

Report of a Primary Inspection
St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery, Kilcoo

January 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery is located in the village of Kilcoo in County Down. It draws its children from the village and the surrounding rural area. A purpose-built nursery unit was established in 2019, and in September 2024, a new extension was opened, which includes an additional classroom, a resource area and extra storage.

The school currently has 177 children enrolled, including 25 children in the nursery unit. A small number of the children have free school meals entitlement. Of the total enrolment, 19% of the children have been identified as having Special Education Needs (SEN) and a small number of children have a statement of special educational needs.

The nursery operates as a single, part-time class, while the primary comprises six classes, four of which are composite classes. The school also runs a breakfast club and an after-school programme. The teaching staff includes a teaching principal, six teachers, and a part-time teacher for principal release.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children and all staff and parents/carers in advance of the inspection.

All of the year 7 children (18) completed the questionnaires and three-quarters of them provided written comments. Every child indicated that they feel safe in school and know who to speak to if they have any concerns. They are encouraged to eat healthily, exercise and set targets to help them improve their work. All of the children agreed that everyone is welcomed and valued, and that teachers and other adults in the school treat them with care and respect. In their written comments, the children described their school as 'brilliant', highlighting their enjoyment of and participation in sports and quizzes, including competitions with other schools.

Fifty-nine percent (61) of the parents/carers responded to the online questionnaire, almost half (29) of whom provided additional written comments. All of the parents/carers indicated that: their child is happy and safe at school; they are content with the pastoral care and support given to their child; and they are happy with their child's learning experiences. In their written comments, the parents/carers expressed their appreciation for the professional, dedicated and caring leaders and staff. They also praised the improvements made to the school's facilities and provision in the last few years, particularly in relation to the communication with parents, the quality of the accommodation, the commencement of a breakfast club, and the wide range of after-school clubs provided for the children.

All of the teaching and support staff responses were very positive. In their written comments, the staff praised the collaborative approach to working, built on respectful relationships and shared values. They highlighted that they prioritise a supportive, high-quality learning environment where the children are happy, achievements are celebrated, and the school is at the heart of the community.

A summary of all the questionnaire responses, including a small number of positive suggestions from respondents, was shared with the principal and representative from the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to define, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The shared values of 'Love, Care, Share' are embedded deeply in the school's culture, underpinning every aspect of the work of the school, and are evident in the respectful relationships and the nurturing, supportive learning environment.
- All members of the school community feel safe, valued and heard.
- The school leader has worked at pace to implement transformational improvements, including enhancing the physical and digital learning environment, strengthening staff professional learning and development, and fostering a collaborative and reflective school community.
- The areas for development outlined in the school development plan are appropriate and there is evidence of a positive impact on the children's numeracy and digital skills as a result of current improvement work.
- There is a consistent approach to planning across the school; the approach to planning for the progression of children's learning within the nursery is of a high quality.

- The unique skills and talents of the staff and members of the wider school community are utilised effectively to enhance and broaden the children's learning experiences.
- There is equity and fairness at all levels and all staff ensure that every child receives the support and encouragement needed to succeed. As a result, the children are happy and achieve well.
- The positive relationships between the staff and the parents are supported by effective communication.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for action:

- to implement the planned monitoring and evaluation of children's work across the curriculum to identify and share the most effective practices within the school; and
- to develop further the progression in long- and medium-term planning, in particular the development of the children's thinking skills, across the primary school.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The shared values of 'Love, Care, Share' are embedded deeply in the school's culture and recognised widely throughout the school community. These values underpin every aspect of the work of the school and are evident in the respectful relationships that exist at all levels, the nurturing and supportive learning environment, described by the children as 'one big family', and the school's strong Catholic ethos. The school crest, designed and worn proudly by the children, serves as a meaningful and visible symbol of these core principles. The child-centred vision is evident in a learning environment where the children feel safe, happy and respected, with their achievements celebrated and their worth recognised.

