexts. This good practice should be disseminated across the school.

2.10 At the time of the inspection, the Principal was acting literacy co-ordinator and had identified the need to appoint a new co-ordinator to develop further the policy and procedures to guide the necessary developmental work in literacy. There is a concise policy for literacy which appropriately identifies the importance of the use of the English language to communicate through talking and listening, reading and writing. The policy should be extended to identify strategies to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the schools literacy programme and the standards the children attain. The quality of the planning for English varies; there is a need to ensure that it effectively guides progression in the development of the children's literacy skills.

2.11 The teachers have created stimulating literacy environments, including, in some instances, inviting and well-stocked class libraries. The school's computerised central library has a wide variety of novels and reference books organised according to the Dewey system. This facility and the school's two computer suites provide valuable opportunities for the children to enhance their reading and research skills. Recently the school has installed a number of interactive white boards and the teachers are becoming increasingly proficient and confident in their use. The children enjoy ICT activities and there are many examples of writing and pictorial displays created using ICT.

2.12 The children have frequent opportunities to develop their talking and listening skills. They are encouraged to develop conversations, to share ideas and to understand the importance of being good listeners. During the inspection, most children displayed confidence, enthusiasm, and used a rich vocabulary when communicating with others. They participated in role-play situations in the foundation stage (FS) and constructed good oral responses to teacher questions throughout key stages (KS) 1 and 2. There were many good opportunities for the children to talk about their learning, to express feelings, and explain and justify their opinions.

2.13 The school has identified the children's general low attainments in reading as a major issue. The teachers are reviewing and amending the teaching of early reading skills and have recently introduced a phonics programme. There is a need to ensure that the children in the early years are provided with sufficient timetabled opportunities to acquire the skills of reading and that literacy permeates all play and curricular experiences. The school has recently completed a three year Raising Achievement Programme (RAP) supported by the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) which focused on improving literacy standards in years 4 to 7. The success of this programme needs to be embedded, and the good practice built upon, to ensure that reading standards continue to improve. There is

evidence that the Reading Partnership Programme which was supported by a trained group of classroom assistants has led to significant improvements for targeted readers; a paired reading programme involving some parents is also in place. During the inspection, examples of good practice observed included an effective guided reading session where the children read with accuracy, expression and fluency, and instances when the children used novels and information books to support work in other areas of the curriculum.

2.14 The children's writing skills are developed progressively. In FS and KS1, they engage appropriately with print and have good opportunities for shared writing activities such as class stories and letters to authors. As their skills develop, the children, through teacher-modelled, shared and guided writing sessions, begin to record their own ideas in simple words and sentences, and then in lengthier passages of prose. Throughout KS2, the children's writing is developed further and applied to a broader range of purposes, including, for example, the writing of letters, descriptions, recounts, narratives and reports. During the inspection, in the year 7 classes, the children, as part of history activities, prepared good examples of empathetic writing. The children were encouraged to think carefully about the context of the period and the need for an appropriate vocabulary. Where teaching was less effective, insufficient emphasis was placed on the development of extended and independent writing, and the children's creativity and fluency were unduly restricted by an over reliance on worksheets. All of the children, and particularly the more able, would benefit from more challenging activities such as extended creative writing and note-making through Internet and book research activities. The overall standard of handwriting and general presentation could be better, and there is scope for greater use of dictionaries and thesauri to support independent writing.

2.15 Overall, the children's talking and listening skills are very good and a significant minority make satisfactory progress in their reading and achieve standards in writing of which they are capable. Nevertheless, the standards in English need to be improved. The children require regular opportunities to read interesting literature and to integrate talking and listening, reading, drama and writing activities to specifically raise standards in reading and, more generally, their overall standards in literacy.

2.16 Approximately 24% of the children have been identified as requiring additional help with aspects of their learning. Support is provided by the class teacher and also, for most of the children, by two short withdrawal sessions each week with the part-time Special Educational Needs (SEN) teacher. While suitable education plans have been drawn up for each child, it is important to ensure that the support provided matches appropriately the needs of the children. The withdrawal provision focuses mainly on promoting the children's understanding of phonics. A small number of children receive helpful support from the WELB peripatetic support service.

2.17 Records of the children's attainments are maintained and updated regularly. Information is received from the nursery unit and provides a valuable baseline from which to plan and record individual children's learning as they progress through the FS. Test performance data in English is collected on children from year 3 onwards; while this information is used to assess individual progress, the school has identified the need to make greater use of the data in order to identify areas of weakness within English and to monitor and track individual and class progress much more closely.

2.18 The Principal has been in post for 13 years. She is hard-working and committed fully to all aspects of the life and work of the school. She provides effective leadership and demonstrates a clear vision for the all-round development of each child within an inclusive and supportive setting; she has worked hard to integrate the school into the wider community. Under her direction, the school has worked through a range of initiatives, and the detailed School Development Plan (SDP) identifies an ongoing programme of pastoral and curricular developments. With the Literacy co-ordinator and SEN co-ordinator posts to be filled, it is appropriate that roles and responsibilities within the school are to be reviewed. This exercise, together with a revision of the present SDP, and the inspection findings, will enable the school to put in place clear structures and processes to implement a whole-school programme with the following key foci: teaching and learning in English; the standards the children attain, particularly in reading; and the arrangements for providing support for children who have difficulties in aspects of their work.

