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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

Strathearn Preparatory School Belfast

Inspected: March 2007

CONTENTS

Section		Page
	STATISTICAL INFORMATION	
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK	1
3.	CONCLUSION	5

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Strathearn Preparatory School is the preparatory department of Strathearn Grammar School and is located in two large detached buildings in the suburbs of east Belfast. Whilst many of the children live in the immediate area, a significant minority travel from outlying areas of the city and North Down. No children are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 The inspection focused on the work in English and information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum and the effectiveness of the school's special education needs provision. The inspection also evaluated the school's procedures for pastoral care, including child protection.

1.3 As part of the inspection process, meetings were held with the Board of Governors (governors) and with a small group of children in year 6. The parents' views on aspects of the life and work of the school were also sought by means of a questionnaire. Approximately 119 questionnaires were sent to parents; 64% of these were returned to the Department of Education (DE), 35 of which contained written comments. Nearly all of the comments in the questionnaires were very positive. In particular, the parents commented on the family-like atmosphere created by the teachers in the school and felt that they are hard-working and care for the wellbeing of their children. In addition to the comments made by the parents, the governors commended the leadership of the head of department. Any concerns or areas for clarification raised by the parents have been discussed with the Principal and the governors.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 The children are friendly, courteous and are very willing to talk about the school and their work. The standard of the children's behaviour throughout the school is excellent.

2.2 The relationships in the classrooms are very good; all of the teachers are considerate of the welfare of the children.

2.3 The teachers have worked hard to create a stimulating learning environment for the children.

2.4 The school establishes and maintains effective links with the parents. The prospectus and regular notes home provide parents with important information on the work of the school. The comprehensive programme of extra-curricular activities is a feature of the school and provides the children with enriching opportunities to develop further their interests, particularly in music, dance, drama and physical education. Many of these activities are provided on the school premises by specialists and are funded separately by the parents. The children's learning and social development are also enhanced through the regular visits to places of educational interest. These activities help to develop the children's confidence, sense of inter-dependence and self-esteem. Prior to the inspection the school staged a performance of the musical Oliver. All Key Stage (KS) 2 children participated in this production, the quality of which was excellent.

2.5 The school has a range of policies on pastoral care, including guidance on promoting positive behaviour. These policies place a strong emphasis on developing the children's self-confidence and self-esteem; the school's effective implementation of the policy documents has contributed to a setting in which the children feel safe and secure. The children receive a wide and effective programme on pastoral matters, for example on issues related to bullying and personal safety.

2.6 There are many strengths in the quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection in the school. The school has procedures in place which implement the guidance outlined in the relevant DE Circulars and has identified appropriately a few areas for improvement which it is currently implementing. In particular, the school has prioritised the need to: review the arrangements for the communication of the pastoral care and child protection policies to the parents; develop more opportunities for the parents and the children to contribute to the review and design of relevant school policies which guide the future work of the school; and to update the child protection training for staff once appropriate courses become available. The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) endorse these as appropriate areas for development.

2.7 The school's programme for promoting the health and wellbeing of the children has many strengths. Attention is given to the development and implementation of programmes which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles, for example, healthy breaks. There is a commitment to the promotion of healthy eating; a significant feature of this commitment is the extent to which the parents are given the opportunity to comment on the menu planning for school lunches. The children are knowledgeable about nutrition and value the social experience of eating together at lunchtimes. Opportunities are provided for all of the children to participate in a range of physical activities both during and after the school day. In order to improve the provision further, and to comply with statutory regulations, 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.

2.8 The quality of teaching observed during the inspection ranged from that which was just satisfactory to that which was excellent. Overall the teaching was sound. In the best practice observed, good opportunities were provided for the children to work collaboratively and constructively in pairs and groups; the children were challenged appropriately and the lessons were well-paced. On these occasions the children were involved actively in the learning process. Their responses were of a high quality and they had opportunities to reflect on what they had learned and, in a few instances, to evaluate their work. The quality of these evaluations was very good. In too many instances, however, the lesson was overly directed by the teacher and the pace and challenge of the work was too low. As a result the children were provided with too few opportunities to work collaboratively and develop their independent learning skills. It will be important that the very effective practice which exists within the school, is discussed and disseminated to promote the highest possible quality of learning and teaching.

2.9 The children are very articulate and they all show interest in their learning. When provided with the opportunity, they discuss their work with considerable enthusiasm and ability. They work steadily at the set tasks and they take pride in producing their best work. By year 7 the children have made very good progress and are achieving very good standards.

2.10 The school is in the early stages of developing whole-school guidance for English as a result of its participation in the Northern Ireland Literacy Strategy; this is timely. To date the main focus of the school's development work has been in the planning for learning and teaching in writing. The documentation developed as a consequence of this work places an appropriate emphasis on the intended learning outcomes for each group, ensuring continuity and progression across the year groups. The teachers' short and medium term planning, however, is in need of further development in most instances. In particular, the planning needs to address the different learning needs of the children in each class and provide more detail on what the children are to learn and how it will be taught and assessed.

2.11 The teachers encourage the children to listen, and to contribute orally. In general, the teachers provide varied contexts for the children and use appropriate prompts and questions to develop the children's oral skills. In KS1, the talking and listening activities on Big Books are developed appropriately into meaningful and enjoyable tasks. In particular, the story of the Owl Babies was used well to promote discussion on babies and feelings and to sequence events during the story. Group work and Circle Time are used well to support the pastoral development of the children and to promote their listening skills. The majority of children are articulate and provide very thoughtful and mature responses. In some instances, however, the children have limited opportunities to develop more extended responses.

