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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

St Mary's Primary School
Mullymesker, Enniskillen

Inspected: May 2009

CONTENTS

Section		Page
	STATISTICAL INFORMATION	
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	2
3.	THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	4
4.	LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	6
5.	CONCLUSION	7
	APPENDIX	

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Mary's Primary School is situated in a rural area, six miles from Enniskillen in County Fermanagh. Most of the children who attend the school come from Cleenish Parish and the surrounding Enniskillen areas. Applications to attend the school exceed the enrolment number and the Department of Education (DE) has agreed the current enrolment of 116 as a temporary variation. Approximately 7% of the children are entitled to receive free school meals. Thirty per cent of the children are registered with a range of special educational needs according to the requirements of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on the quality of the children's experiences in literacy and numeracy and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching and the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection.

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

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching staff to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and a group of children from year 6. Seventy-two questionnaires were issued to the parents; over half were returned to DE and 12 contained additional written comments. The responses from the questionnaires indicated that almost all of the parents appreciate the care provided for the children, the approachable staff, the standard of the education provided and the value of the school to the community. The few issues arising from the parental questionnaires were shared with the Principal and the governors and are addressed in the body of the report.

The governors expressed their appreciation for the work of the Principal and the staff who create a caring family ethos in the school and praised the school for its high standards of academic attainment and the very good reputation it has within the local community.

Almost all the teaching staff responded to the teacher questionnaire and all included positive written comments about the life and work of the school.

The year 6 children spoke with confidence about what to do if they have worries about their safety and well-being and reported that they find the teachers approachable and willing to listen to their views about school issues such as, making school rules and adjusting the amount of homework.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is outstanding; the inclusive atmosphere is welcoming to all and a strong community ethos permeates the school. The Principal, teaching and non-teaching staff are committed to the care and welfare of the children and work together to promote and maintain a pleasant and supportive environment for learning.

The children respond well to the staff's expectations for good behaviour. A whole-school approach to promoting and rewarding positive behaviour encourages the children to work hard and develops their self-esteem. The bright and attractive displays in the classrooms and on the corridors are used to celebrate the children's work and achievements.

The children benefit from the recent addition of a soft play area, new play equipment and from opportunities to participate in a range of extra-curricular activities including music, drama and sports. In addition, the children's learning experiences are enhanced through the school's links with the local pre-school centre and local post-primary schools, participation in competitions, involvement in the Schools Community Relations Programme and visits to places of educational interest. The school contributes to selected charities and appropriate emphasis is placed on caring for others in both the local and the wider communities.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has very good comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by DE.

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, and has received the gold standard in the Health Promoting Schools Award in recognition of the variety of ways the staff encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles. The school encourages participation in a range of sports and the children access a playing field and physical activity equipment in the school grounds on a regular basis.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The learning environment in the classrooms is child-centred and facilitates the children's access to a broad range of relevant learning experiences. The children are made aware of, and use, information available to them through a range of sources including ICT. A variety of external links to the school enhance the children's learning experiences and beneficial services include the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) Mobile Library Service.

The children enjoy learning and often show good levels of motivation and perseverance through effective self-management skills and productive group work strategies to achieve their learning goals.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall provision for English and literacy in the school is very good. By the end of key stage (KS) 2, a majority of the children, compared with children of a similar age, achieve or surpass the expected level of attainment in English. While the teachers plan effectively for their individual classes, there is a need to develop a coherent and progressive whole-school programme for literacy. The school has made a good start to addressing this issue with the recent appointment of a literacy co-ordinator who has a clear vision for the development of literacy in the school.

The school provides a variety of stimulating experiences for the children in each year group and they have many opportunities to develop their skills in drama, talking and listening, reading and writing in English lessons and across the curriculum. In the foundation stage (FS) and KS1, play-based learning, shared reading and other activities are used to provide the children with opportunities to develop their language skills and as the children progress, talking and listening skills are developed through the use of circle time, drama, paired, group and whole-class work. By the end of KS2, most of the children express their thoughts and ideas confidently and articulately. In the best practice observed, the use of effective questioning provided the children with opportunities to give extended responses.

