

PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Victoria College Preparatory
Department, Belfast

Report of an Inspection
in May 2010

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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

BASIC INFORMATION SHEET (BIS) - PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- A. i. **School:** Victoria College Preparatory Department, Belfast
 ii. **School Reference Number:** 162-0264
 iii. **Date of Inspection:** W/B 10/05/10
 iv. **Nature of Inspection:** Focused

B.

School Year	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Year 1 Intake	13	8	22	22	13
Enrolments					
Primary	158	140	136	138	135
Reception	0	0	0	0	0
Nursery Unit	0	0	0	0	0
Special Unit	0	0	0	0	0
Irish Medium Unit	0	0	0	0	0

The enrolment for the current year is the figure on the day of notification of inspection.
 For previous years it is the figure in the annual return to the Department of Education.

The calculations at C and D should be based on the total of the primary and reception enrolments only.

- C. Average Attendance for the Previous School Year
 (expressed as a percentage):

97.5%

NI Avg Att: 94.9%

Primary & Reception	Nursery Unit	Special Unit	Irish Medium Unit
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- D. i. Number of Teachers
 (including the principal and part-time teachers): 8 0 0 0
 (Full-time equivalent = 25 teaching hours)

- ii. PTR (Pupil/Teacher Ratio): 17.1 NI PTR: 20.4

- iii. Average Class Size: 19

- iv. Class Size (Range): 13 to 26

- v. Ancillary Support:

Number of Hours **Per Week:**

- | | |
|---|----|
| i. Clerical support: | 12 |
| ii. Foundation Stage Classroom Assistant Support: | 55 |
| iii. Additional hours of other classroom assistant support: | 20 |

- vi. Percentage of children with statements of special educational needs: 1.48%

- vii. Total percentage of children on the Special Needs Register: 9%

- viii. Number of children who are **not** of statutory school age: 0

- ix. Percentage of children entitled to free school meals: 0%

- x. Percentage of children at the end of Key Stage 2 for 2008/09 who attained level 4 and above in English and mathematics: **English** 100% **Mathematics** 100%

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

The preparatory department of Victoria College is situated in the attractive grounds at Cranmore Park in south Belfast that also contain part of the girls' grammar school. Most of the girls attending the preparatory department come from the greater Belfast area but some travel from much further afield; the enrolment has declined slightly in recent years and stands currently at 135 girls. Approximately 9% of the children in the primary school are identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Since the last inspection there have been several changes in the staffing including the appointment of a new Head of Department who took up post in December 2009.

1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on:

- the quality of the children's achievements and standards in literacy and numeracy;
- the quality of provision for learning;
- the quality of leadership and management;
- the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning; and
- the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection.

In addition, the school was selected as part of a sample to monitor the implementation of the healthy food in schools initiative.

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 the children from year 6 and year 7.

Thirty-four per cent of parental questionnaires were returned to Inspection Services Branch. Twenty-two returns included additional written comments. The parents expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the overall educational and pastoral provision provided by the school. In particular, many reported that they value the good attention given to developing the whole child, the high academic standards, the wide range of activities provided and the caring and supportive ethos.

The responses to the staff questionnaires were wholly affirmative of the school and indicated that the teachers enjoy their work, have a strong sense of community and recognise the Head of Department as providing effective leadership.

The governors reported their appreciation of the hard-working staff and also noted their confidence in the recently appointed Head of Department. They indicated their commitment to supporting the continued improvement and development of the provision within the preparatory department.

The small number of issues raised through the questionnaires have been shared with the Principal and the governors.

In discussions, the children in year 6 and year 7 talked enthusiastically about their enjoyment of all aspects of school life. In particular they appreciated the wide range of opportunities to participate in sport, writing about their own experiences, learning new things and the work of the School Council. They report that they all feel happy and safe at school and are aware of what to do if they have any concerns.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in this school is outstanding.

The strengths of the pastoral care provision include:

- the caring, supportive ethos which promotes the children's confidence, self-esteem and excellent behaviour;
- the opportunities for children to express their views and to take responsibility for caring for others and their environment;
- the wide range of extra-curricular activities and initiatives which provide a very good breadth of experiences for the children; and
- the increasing opportunities for parents to be involved in the life of the school.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

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

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, for example, the productive links with external health agencies and the strong focus on sport, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Effective methods of communication keep the parents well informed about school life and their children's progress. Opportunities for the children to participate in school trips, the range of visitors invited to the school and links with business, charities and community groups all enhance the children's learning and development. These include their involvement in the Young Enterprise scheme and the SENTINUS engineering project.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

Most of the children are well-motivated and demonstrate engagement and enjoyment in their learning. They interact confidently with their teachers often giving mature and extended oral responses. They can work independently and collaboratively, valuing the opinions of others and showing mutual respect.