The school leader has worked at pace to establish a clear management structure and implement transformational improvements including enhancing the physical and digital learning environment, strengthening staff professional learning and development, and fostering a collaborative and reflective school community. Key areas for development have been identified through feedback from the children and staff, parental questionnaires, and the school's assessment information. The school's priorities are appropriate and outlined clearly in a one-year interim school development plan and a small number of school improvement plans. The monitoring and review of children's work, and the identification and sharing of effective practices, have been planned for and are in the very early stages of implementation. This is an important next step in promoting continuous improvement.

The school governors have a wide range of skills and are engaged actively in the strategic development and decision-making processes within the school. They are highly supportive of the principal and staff and are well-informed about the school's current priorities through written reports from the learning co-ordinators.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

In the nursery, planning at all levels is exceptionally detailed and coherent, and outlines clear progression in the development of the children's knowledge, skills and understanding. In the primary school, the staff have reviewed recently the literacy and numeracy planning, leading to a consistent and agreed approach being implemented across the school. Through self-evaluation, the staff have identified appropriately the need to enhance progression in learning within the planning, particularly in the areas of writing and the World Around Us, to outline a clearer development in the children's knowledge and skills and better clarity on the intended learning.

Across the school, assessment of learning is well-embedded. In the nursery and foundation stage, a well-structured system is in place for recording observations of the children's learning, and effective use is made of assessments to inform the next planning cycle. In key stages 1 and 2, the staff use a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data to monitor the children's progress, identify those in need of support, and empower the children to set monthly learning targets. The use of assessment for learning strategies, in particular, the use of self- and peer-assessment and the plenary session should be developed further to extend the children's thinking skills. The learning was effective in most of the lessons observed, supported by excellent relationships that fostered learning, meaningful opportunities for the children to collaborate and, the skilful questioning of the staff.

The individual skills of the staff and members of the community are harnessed well to enrich the children's learning experiences. The nursery staff provide a broad and balanced curriculum that fosters the children's independence and their investigative skills. The children's early mathematical development and the World Around Us curriculum are particular strengths of the nursery provision. Across the school, the curriculum has been developed using the expertise of the staff and parents. Children can access play therapy, a wide range of sports, and Irish and Spanish classes which creates greater opportunities for them to develop new skills.

The recent whole-school focus on mental mathematics and problem-solving activities is having a positive impact on the children's engagement and confidence in and enjoyment of numeracy. The staff provide a good range of opportunities for the children to practise their mental mathematics strategies through practical learning experiences and an online app. The children told us how much they enjoy the challenge of competing with their peers online, which not only strengthens their numeracy skills but also enhances teamwork and communication.

The school leadership team have prioritised ongoing professional learning for the staff in emerging digital technologies and have invested in a range of digital resources to develop the children's digital literacy skills. These resources have enhanced the children's access to technology and are developing their ability to work

flexibility across various devices. The children use well their digital skills to engage in research, code, create QR codes linked to presentations, record videos using green screen technology, and use apps to support their literacy and numeracy development. They have a sound understanding of online safety.

The staff create a nurturing environment where all children feel safe, cared for, and valued. From nursery, the children sing daily affirmations that promote a positive mindset and, as they progress through the school, they readily complement one another on their achievements. There is a well-established culture of listening to the children's voices, which has informed the purchase of additional outdoor equipment to enhance the children's play experience and support their physical education. The language in the current behaviour management policy does not align with the school's nurturing and inclusive ethos and should be reviewed.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The school's inclusive ethos, which promotes equity and fairness, is evident throughout the school. One child told us, 'Everyone is different in this school, but that doesn't matter'. Caring relationships between children of all ages are apparent in the classrooms, on the school playground, and in the hall during lunchtime and breakfast club. Staff respond thoughtfully to the children's individual needs, helping them to overcome challenges and barriers to their learning. They make effective use of assessment information and classroom observations to identify children who may require differing levels of support with aspects of their learning. A deep understanding of each child's individual needs enables the teachers to adapt their teaching intuitively and adjust their approaches in real time to meet the children's needs. The teachers, supported by the classroom assistants, provide a range of literacy and numeracy support programmes for children, which enable them to make meaningful progress and achieve success.