The children enjoy reading and show a keen interest in books; for example, those in the FS respond positively to shared reading strategies and to the use of Big Books and the older children engage readily in reading activities based on a variety of media. The reading tasks in which the children are engaged across the school also encourage the development of thinking skills such as managing information, decision making and solving problems. The school currently uses reading books from a number of different reading schemes and interest in books is extended through links with the local library service and involvement in Book Fairs. It is timely that the school has recognised the need to introduce a more systematic approach to the acquisition of reading skills. The school monitors the children's standards in reading through standardised tests; these show that by year seven most of the children reach a standard of reading competence commensurate with their age and a minority attain high standards. By the end of KS2, the majority of the children are reading with fluency, understanding and pleasure.

Across the school, the teachers provide a range of challenging and creative writing tasks which enable the children to develop as writers. They use a range of writing forms; the use of real-life contexts, for example, the writing of personal autobiographies in year 7 and a cross-curricular approach to writing all of which add more meaning for the children. Information and communication technology is integrated effectively in the children's learning experiences and they use it well to improve the quality of their written work. Individual whiteboards are used to support early writing and by the end of KS1, the majority of children are able to express their ideas clearly and appropriately. As they progress, the children write with increasing accuracy and proficiency and by year 7, most children are competent in writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. The quality of the written work achieved by the children overall is very good.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The overall provision for mathematics in the school is very good. At the end of KS2, a majority of the children, compared with children of a similar age, achieve very good standards and a minority surpass expectations for attainment in mathematics. A detailed policy guides the teachers' planning effectively and ensures a whole-school approach to learning for number, shape and space, measures, data handling and processes. The co-ordinator is recently appointed; he has conducted an audit and led a review of mathematics provision and has identified the need to involve the parents in the numeracy programme. The core mathematical planning is used to support progression in the children's learning and it is consolidated through purposeful contexts and topics that enliven the children's interest in numeracy. There are many displays of the children's mathematical investigations based on their personal interests and these illustrate their competence in the management and presentation of data in block graphs, pie charts and pictograms.

In FS the children are introduced to mathematics through play and practical sessions, enhanced by effective use of the interactive whiteboard (IWB). Connections among curricular areas such as the world around us and literacy provide very good contexts for the children to transfer and embed mathematical skills, such as number and handling data related to investigations about animals. The teachers in FS use a wide range of activities and resources to engage the children and provide very good opportunities to develop mathematical language and thinking skills.

In KS1 and KS2 the children are involved in the processes of designing and planning mathematical investigations. They learn through whole-class, group, paired or individual activities and are encouraged to develop reasoning, good recording processes, accuracy in calculations and to use their findings to predict patterns and make decisions. The children engage in practical activities and make effective use of the IWB to demonstrate mathematical concepts. During the inspection, the children made very good use of programmable devices to explore angles. Effective use is made of websites which support the acquisition of numeracy skills and the children are well-motivated to problem-solve and to work in groups to develop their understanding. Overall, the children's attainments and progress in numeracy is very good.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The staff work effectively as a team to develop comprehensive planning for the curriculum. There is evidence of planning for continuity and progression in mathematics through whole-school and individual class programmes; in particular the teachers work hard to make provision for the wide range of needs. The school has identified the need to plan the literacy programme more coherently to identify progression in core literacy skills and make connections with other curricular areas. There is effective evaluation of the learning intentions and these are used to inform future planning and to meet the individual needs of children.

3.2 TEACHING

The quality of the teaching observed was always good; in the majority of lessons it was very good and in a minority it was outstanding. In the best practice, lessons were characterised by the purposeful use of learning intentions and success criteria which helped the children focus on what they were going to learn and provided them with targets to reflect on the effectiveness of the learning at the end of the lesson. The teaching was flexible and facilitated the children's creativity, interests and ideas often through effective questioning techniques. The children engaged with the topics and initiated further research on the Internet to gather information and often worked collaboratively. This good practice needs to be shared to encourage all of the children to develop as independent learners and to support them in taking personal responsibility for their own learning.

Information and communication technology is used effectively to support learning and teaching across the curriculum and the children are confident in the use of a range of digital media. The children are becoming confident in the use of the IWBs and some children display high levels of presentational skills using PowerPoint slideshows. The co-ordinator has devised an appropriate action plan to guide the development of ICT during this current year; the children have regular planned opportunities to use ICT within their classrooms and by year 7 children participate annually in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Accreditation Scheme. By the end of KS2 most of the children are confident and proficient in the use of ICT to support communication, modelling and data-handling.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

There are appropriate procedures and records for keeping the parents informed about their children's progress. These include written reports and formal parent-teacher consultations and the school operates an open-door policy for informal consultations. The annual written reports provide detailed information about progress in and attitudes to learning.