An analysis of the key stage (KS) 2 assessment data over the past four years shows that in mathematics and English the school's performance is consistently well above the Northern Ireland (NI) average. Compared with schools in a similar free school meals category, the levels of attainment in Mathematics and English are also above the average.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall quality of provision for English and literacy is good.

The children's talking and listening skills are a particular strength. Most of the children are very confident and articulate in expressing their thoughts and exchanging ideas as they work together in small and large groups. During the inspection, the very good examples observed included the children in foundation stage (FS) asking well structured questions to solve a problem and engaging in regular singing. The children in KS1 took part in concentrated discussions in groups to share knowledge and ideas about healthy lifestyles, and in KS2, the children demonstrated an ability to debate issues, justify their arguments and clarify their points of view. The effective use of drama and role play further enhances these experiences for the children.

The children read a range of increasingly challenging texts for enjoyment and information as they progress through the school. In the FS the children enjoy listening to stories and are beginning to sound out words independently. As they progress into KS1, they display an increasing competency to read and enjoy unseen text and early novels. In KS1, effective use is made of guided and shared reading sessions to link the children's reading, writing, and talking and listening across the curriculum. By the end of KS2, most children read with enjoyment and demonstrate good fluency, understanding and expression.

The school and class libraries are used well by the children to read for enjoyment, to find information and to research class topics. The development of the children's research skills also includes accessing Internet sources.

The school needs to review the approach to reading at KS2 by setting systems in place to monitor and evaluate the children's progress and ensure that all of the children are reaching their full potential.

The overall quality of the children's writing is good. The children have the opportunity to write using a range of suitable forms. The best quality writing observed was often linked to meaningful experiences and interesting topic work, and was presented in a manner which encouraged extended independent work.

In the FS, the children have some interesting opportunities to write during play based activities and the majority of children are making satisfactory progress. In KS1, the opportunities for writing are developed further through a range of genre including poetry and story writing and the effective use of strategies including modelled and independent writing. By the end of KS2, the children are able to write in a variety of forms and for different audiences and purposes.

The development of writing is an area which has been identified appropriately by the senior leadership team (SLT) as a priority focus for whole school improvement in order to ensure the quality of the children's writing reflects more fully their overall ability. The inspection team endorses this priority.

In the best practice, ICT is used very effectively to support the children's reading and writing as they research topics, make leaflets, posters and power-point presentations.

The recently appointed literacy co-ordinator has a clear and accurate view of the current strengths of the provision and has identified appropriate areas for further development.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The quality of the provision for mathematics and numeracy is very good. The whole school policy and schemes of work have been updated in line with the requirements of the Revised Curriculum. Lines of progression have been drawn up recently covering all of the key components of mathematics and with a clear focus on mathematical processes, communication and investigations.

In general, the tasks set in mathematics are well matched to the children's abilities and often extend them. Most of the teachers use a wide range of approaches and resources to engage the children in practical activities which consolidate their learning. In the best practice, ICT is used to good effect to support teaching and to involve the children better in their learning. In the mental mathematics sessions, effective questioning enables the children to reflect on and explain their thinking, using suitable mathematical language. In a minority of the sessions observed, the activities lacked challenge and pace, and the learning intentions were unclear.

The children demonstrate a good understanding of key mathematical concepts and competence in their ability to estimate with accuracy. They are able to apply their learning in mathematics across the curriculum and in everyday contexts based on real life situations and experiences, including the development of their financial capabilities. The children work confidently in pairs and groups to complete investigative and problem-solving activities.

The co-ordinator has begun to monitor the work in mathematics through lesson observation and a scrutiny of samples of the children's work. In addition, the action plan has a suitable focus on mathematical investigations and the teachers have identified and are acting on suitable areas for development within the programme for mathematics.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers are hard-working and plan their work conscientiously. There are suitable policies in place and a range of useful approaches aimed at aligning the planning to the newer elements of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In the best practice, learning outcomes, key language to be used, differentiation of task and outcome, and connections in learning are evident. The children are, at times, encouraged to contribute to the planning process in a meaningful way. In some classes the teachers complete insightful evaluations of the quality and extent of the children's learning and use this information to inform their teaching. The planned audit of whole school provision by curricular leaders will be a useful next step to reflect on how best to ensure that there is consistent and effective planning across the whole school which best supports the teaching and progression in the learning.

