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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Providing Inspection Services for
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Department for Employment and Learning
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**St Oliver Plunkett Primary School
Strathfoyle, Derry**

Inspected: January 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School is situated in Strathfoyle, about five miles from the city of Derry. Almost all the children come from Strathfoyle and the immediate vicinity. The enrolment has fallen greatly from 263 at the time of the last inspection in 1995 to its current figure of 164. Around 48% of the children are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 The inspection focused on English, the provision for special educational needs, and on the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection.

1.3 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with the Board of Governors (BoG), a group of children in year 6 and year 7. The parents' views on aspects of the life and work of the school were also sought by means of a questionnaire. One hundred and twenty-five questionnaires were sent to parents by the school; 39% (49) of these were returned to the Department of Education (DE); 16 contained written comments. Most of the comments in the questionnaires were very positive. The concerns raised by the parents were shared with the Principal and the BoG. The BoG commented very favourably on the commitment of the Principal and staff; they outlined their role in the management of the school and reported that they were kept well informed and were consulted appropriately. The group of children in year 6 who met with the inspectors indicated that they feel safe, take pride in their school and know whom to turn to in the event of a concern.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 A happy, caring ethos permeates the life of the school. The teaching and non-teaching staff display a strong commitment to the children's development and well-being; opportunities are sought regularly to promote the children's confidence and self-esteem. The children co-operate willingly and respectfully with their teachers and are welcoming and courteous to visitors. A number of Polish children with English as an additional language have enrolled in the school in recent years; they have integrated readily into the life of the school and the whole school community reports that this has been an enriching experience for all. The behaviour of the children around the school and in most of the classes is very good. Relationships at all levels throughout the school are excellent.

2.2 The teachers have created a bright, attractive and stimulating learning environment. Displays in the entrance hall and other public areas show examples of the children's work and aspects of the pastoral care provision; important information about the school and the community is provided for parents. Displays in the classrooms celebrate the children's achievements and are used effectively to promote their understanding and learning.

2.3 The school offers a varied extra-curricular programme, including sporting and musical activities, chess, sewing, drama, arts and crafts and computers. Children in years 6 and 7 have the opportunity to avail of swimming lessons.

2.4 Opportunities to involve parents in their children's education are promoted. A monthly newsletter provides information to parents and highlights school events and the achievements of the children. Parents of children in year 1 receive regular guidance on how to become more fully involved in their children's education. Parents are encouraged to participate on the Developing Early Learning and Thinking Abilities (DELTA) programme in the school. Some parents undertaking study as part of accredited early years courses organise

their work placements in the school and offer assistance in various capacities. The school has an active Parents' Association. During the course of the inspection one parent, a bricklayer, was in the school to work with year 2 children who were looking at materials and their properties, and another parent was in school taking choir practice.

2.5 A secure and supportive environment is provided for the children in which they are valued and feel at ease. The school has procedures in place which implement the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars. The BoG, staff, parents and pupils are aware of the procedures, and have had the opportunity to feed into a range of helpful policies which guide the work of the school. These policies and the effective pastoral care systems underpin the good relationships and the good learning and teaching which take place both within and outside the classroom. The school has identified further areas for development, for example, maintaining a more robust recording system and the greater involvement of pupils in the review of its pastoral policies.

2.6 The school promotes the health and well-being of the children and has appropriate policies and programmes in place to encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles; these include healthy-eating, oral hygiene and physical activity. The children have opportunities to participate in a wide range of physical activities. Overall, the children demonstrate a very good understanding of the importance of making healthy life choices.

2.7 The teachers are hard-working and fully committed to the children's learning and development. The teachers plan appropriately for their work and, for a majority of lessons, identify the intended learning and the teaching activities to be used. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used effectively to support learning across the curriculum and, generally, the children develop good ICT skills. In the lessons observed during the inspection, the teaching was always satisfactory and on occasions it was very good. In the best practice seen, the learning outcomes were identified clearly, the lessons were conducted with good pace and challenge, the children were highly motivated, a variety of teaching methods was used and the learning was consolidated at the end of each session. In the few instances when the teaching was less effective, the lessons were over-directed by the teacher and the activities were mundane and failed to stimulate the children or promote their learning. The very good practice that exists should be disseminated throughout the school.

2.8 The children in the early years classes receive regular sessions of indoor and outdoor play-based learning. A detailed programme sets out the topics to be covered and the learning opportunities to be developed. In the sessions observed, the children's learning was focused on the theme of Winter, and a wide, and at times imaginative, variety of activities promoted their understanding and language development. Resources, including ICT applications, were used creatively and the children set about their learning enthusiastically and with a good sense of purpose and imagination. The children worked well together and, with the very effective support and interaction from the adults present, enhanced their understanding in a broad range of contexts. The teachers have begun to keep records of the children's learning. It is appropriate that this should be developed further to ensure there is clear progression in the play programme and that the needs and learning of the children are monitored regularly.

2.9 Under the effective direction of the literacy co-ordinator, the school's scheme of work for literacy has been revised recently; detailed written guidance provides a good framework for the whole-school development of talking and listening, reading and writing. A stimulating and interesting literacy environment has been created in most classrooms; class libraries contain a good balance of fiction and non-fiction texts and relevant novels and reference materials are used well to support topic work and to stimulate the children's interests. In addition, there is strong support from parents for the school's year 4 and 5 Paired Reading Programme. In the best practice observed, the teachers integrate appropriately the children's reading, writing and talking and listening activities, often through imaginative play-based learning and interesting topic work. When the teaching and learning in literacy is less effective, there is an over-dependence on repetitive grammar and comprehension exercises, or whole-class worksheet activities that fail to meet the range of abilities within the class.

