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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

St Mary's Primary School
Aughlisnafin

Inspected: March 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 St Mary's Primary School, Aughlisnafin is situated in a rural setting about three miles from Castlewellan in the parish of Kilmegan. The vast majority of the children come from approximately a three mile radius of the school; a few come from further afield. Over the last few years the enrolment has remained fairly constant, but has fallen this year to 135, including 12 children under statutory school age taught with year 1. The school identifies approximately 15% of the children as requiring special help with their learning, and 16% are entitled to free school meals.

1.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection. The inspectors also met with representatives of the Board of Governors (governors) and with children in year 6. Of the 86 parental questionnaires issued, approximately 40% were completed and returned to the Department of Education (DE); fifteen included extended written comments. The responses from the parents indicated that they were very satisfied with almost all aspects of the school. In their written comments they praised the friendly, child-centred approach of the staff and the safe, enriched environment provided for the children's learning. An issue regarding the lack of fencing between the road and the school was raised. The comments from the parents have been shared with the Principal and the governors. The governors expressed their appreciation of the quality of education and care provided for the children.

1.3 During discussions with year 6 children, they talked openly about what they enjoyed in the school and the range of activities and educational visits available to them. They indicated that while they feel safe and happy they are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their safety and well-being. The inspection findings endorse the favourable comments made by the governors, parents and children and confirm the need for perimeter fencing on safety grounds.

1.4 There are significant strengths in the quality of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection. The school has procedures in place which implement the guidance outlined in the relevant DE circulars and has identified appropriately a few minor areas for improvement such as the completion of training in children protection for some staff and a newly-appointed governor. Amongst the strengths are the caring ethos throughout the school, the clear written procedures for staff and the celebration of the children's achievements.

1.5 The inspection focused on the quality of work in English and the effectiveness of the school's special educational needs (SEN) provision. In addition, the report makes reference to the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching in English.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 There is a strong family and community atmosphere in the school. There are excellent working relationships between the teachers and the children. The children's behaviour is exemplary; they are courteous and welcoming to visitors, and very considerate of each other. The vast majority of the children are well motivated, show high levels of interest and perseverance in completing the tasks set; they work well in pairs and groups. The school values greatly the support of the parents and the parent teacher association (Friends of the Fin).

2.2 The school's programme for the promotion of health and well-being has many sound features for example, healthy breaks and unrestricted access to drinking water. Attention is given to the development and implementation of programmes which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles, for example, the 'Investing in Children's Health and Fitness' pilot which includes nutrition advice and information. There is a developing commitment to promote healthy eating, and opportunities are provided for all to participate in a wide range of physical activities. The children demonstrate a very good understanding of the importance of making healthy life choices. To improve further the provision and to comply with statutory regulations, an assessment of the nature and quality of the arrangements for health and well-being practices within the school should be included in the school development plan (SDP).

2.3 The teachers are hard-working and show a high level of commitment to the education and care of the children. The support provided by the non-teaching staff is excellent. All of the teachers plan carefully and have identified learning intentions in their planning. The quality of the teaching observed was always sound; a majority was consistently good and a minority was characterised by excellence. In the most effective lessons observed, the learning intentions were shared with the children, the explanations were clear, the teachers effectively modelled the learning processes, set a good pace and appropriately assessed learning at the end of the lesson. In the less effective instances, the learning intentions stated were too general and the lack of specific success criteria did not facilitate the learning or the assessment process.

2.4 Importantly, the teachers have begun to evaluate the effectiveness of their work across the curriculum. Evaluation needs to be taken further to enable the teachers to assess more fully, against the learning outcomes, the quality of learning and teaching and the extent to which they are meeting the needs of all of the children in their classes.

2.5 Structured play contributes effectively to the children's learning; the excellent range of activities is often linked successfully to current class topics. During almost all of the structured play sessions observed the children were co-operative, involved, had opportunities to consolidate their understanding of basic concepts and ideas and very good opportunities to develop independent writing skills. The excellent interaction between the adults and the children supported well the children's learning and enjoyment. In the best practice, the planning for structured play is supported by very extensive assessment of the children's strengths and areas for development. Appropriately, the school has identified the need to develop a broad and balanced programme of play throughout key stage (KS) 1.

2.6 Literacy has been a major focus of development in recent years and the co-ordinator has invested considerable time and expertise into supporting staff and developing and monitoring a literacy programme across the whole school. For example, all teachers have a planned and structured approach to ensure that they cover all forms of writing. They all achieve a good balance across the three attainment targets for English and organise a suitably broad range of contexts within which the children learn to talk and listen, to read and write, and, where appropriate, the children's own interests are often used as suitable starting points.