3.2 TEACHING

A majority of the teaching observed was very good or outstanding. In just under one-third of the lessons there was a need for improvement.

In the best practice observed, the teachers set high expectations and matched the tasks and teaching approaches to the needs and interests of the children; effective questioning promoted the children's thinking and encouraged extended responses from the children.

The children were able to make meaningful connections across the curriculum and the lessons took full account of the children's prior experiences ensuring progression in their learning. In addition, the children were engaged fully in stimulating and enjoyable learning experiences and the teachers and the children were clear about the intended learning outcomes and used relevant success criteria to assess their work.

In the less effective practice, the lessons tended to be over-directed by the teacher and there was a lack of challenge and pace in the activities. The children were not always engaged fully with their learning.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The school has developed a range of policies for assessment, reporting and marking which provide a common framework to guide the teachers. Written work is marked promptly using positive comments to encourage the children. As part of their work on the Revised Curriculum, the teachers have introduced helpful assessment for learning strategies and the older children engage in effective self-assessment based on clear success criteria. In general, the teachers need to provide more consistent and effective feedback in order to ensure that comments made on the children's written work have a stronger focus on bringing about improvement. The SLT intends to introduce a wider range of assessment procedures to obtain more detailed information on the progress of individuals and groups of pupils. The parents are kept well informed of their children's progress through regular interviews and an annual written report.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The school's provision for the children with special education needs (SEN) is satisfactory. Around 9% of the children have been identified and there is a small number of children with statements of educational need. Provision for both literacy and numeracy consists of a combination of in-class support and withdrawal for individuals and small groups of children. In addition, some of the children receive help each week from a peripatetic support officer of the Belfast Education and Library Board. The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) has developed a useful policy to guide the work and there are suitable individual education plans which are suitably focused and appropriately short term. The teachers are committed to meeting the needs of the children with special education needs and they provide effective one-to-one and group support. The children are well-settled in the withdrawal classes and enjoy their work. The majority of the children are making steady progress. However, the school needs to review its provision for SEN to ensure that there is greater coherence and to monitor more rigorously the progress of the children.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The recently appointed Head of the Preparatory Department provides very effective leadership and management of the school. She demonstrates a high level of professional knowledge and expertise in her own teaching, and has made an excellent start in her leadership role. The recently established SLT meet regularly and are developing a shared vision and collaborative approach to school improvement. The newly-appointed co-ordinators have made a good start in developing their curricular areas.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school development plan (SDP) is compliant with the Department of Education School Development Planning Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005/19

A culture of reflection and self-evaluation is currently being fostered within the school through wide consultation, a series of well-focused audits, and through monitoring and evaluation. There is already evidence of improvement and development as a result of this initial work. Appropriate priorities to be incorporated into the next school development plan are already emerging and are endorsed fully by the findings of the inspection team. These include, for example, the continued development of the provision for early years, the development of reading and writing, the use of data to inform teaching and learning and the continued professional development of the staff matched to these priorities.

4.3 ACCOMMODATION, RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The quality of the accommodation is satisfactory; effective use is made of all of the space available. The facilities to support SEN withdrawal groups and meetings are less than satisfactory. There is generally an adequate range of resources to support teaching and learning. The early years would benefit from additional resources to enhance their activity based learning both indoors and outdoors.

The governors are committed to the continued strengthening of the links between the preparatory department and the main school.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the outstanding quality of the pastoral care;
- the majority of the teaching observed which was very good or outstanding;
- the standards achieved by the children by the end of KS2, which were good in literacy and very good in mathematics;
- the children's ability to express themselves, take responsibility and work collaboratively and independently;
- the school's commitment to the all round development of the children through a wide range of learning experiences and extra curricular activities; and
- the very effective leadership of the Head of Department, well supported by the SLT and the very hard-working staff.

5.2 The areas for improvement are the need to:

- develop further the use of performance data to ensure the children are making systematic progress in all aspects of their learning and meeting their full potential; and
- disseminate the key aspects of the best teaching and learning observed across the school to ensure there is a consistently high standard.

In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is good. The school has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the school has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor the school's progress on the areas for improvement.

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