2.19 A culture of self-evaluation has been established. This process should be embedded further to ensure that the work of the school, and especially those elements which relate to the children's standards and attainments, are systematically monitored and evaluated.

2.20 The accommodation is well maintained and the standard of caretaking is good.

3. CONCLUSION

The strengths of the school include:

- the very high quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection;
- the well behaved children who display a good sense of responsibility;
- the commitment and hard work of the teachers and the good teaching observed in the majority of lessons;
- the high standard of the children's talking and listening skills;
- the dedication of the Principal, and her commitment to school improvement; and
- the support of parents and governors and the excellent links with the local community.

Areas for improvement include:

- the need to focus more clearly and consistently on the development of the children's reading and writing skills in order to bring about improvement in the standards they attain; and
- the need to establish regular and consistent processes to monitor and evaluate the children's learning experiences and the standards they attain.

In the areas inspected, the school has strengths in many aspects of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified a few areas for improvement in important areas which need to be addressed to meet effectively the needs of all the learners.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

4. THE NURSERY UNIT

4.1 The nursery unit is situated in purpose-built accommodation within the primary school. The children come from the wider surrounding area and a significant minority of the children are in their penultimate pre-school year. Since the last inspection, a new nursery assistant was appointed and took up post in September 2004, and a large, attractive outdoor play area has been developed.

4.2 The parents and staff were given opportunities to express their views about the nursery through the inspection questionnaires. The responses have been taken into account as part of the inspection and any issues raised have been shared with the staff. Those parents who responded expressed high levels of satisfaction with the work of the nursery.

4.3 The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the nursery has important strengths. The nursery has policies and procedures for child protection that address most aspects of DE Circulars and guidance. Some minor additions are needed to ensure they are comprehensive; these include the need to display information about child protection on the parents' noticeboard and to document the procedures for the personal care of the children. The inspection evidence indicates that the policies and procedures are implemented consistently by the staff.

4.4 The nursery gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, and has effective policies and programmes in place to encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

4.5 The main strengths within the nursery's educational and pastoral provision are as follows.

- The nursery has a very positive ethos based on good working relationships at all levels. The staff provide a secure and supportive environment which helps the children grow in confidence and self-esteem. The children respond well to the staff's expectations and their behaviour is very good.
- The staff have created a very attractive learning environment, both indoors and in the outdoor play area. Good use is made of the space and resources available to stimulate and sustain the children's interest in the play activities.
- The daily timetable is well organised and provides a good balance of free play and appropriate group activities. The routines are unobtrusive and used effectively to promote the children's personal capabilities.
- The staff interact effectively with the children and skilfully exploit the learning potential within the planned activities; the children show high levels of interest, motivation and concentration. Sensitive support is provided for those children with additional learning needs.
- There are very good opportunities for learning in all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The staff place much emphasis on promotion of the children's language development across all areas of the curriculum.

- The written planning is detailed and is evaluated regularly; the staff observe and record the children's progress and use this information effectively to inform the planning.

4.6 The teacher in charge of the nursery manages the unit very effectively. She is a good role-model in her work with the children and the staff work very well together as a team. The nursery has a sound development plan with associated action plans which prioritise areas for improvements in the provision. It is very appropriate that the staff have identified the need to strengthen the curricular links with the teachers in year 1 and 2, to ensure continuity and progression in planning and methodology.

4.7 The quality of education provided in this nursery is very good. The educational and pastoral needs of the children are being well met. The parents can have confidence in the nursery's capacity for sustained self-improvement.

No follow-up inspection is required.

**STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON THE NURSERY UNIT IN
SION MILLS PRIMARY SCHOOL**

1. Details of Children

Number of children:	Class 1	Class 2
Attending full-time	0	0
Attending part-time	26	21
Under 3 years of age*	13	8
With statement of SEN**	0	0
At CoP stages 3 or 4***	7	3
At CoP stages 1 or 2***	0	0
With English as an additional language	0	0

* 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.	21%
Average attendance for the previous year.	90%

2. Duration of Sessions

Full-time	Part-time: am	Part-time: pm
	2½ hrs	2½ hrs

3. Details of Staff

Number of:	Full-Time	Part-Time
Teachers	1	0
Nursery Assistants	1	0
Qualified Nursery Assistants	1	0

Number of: ****	
Students	0
Trainees	1

**** Total placements since September of current year

4. Parental Questionnaires

Number issued	47
Percentage returned	55%
Number of written comments	13

HEALTH AND SAFETY (PRIMARY SCHOOL)

- Inadequate parking facilities at the school entrance cause severe traffic congestion during parts of the day.
- Wheelchair access to the main building is inadequate

The perspex canopy over the outdoor play area of the nursery unit leaks very badly. As a result, the children are, on occasion, unable to access play activities in the covered outdoor area.

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