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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**



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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**St Joseph's Primary School and Nursery Unit
Bessbrook**

Inspected: October 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 St Joseph's Primary School is situated in the village of Bessbrook in County Armagh. Almost all of the children come from the local area. The enrolment has ranged from 261 to 305 over the last five years and currently sits at 273.

1.2 Twenty-five percent of the children are entitled to free school meals, while 20% of the children in the mainstream classes have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. In addition, a Learning Support Unit (LSU) comprising of three classes is located within the school. The children in the LSU come from a wide catchment area.

1.3 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents and teachers to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors), 'Friends of St Joseph's' parent association and groups of children from year 6 and year 7. One hundred and thirty questionnaires were issued to parents in the school; 37 (28%) were returned to the Department of Education (DE), of which 21 contained additional written comments. Twenty-nine questionnaires were issued to parents of children in the LSU; 13 (45%) were returned to DE, of which seven had written comments. Most of the parents commented favourably on the high quality of care and support provided for the children and the standards they attain. A minority of parents were unsure about child protection procedures and about how to raise a concern. The few concerns and areas for clarification raised by the parents were discussed with the Principal and the governors. Half of the teachers completed the online questionnaire; all of their responses were wholly positive. The governors praised the dedication of the staff, the quality of the pastoral care, and the high standing of the school within the community. The children in year 6 and year 7 reported that they feel safe and happy in school and know what to do in the event of a concern. The inspection endorses these positive views.

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

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 A very inclusive and supportive ethos is evident throughout the school. The children are friendly and welcoming and working relationships at all levels are very good.

2.2 The teachers value the children's efforts and have worked hard to create a pleasant learning environment. In many of the classrooms and corridors, informative and attractive displays of the children's work and other learning resources are used effectively to foster interest and encourage learning. The children's self-esteem and confidence are boosted through a number of reward initiatives, including a merit points system and a 'Pupil of the Month' award.

2.3 The school extends the children's experiences through a varied range of extra-curricular activities which include sports coaching, visitors to the school, Irish dancing, choir, swimming, cookery, music and drama. The children also benefit from opportunities to attend summer school activities in literacy and numeracy, and they participate in educational visits to local places of interest in connection with their work in geography, history and science.

2.4 The school values the good links with the parents and the local community. There is an active 'Friends of St Joseph's' group which organises fundraising events to provide additional resources for the school. The parents are regularly updated about the life of the school through news sheets, letters and the school's informative website. All of the classes make weekly visits to the local library.

2.5 The school has established good cross-community relations with other schools in the local area. The children have also benefited from links, through the Comenius project, with schools in mainland Europe. The most recent joint work was on the theme of Children of Europe, Play and Learn, when the children, together with their peers in schools in Netherlands, Italy, Norway and Finland, collaborated to produce a high quality book of national folk tales.

2.6 The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the school is good. The school has procedures in place which implement fully the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars. The governors, staff and children are fully aware of the school's procedures and have had the opportunity to contribute to a range of effective policies which guide the work of the school. The school recognises the need to review the effectiveness of its general communication with parents.

2.7 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has important strengths. Attention is paid to the development and implementation of healthy eating and physical activity programmes; for example, the healthy eating week and practice of healthy breaks, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles. The few areas for development identified include the requirement to incorporate, within the School Development Plan (SDP), an assessment of the nature and quality of the school's arrangements for health and well-being practices; and the need to extend the range of food-related initiatives in the school to promote healthy eating messages and help to make food experiences more interesting for the children.

2.8 The children's behaviour is excellent and they settle readily to their work. They co-operate well with one another, are capable of sustained periods of work and generally take pride in their efforts and achievements.

2.9 The teachers' medium-term planning for literacy identifies appropriately the learning intentions for the children, together with the teaching strategies to be employed within the differentiated reading groups. The planning also records the teachers' evaluations which inform future planning and practice. There is a good match between the planning, the teaching approaches used and the children's learning activities and experiences.