2.10 Reading is taught systematically throughout the school. In the early years classes, the children are made familiar with print from a range of sources; and, through well-organised and suitably resourced activities, develop appropriate strategies to build up their fluency and to develop effective word attack skills. Due emphasis is placed on the children's understanding of text; this is promoted through good questioning by the teachers and by providing frequent opportunities for the children to talk about their texts. By the end of key stage (KS) 1, most children read accurately, fluently and with a level of comprehension appropriate to their age. The children's skills are developed further throughout KS2. Class novels, often linked to class topics, and a variety of sources of information, such as the Internet and newspapers, are used effectively to promote the children's learning and comprehension. By the end of year 7, most of the children achieve standards well in line with their ability.

2.11 The children's writing skills are developed progressively. In year 1, they are encouraged to experiment with informal mark making, from which letter formation skills are developed systematically. As their writing skills improve, the children, with teacher support when necessary, record their own ideas in simple sentences and then through lengthier prose. Writing conventions are taught through modelled and guided activities, and are generally used accurately by the children; this knowledge is promoted through word-processing activities, either in class or in the school's computer suite. By the end of KS1, most children are able to write competently in their own words; their learning is supported through the use of word-banks and dictionaries.

2.12 As they progress through KS2, the children's writing skills are developed further and used for a range of purposes including story, poetry and letter writing, book reviewing and the recounting of visits to places of interest. Through project and topic work the children are encouraged and supported to become involved in issues concerning their local area and to take a pride in its important heritage. While the children, generally, achieve good standards in writing, there are insufficient opportunities for them to apply their skills to other areas of work such as science and history. Too often work in these subjects is restricted to the copying of notes or to activities which require the filling in of missing words. All of the children, and particularly the more able, would benefit from more challenging activities such as extended free writing and note taking. The standards of handwriting and general presentation are, in the main, good.

2.13 Appropriate emphasis is placed on the development of the children's oral skills. From year 1 onwards, the children are encouraged to talk about their interests and their learning, and to listen with respect to what others have to say. A range of activities, including play-based learning, Circle Time, shared and group reading and writing sessions are used effectively to promote the children's oral and listening skills. By the end of KS2, most children demonstrate good oracy; they talk confidently with clarity and maturity. In the year 7 class, for example, the children, as part of their study of Anne Frank's 'Diary of a Young Girl', discussed the Holocaust and then applied their learning to contemporary issues including asylum seekers, conflict and world poverty. The children's oracy skills are developed further through drama, including school productions and assemblies, and by participation in competitions.

2.14 The school has identified some 17% of the children as requiring additional support with their learning. The teachers use an appropriate range of tests and observations to establish early identification of those children who require help. Under the direction of the special education needs co-ordinator (SENCO), a well-structured and effective programme of in-class support is in place. Detailed and appropriate individual education plans have been drawn up in consultation between the class teachers and the SENCO; these are shared with parents and reviewed appropriately.

2.15 The needs of the Polish children who have become an integral part of the school community are well provided for by the class teachers. The school has successfully recruited the services of a Polish Comenius Assistant to assist in this area and to enrich the provision of all the children in the school.

2.16 Data on individual and class performance is collected by the school. This information is used to identify areas of weakness in the children's learning and to track individual and overall progress. The parents are kept informed of their children's progress through an annual written report and two formal meetings. The children's work is marked regularly; while the teachers often add personal comments of encouragement for the children, there is insufficient guidance given on how the work can be improved or how the children can build on earlier learning.

2.17 The Principal combines his teaching responsibilities with the administration of the school and successfully promotes good behaviour and positive attitudes among the children. He is fully committed to the life and work of the school and his concern and care for the children and the staff are evident.

2.18 In a context of falling enrolments, the Principal and school managers have worked effectively to manage the school budget.

2.19 The school development plan (SDP) fails to meet statutory requirements and should be re-drafted in order to meet the requirements of The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 as described in the DE publication 'School Development Planning' (June 2005). Priorities for whole-school development and improvement should be identified clearly and set within detailed action plans.

2.20 The processes presently in place for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school are at an early stage of development. This is an area that needs to be developed as a matter of urgency. The school's co-ordinators, together with those in senior management positions need to address this aspect of their role to ensure that learning and teaching consistently meet the needs of all of the children.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the happy, caring ethos that permeates the life of the school;
- the strong commitment of all staff to the children's development and well-being;
- the well-maintained, attractive and stimulating learning environment;
- the motivated, well-behaved children;
- the excellent working relationships at all levels throughout the school;
- the ready integration of the children with English as an additional language and the effective provision for their needs;
- the commitment of the hard-working teachers;
- the teaching which was always satisfactory and on occasions very good;
- the overall good standards achieved by the children in literacy;
- the effective provision for children with special educational needs;
- the care and concern of the Principal for the children and the whole school community; and
- the strong support of parents, the BoG and wider community for the work of the school.

3.2 The areas for improvement include the need for the school:

- to agree and implement a clear, prioritised and costed SDP to guide the work of the school in a more strategic manner; and
- to develop an effective system of monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning to promote ongoing improvement.

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

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

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