2.12 The school has identified appropriately the need to review the planning for, and development of reading throughout the school. The children are presented with a variety of texts including fiction, non-fiction and poetry. In KS1, in addition to the use of the Big Books, the core reading scheme and complementary readers are used well to promote engagement with text and enjoyment of reading. A few of the children who are experiencing difficulty with literacy would benefit from a wider range of strategies to help them to recognise unfamiliar text. As the children progress through the school they read with increasing fluency and confidence and can express their book preferences, for example, to visitors; they are encouraged, by the end of KS2, to carry out personal research in a variety of ways including the appropriate use of ICT and other reference materials. In addition to the school library, there are class libraries and, by the end of KS1, the children are encouraged to have individual novels to supplement their class or group novel. The school has identified appropriately the need to update the stock of reading materials for the children.

2.13 The development of the children's writing is being well integrated across the curriculum. In KS1, for example, the children in year 1 are provided with good opportunities to work independently and in groups to write their stories about babies as a result of the imaginative play in the 'Baby Clinic'. In a few classes there is an over-emphasis on the completion of comprehension exercises linked to commercial schemes which do not challenge the children sufficiently. The children take pride in the presentation of their written work and the majority of them have developed a clear handwriting style. They also have appropriate opportunities to present their work using ICT. The children make use of word banks and dictionaries and they also have a personal book which attempts to improve their spelling ability. They are aware of the different audiences for whom they write and they have the opportunity to experience a wide range of different formats of writing. By the end of KS2 the majority of children write with great maturity and inventiveness; in the best practice observed, the children are encouraged to write written evaluations of their work. The standard of much of the writing is very good.

2.14 The children in years 1-3 have regular sessions of play-based learning. The children on entry to school in year 1 begin each morning with a variety of interesting and motivating activities which are attractively presented, thoughtfully prepared and provide good opportunities to promote the children's language, confidence and self-esteem. On other occasions, the activities in some classes are not built sufficiently on the children's previous experiences; they lack preparation and purpose or do not provide adequate time for the children to develop their play and ideas. The staff need to plan and develop a stimulating and cohesive programme for play. This whole-school planning needs to define clearly the continuity and progression expected in the learning to be developed through the children's play experiences.

2.15 The school is committed fully to supporting the small number of children who present specific learning difficulties. The resources which the school has allocated to meeting the needs of these children exemplify this commitment. Approximately 5% of the children have been identified as requiring additional learning support. Most of these children have specific learning difficulties in literacy. The class teachers, in consultation with the parents, and special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) have produced individual learning plans for these children. The plans identify appropriately the additional support these children should receive. In a small number of instances the additional support is provided by withdrawing the children from class once or twice a week. The withdrawal lessons are taken by an early years teacher and, on occasion, by a member of the peripatetic support service of the Belfast Education and Library Board. The school has identified improvements in the children's attitude, self-confidence and self-esteem as a result of the support provided. The children are discontinued from additional support at an appropriate stage. In addition to the small number of children with specific learning difficulties, the school has a number of very able children. There is a need for the learning needs of these children to be identified more effectively and strategies for managing these needs within the classroom developed and implemented consistently.

2.16 There are strong management and pastoral links between the preparatory department and Strathearn Grammar School. The head of the preparatory department has been in post for 14 years. She is enthusiastic, committed to the school and gives clear and effective leadership. She has a vision for the school and has given skilful direction to the staff in aspects of curriculum review and development, particularly in aspects of English. In addition to her duties as head of department she also acts as the SENCO and literacy co-ordinator.

2.17 A significant feature of the work of the head of department is the extent to which she monitors and evaluates the work of the school. She makes regular class observations and the outcomes of these visits are reported back to the teachers in a supportive manner. The head of department has identified appropriately the need for these evaluations to be used more effectively to set specific targets for improvement so that they may have a greater impact on the quality of the teachers' planning and classroom practice.

2.18 The teachers mark the children's work regularly, and often add detailed supportive comments. In the best practice these comments provide clear guidance as to how work can be improved. Detailed records of the children's progress, including their results in standardised tests, are maintained. These records contribute to a comprehensive profile of each child's achievements which provide a detailed record of their ability, aptitudes and

strengths. The procedures for communicating with the parents about their children's progress are excellent. The parents receive two formal written reports each year which contain detailed comments. The parents also have three opportunities each year to meet with the teachers to discuss their children's progress.

2.19 The school buildings are old although they are well maintained and in generally good repair. Many of the classrooms are small, or have an irregular shape, which restricts unduly the range of teaching strategies teachers can employ. Visitors access the school too easily: the external doors are not all, as yet, secured.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 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.

3.2 The strengths of the school include the:

- positive and caring ethos;
- quality of many of the displays of the children's work which enhances the learning environment and celebrates their efforts and achievements;
- well-behaved, articulate and enthusiastic children;
- quality of the working relationships between the teachers and the children;
- quality of the children's responses when provided with enriching, imaginative and stimulating learning opportunities;
- quality of much of the teaching observed;
- commitment of the school to supporting the few children who have specific learning difficulties;
- recent work undertaken by the teachers, under the direction of the head of department, in the review of aspects of literacy;
- dedication and commitment of the head of department and the example she sets to the members of her staff; and
- the standards achieved by the children.

3.3 The areas for improvement include the need to:

- improve the quality of the teachers' planning and practice to ensure that the teaching strategies employed provide the children with appropriate challenge and develops their independence in a coherent and progressive manner;

- develop a detailed, planned and progressive programme of learning through play which will ensure that the children have access to a range of stimulating and appropriately challenging experiences throughout the key stage; and
- continue to update the pastoral care and child protection procedures in order to meet fully the requirements set out in the current DE circulars.

3.4 In the area(s) 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 Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

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