The staff have a clear understanding of the needs of children who have been identified as having SEN and set appropriate targets for their learning and development, including collaborating with outside agencies when necessary. The children who require additional support are identified early and receive tailored assistance from teachers, classroom assistants, and external agencies as needed. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are centred around the child and are reviewed regularly to ensure their unique needs are met. The progress made by the children towards their individual targets is monitored closely. Staff gather evidence of the progress made and use well their knowledge of the children to inform the next steps in their learning.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children are happy in this school which is evident in the highly respectful relationships they share with one another and the staff. They have well-developed listening and social skills and engage enthusiastically in their learning. The children told inspectors that success at school is about good teamwork and helping and including others. They define success as trying their best and thinking hard, which develops their confidence. The children enjoy being challenged and understand the value of perseverance.

The work in the children's books provides clear evidence of their progress in developing their mathematical skills through a broad and balanced curriculum. The children develop their entrepreneurial skills and apply money management abilities in real-life contexts, both inside and outside the classroom, through activities such as bun sales and the May Day Fair. The recent emphasis on mental mathematics and problem-solving is having a positive impact on the children's mathematical development; they are more confident when working with numbers and apply a wider range of strategies to solve problems. To build on this progress, more opportunities for mathematical investigations are needed to develop the children's critical thinking and reasoning skills.

The children engage readily in conversation with adults and each other and are confident in sharing their ideas and views. They take pride in their work which is presented to a high standard. In the foundation stage, the children write their news and simple stories with growing independence. As the children progress through the school, they plan and write stories, recounts and poems with increasing confidence. The children would benefit from opportunities to write across a wider range of genres and forms, including extended pieces of writing.

The children are encouraged to be active citizens and are socially responsible. They are considerate and empathetic towards one another, listen well and communicate respectfully in group work activities. The year 7 children lead by example and make a positive contribution to making the school a safe and happy place to learn and play through a range of leadership roles. These include supporting the younger children in physical education lessons and developing their leadership skills through roles as school council members, captains and vice-captains of the House reward system.

The children experience success and develop further their confidence, self-esteem and wider skills through the increasing range of extra-curricular opportunities offered at the school. The school's reward system, based on a house structure, is successful in motivating the children to do their best work and try hard.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The children express a strong sense of belonging to both the school and the local community. Each classroom fosters a supportive and nurturing learning environment where the school's core values are actively embraced by everyone, encouraging children to always strive for their best. Relationships with the parents are positive, with effective communication maintained through online platforms, the school website, and opportunities for parents/carers to visit the school for various educational events.

The school prioritises and plans for inclusive, flexible and responsive professional learning for staff aligned with current school improvement priorities. Recently, this has included training in assistive technology, problem-solving in mathematics, and learning through play. These opportunities have impacted positively on the teachers' professional development, enabling them to apply their learning effectively in the classroom. As a result, the children have benefited from improved learning experiences and enhanced outcomes in these areas.

The children told us that they are given regular opportunities to express their opinions in various ways, particularly through the school council. They understand that their voices matter and are confident that their views are valued and acted upon. For example, they designed the school sports jersey to reflect the school's connection with, and the children's love of, the local Gaelic football club. The children's learning experiences could be enriched further by providing more opportunities for them to share their views on topics that interest them, for example, when reviewing the planning for the World Around Us curriculum.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery's vision is child-centred, guided by the shared values of 'Love, Care, Share', which permeate the entire school community. The children are proud of their school; they feel safe and happy, are making good progress, and their achievements are celebrated by the caring staff.

Through the work of the district inspector, ETI will monitor the progress of St Malachy's Primary School and Nursery in addressing the areas for action as laid out in this report.

Inspectors also identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the development and embedding of shared values which guide every area of the life and work of the school; and
- the highly effective approach to planning in the nursery unit which enables all children to have access to a stimulating and balanced curriculum and make good progress.

5. APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

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%

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