2.10 The teachers are very hard-working and committed fully to the children's academic, social and emotional development. The quality of the teaching observed was always satisfactory; in three-quarters of the lessons observed it was good or better, and on occasions it was excellent. In the best practice, the intended learning and success criteria were shared

with the children. In these lessons the learning was connected well to other areas of the curriculum and the children had opportunities to discuss and explain their learning. In the small number of instances where the teaching was less effective, the children had limited opportunities to contribute orally.

2.11 The teachers in the foundation stage (FS) are currently reviewing their planning to take account of recent changes in the curriculum. There is a relaxed atmosphere in the classrooms where regular play-based learning activities contribute to the children's oral, physical and personal development. The children have opportunities to select and report on their play activities through the use of a range of plan-do-review approaches. In the most effective practice, the teachers and support staff ask suitable questions and encourage children to express their ideas and views; the activities lead to the development of children's investigative and problem-solving skills and support their language development across the curriculum. However, in the least effective practice, the activities lack purpose and progression and provide limited opportunity for collaboration. The school recognises the need to further develop outdoor play provision. In the absence of an appropriate all weather area it will be important, where possible, to provide additional energetic activity indoors.

2.12 The school places a strong emphasis on the development of the children's oral language skills. In the majority of classes, the children's talking and listening skills are promoted effectively through class discussions, paired and group work. At key stage (KS) 2, the children discuss many topical issues that provide opportunities to make sustained responses and to debate different opinions. In contrast, in a few of the lessons observed in KS1 and KS2, the children's opportunities to infer meaning and extend their thinking skills were restricted by over-structured questions that required only short, factual responses.

2.13 In the FS and KS1, the talking and listening activities and reading sessions are developed well into tasks such as sequencing, independent sentence construction and simple scripts and story-writing. In the most effective practice, ICT is used to assist the recall of prior learning and to support and stimulate the children's interest in writing; in one lesson observed, for example, the imaginative use of the digital camera, digital microscope and digital video helped to inspire and extend the children's writing skills. In the majority of the KS2 classes, the children write for a range of purposes including reports of events and visits, letters, poems, factual, imaginative and empathetic accounts, personal responses and descriptions of processes. To improve further the children's writing, there is scope for them to engage more in revising and editing their own writing, using ICT, where it is appropriate. Furthermore, in a minority of classes, the teachers need to establish a better balance between practising grammatical and vocabulary skills and fostering extended personal and independent writing across the curriculum.

2.14 Reading is taught systematically through the use of an appropriate range of levelled books from commercial reading schemes, supplemented by other reading materials, such as, novels and non-fiction reference materials. The teachers' use of running records as a formative assessment tool ensures that children are reading texts at an instructional level during the reading-group sessions. Further, the consistent use of a structured phonics programme in years 1 to 4 improves the children's word recognition skills, understanding and engagement with text. The shared, modelled and guided reading sessions are generally used well to develop the children's interest in books and their reading skills. In the best practice observed, the teachers used text effectively to develop the children's sense of mood and atmosphere, to explore language and grammar in context, and to draw out how they might

improve their own writing. Reading for enjoyment is given a high priority and is encouraged through the use of reading texts, class novels and library books. The teachers promote the use of books for accessing information; many of the children use dictionaries, thesauri and reference books competently. The KS2 children develop appropriate study and research skills, including the use of the Internet. The Reading Partnership programme in year 3 makes a worthwhile contribution to raising the children's standards of reading; the classroom assistants ably support the children's learning during the sessions. By the end of year 7, most of the children can read with fluency and understanding.

2.15 Writing has been identified as a priority in the school's current literacy action plan. The school has begun the implementation of assessment for learning strategies alongside the further development of the different forms of writing.

2.16 The school performance data held by the school in relation to literacy indicates that the levels of attainment of the majority of children are satisfactory or better.

2.17 All of the teachers mark the children's work regularly. In most classes, the work is marked with supportive comments; in the effective practice, the marking indicates to the children how they have met the agreed success criteria and often indicates to them how to improve further aspects of their performance.