The teachers mark the children's written work regularly. In the best practice, there is effective marking to promote improvement and the children are encouraged to self-evaluate against their individual targets and agreed criteria. The school has identified the need to develop an assessment policy to include guidelines for marking and homework.

The school uses a suitable range of standardised and non-standardised testing to assess the children's level of attainment in English and mathematics. The school has recently developed a system to track the children's progress and uses an IT program effectively to manage the information. There is a need to improve the recording of the children's progress and development in FS and to develop further the assessment strategies of and for learning across the school.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The quality of the provision in special educational needs (SEN) is very good. At the time of the inspection, 35 children with a wide range of special educational needs were on the special needs register. The SEN policy was recently reviewed and adopted by the governors. The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) is an experienced classroom teacher and she

provides very good staff training and advice for staff and the parents. Information evenings on aspects of SEN are organised to enable the parents and wider community to develop their understanding about specific needs; for example, language delay and physical needs. The school has a very inclusive and welcoming ethos for children with special needs.

Analysis of class work, diagnostic and standardised test results provides indicators for identifying children within individual classes in need of additional long or short-term support. Appropriate links are kept with a range of support services including the Western Health and Social Care Trust. Almost all the support for the children is through in-class differentiated teaching supplemented with support from a range of specialist teachers for children who require specialised teaching.

The children have individual education plans (IEPs) which are reviewed with parents and include an input from the children about their progress and future targets. The IEPs take account of all of the information available about the individual children's needs. The children's progress is monitored to measure and ensure progress and development against targets previously set to improve attainment and some children registered with learning difficulties make sufficient academic progress to enable them to exit the special needs register.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The teaching Principal is in his first year in post and combines teaching, leadership and management roles well. He has a clear vision for school improvement and is committed to meeting the needs of all of the children. Through strategic management and leadership he has revised the priorities of the school development plan (SDP) effectively. There is a schedule of ongoing policy and organisational review and through the effective analysis and use of the performance data appropriate targets to raise standards in literacy and numeracy are set in consultation with the staff and the governors. The Principal is ably-supported by a committed Vice-principal who is a very good curriculum leader and SENCO. Following a recent review of curricular leadership roles, literacy and numeracy co-ordinators were appointed and are currently developing their skills in auditing and reviewing policy and planning in these areas. The staff respond enthusiastically to the implementation of the curriculum and embrace a wide range of additional educational initiatives; for example, languages in KS1 and Sport and Health promotion programmes.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The improvement process is clearly linked to a comprehensive SDP. The school gives good attention to and complies with the schedule of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

There are appropriate self-evaluation processes which focus on the children's learning and include some consultation with the school community about the pastoral care and discipline policies in the school. Monitoring and evaluation processes need to be developed further to focus on sharing the quality of teaching and learning within the classrooms. The effective use of data and target-setting for literacy and numeracy is based on the outcomes of internal school standardised tests and the external DE benchmarking data. Appropriate policies are in

place; for example, in teaching and learning, and a useful start has been made in action planning in literacy and numeracy which support effectively a culture of review and development for school improvement. The school needs to monitor the implementation of the action plans and to gather evidence of improvement.

4.3 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The governors have agreed the priorities for the SDP and it is appropriate to provide them with information on the progress and implementation of the action plans for improvement. There is a need to develop procedures for the communication of the SDP to the parents in order to involve them more fully in the consultation process.

The school's budget is supplemented though contributions from the parents, local businesses and sporting organisations. The provision in the outdoor area is very good; the children enjoy energetic physical play and sporting activities in the dry weather.

The quality of the caretaking in the school is of a very high standard.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the vision, leadership and commitment of the Principal and Vice-principal and their work to improve and develop the school;
- the outstanding quality of the school ethos and the supportive, child-centred learning environment;
- the support provided for the children with special educational needs and the very good links made with external agencies and the local community;
- the very good use made of ICT and the wide range of creative learning strategies to develop the children's thinking skills;
- the hard-working teachers and the quality of the teaching observed, all of which was good, very good or outstanding; and
- the very good standards in literacy and numeracy attained by the children.

In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is very good. The school is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the learners; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- During the inspection, the arrangements for the children leaving the school at lunchtime were not conducted according to the school guidance. Two exit points were used; this resulted in the children potentially accessing a busy road.

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