2.18 Approximately 20% of the children in the mainstream classes have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. The teachers use an appropriate range of diagnostic tests and observations to establish early identification of those children who require help. Under the guidance of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), and in consultation with the class teachers, detailed individual education plans (IEPs) have been drawn up; these IEPs identify realistic short-term targets for the children. The IEPs are shared with parents and reviewed regularly. All of the support is provided within class by the class teacher, often with skilful inputs from the classroom assistants. While these arrangements provide effective support for children experiencing difficulty with aspects of their work, it is appropriate that the school is reviewing its provision; additional support by way of a part-time special needs teacher will focus on the specific needs of a targeted group of children in KS1.

2.19 There are three learning support classes (LSC) with a total of 31 children located in the corresponding FS and KS areas of the school. All the children have statements of special educational need and are placed in the LSC by the Southern Education and Library Board. The children have a wide range of learning needs, consequently the teachers plan, resource and teach using highly differentiated teaching and learning approaches. The younger children in particular have significant learning and medical needs.

2.20 The LSC are characterised by good working relationships amongst the children and the members of staff, sensitive and flexible practice, high expectations by teachers, thoughtful planning and appropriate attention to communication and social skills. In the most effective examples of teaching and learning observed, the children engaged well in practical activities, responded with enthusiasm to their work tasks and gained a sound understanding of the learning objectives. Classroom management is efficient with good use made of resources and ICT. There is an appropriate strong emphasis on inclusive activities for the children with

their peers in mainstream classes. Classroom assistants ably support the work of the teachers and contribute to the smooth running of the school day. The effective inter-disciplinary collaborative working between therapists and classroom staff provides valuable support to the children's learning and development.

2.21 There are clear procedures in place to assess the children's progress and to report the outcomes to the parents. The assessment policy is agreed by all staff and takes into account the needs of individual children across the ability range. The children's progress is monitored regularly and systematically and the information is collated centrally. The Principal makes effective use of the outcomes of these assessments, along with end of KS results, to make general judgements about the children's progress, and to set appropriate KS targets to benchmark the school's performance. Each year the parents receive a written report and there are suitable arrangements in place for parent and teacher consultations. The school provides the parents with results of statutory assessment at the end of KS1 and KS2 in an appropriate format that indicates the children's attainment level and progress.

2.22 The Principal has been in post for eleven years; she is extremely hard-working and fully committed to meeting the needs of the children and the broader school community. She provides effective and strategic leadership, and under her direction and that of the Vice-Principal the school has worked through a number of important pastoral and educational initiatives aimed at promoting and improving the children's learning experiences and well-being. While the Vice-principal has provided good support in this work, it is important that there is a clear and shared vision of the roles and responsibilities of all of the co-ordinators, in order to embed further the school's process and culture of self-evaluation. The role of the co-ordinators, in monitoring and evaluating the quality of learning and teaching within all curricular areas is underdeveloped.

2.23 A SDP guides the work of the school and is regularly reviewed and updated. This plan would benefit from further refinement to include specific targets and performance indicators to help senior management evaluate progress more effectively.

2.24 The school is located on three levels connected by outdoor steps and purpose-built ramps. During the school day most of the children move between levels; this presents a health and safety issue during adverse weather conditions. While there are many shortcomings in the accommodation, the school has used well the available space. The school is well-maintained and the standard of caretaking is very good. The classroom assistants, kitchen staff and school administration staff make a valuable contribution to the work of the school.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the very inclusive and supportive ethos throughout the school which is reflected in the children's behaviour;
- the high incidence of good quality teaching in the lessons observed;
- the confidence and very good oral skills of many of the children;

- the effective provision for children who experience difficulty with aspects of their learning in the learning support and mainstream classes;
- the attention given to the social and emotional development of the children; and
- the effective leadership of the Principal and Vice-principal and their commitment to the school and the wider community.

3.2 The main area for improvement is the need to:

- develop further the role of the co-ordinators to establish a more coherent approach to whole-school self-evaluation.

In the areas inspected, the school has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified a minor area for improvement which the school has the capacity to address.

The school's progress on the area for improvement will be followed-up by monitoring visits, conducted by the District Inspector.

4. THE NURSERY UNIT

4.1 The nursery is situated in spacious, purpose-built accommodation within St Joseph's Primary School. The teacher in charge of the nursery was appointed in 2001, and two of the teaching staff were appointed in 2005 on a job-sharing basis. At the time of the inspection, a significant minority of the children were in their penultimate pre-school year. Some of the younger children require high levels of adult support.

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. The staff and parents who responded expressed high levels of satisfaction with the work of the nursery.

4.3 The nursery has policies and procedures for child protection that address most aspects of Department of Education Circulars and guidance. Some minor additions are needed to ensure they are comprehensive. The procedures related to the personal care of the children should be documented and shared with the parents. The inspection evidence indicates that the policies and procedures are implemented consistently by the staff.

4.4 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has important strengths, with attention paid to the development and implementation of healthy eating and physical activity programmes 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 welcoming atmosphere and relationships at all levels are good. The staff are caring and supportive; they consistently implement positive behaviour management strategies and the children's behaviour is good;
- within the range of experiences provided, there are particular strengths in the promotion of the children's oral language and their listening skills;
- appropriate systems of planning have been developed which help to guide the staff in their day-to-day work with the children;
- the staff provide carefully-planned support for those children identified as having special educational needs (SEN). They liaise effectively with the school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) and there is evidence that these children make progress in their learning;
- the staff have developed good links with the parents and a variety of methods is used to inform them of their children's progress and the work of the centre; and
- very good links have been established with the local SureStart project; the nursery has worked with the SureStart co-ordinator to facilitate a range of activities for young children and their families, including the SureStart programme for two-year-olds.

4.6 The inspection identified areas for improvement. The following are the most important areas that need attention:

- there is a need to review and improve the organisation of the daily session to provide longer periods of uninterrupted play and to ensure that all time is used effectively to promote the children's learning; and
- the staff need to ensure that the planned programme is more appropriately matched to the needs and interests of the children, and provides more opportunities to develop the children's creativity and extend their thinking skills.

4.7 There is a strong sense of team-spirit within the nursery; the staff meet regularly to plan and evaluate the programme and are committed to the development of the unit. They have availed of many training opportunities in recent years and their involvement in the Effective Early Learning project in 2001 has helped to create a culture of ongoing self-evaluation. The teachers are currently accessing training in the HighScope programme. The team is well placed to create a development plan for the nursery, which should include action plans to take forward the issues identified during this inspection. The staff should continue to take a structured approach to self-evaluation and to gather evidence of improvement in provision and practice.

4.8 The nursery 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 children.

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

STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON THE NURSERY UNIT IN ST JOSEPH'S PRIMARY SCHOOL, BESSBROOK

1. Details of Children

Number of children:	Class 1	Class 2
Attending full-time	26	26
Attending part-time	0	0
Under 3 years of age*	12	13
With statement of SEN**	0	0
At CoP stages 3 or 4***	0	0
At CoP stages 1 or 2***	0	1
With English as an additional language	1	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.	
Average attendance for the previous year.	89.8

2. Duration of Sessions

Full-time	Part-time: am	Part-time: pm
4½ hours		

3. Details of Staff

Number of:	Full-Time	Part-Time
Teachers	1	2
Nursery Assistants		
Qualified Nursery Assistants	2	

Number of: ****	
Students	3
Trainees	

**** Total placements since September of current year

4. Parental Questionnaires (to be completed by Inspection Services Branch)

Number issued	35
Percentage returned	54%
Number of written comments	3

HEALTH AND SAFETY (PRIMARY SCHOOL)

- The school needs to review the security of the school buildings and the mobile classrooms to restrict access from the public footpath.

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