2.7 All of the children have good opportunities for talking and listening and are generally confident in individual and group responses. Good use is made of Circle Time to promote talking and listening. In the best practice, open-ended questioning supports the children by extending their thinking and their answers. The children are mostly confident when reading, reciting or giving an opinion. Some older children use language well for problem-solving and can effectively make presentations, at times supported by technology, to their peers and others.

2.8 The development of reading is identified as a priority in the literacy co-ordinator's plan. The sessions of reading are organised well. The teachers use a range of approaches to teach reading, which are effective for most of the children who, by the end of KS2, read fluently. There is a good range of appropriate reading materials in a wide range of genres both in classroom libraries and the school library.

2.9 Broadening the forms of writing is a main focus for all teachers, and as a result extended writing is evident across all of the learning areas in some classes, and the children generally have a good understanding of a variety of writing forms. All year groups need such broad opportunities for writing. The imaginative and effective provision of 'writing boxes', designed to motivate and promote independent writing at home, could be used to extend further the range and standard of writing of more children.

2.10 The children are generally achieving well from the early years. By the end of KS2, the standards achieved by a small number of the children could be higher. The school has identified the need to monitor and evaluate across the school, the standards achieved by all the children, and to share more effectively the good practice in the development of writing which exists. The inspection team would endorse this view.

2.11 The standard of presentation of the children's work in English varies considerably. Appropriately, the school has identified the need to make an earlier start on raising the standards in spelling.

2.12 Over the last two years, the ICT co-ordinator has developed a comprehensive scheme to embed the use of ICT in all year groups. He has also undertaken a considerable amount of research into appropriate ICT resources, and staff development has been provided. In addition, appropriate Internet safety guidelines have been advised to parents and are well understood by the children. The excellent practices evident in some classrooms need to be modelled and shared more consistently across the school.

2.13 In the best practice, the teachers have appropriately embedded ICT into their teaching plans to support learning, and help with the achievement of learning objectives. Elsewhere, the references to ICT remain too generalised and require further detailed development.

2.14 When effectively used, ICT raises the achievement of the children. For example, word-processing extends the children's writing and their oral reporting. The children contribute well to editing their writing for a school newsletter produced through ICT. This aspect of the life and work of the school could usefully be extended to provide opportunities for the children to design and produce the magazine. In addition, further use of the school's well-developed website would enable the children to take a role in editing and publishing their own written work.

2.15 To extend the children's access to ICT, the school helpfully subsidises access to a secure 'superclubs' environment which enables the year 7 children to publish work and communicate with other children in a moderated and safe environment.

2.16 A paper-based record-keeping file is used to record the progression in ICT skills in each year group. However, there is a need to modify this to allow the children to track their own progression continuously throughout the school from year 1 to year 7 and to automate the process on the school's network.

2.17 In 2006, all year 7 pupils were entered for all strands of the Scheme of Information Technology (IT) Accreditation at KS2 organised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and obtained creditable results.

2.18 Good provision is made for the children requiring additional support for their learning in English. Children who experience difficulty are identified at an early stage through the appropriate use of diagnostic tests and teacher observation; additional help in English is provided through periods of withdrawal from normal classes. Targets in individual learning plans (IEPs) are specific and useful to guide classroom practice. Planning for withdrawal classes is very good. During the inspection it was not possible to observe taught withdrawal lessons.

2.19 The teaching principal is strongly committed to the welfare of the staff and the children. Following a period of staff changes, he has developed a whole-school approach to decision-making. The good quality of the work of the Principal and Vice-principal has provided a sound start to the reviewing of relevant data to support development planning and to assess and monitor the children's progress.

2.20 The current review of the SDP is timely. Within a revised development plan the areas identified for improvement need to be very specific and to focus more clearly on learning and teaching and assessment for learning. This review should include improved planning with more explicit identification of intended learning outcomes in the teachers' short-term planning.

2.21 As a focus for improving whole-school management, the school has identified the need to develop its capacity for self-evaluation leading towards improvement. The inspection endorses this as an appropriate priority. To build on the considerable strengths already within the school, the work should include the further clarification of how the co-ordinators will monitor and evaluate the standards reached across the school, and use more effectively assessment information and first-hand evidence from classroom observation to review and inform further improvements in learning and teaching.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the strong family and community atmosphere in the school;
- the excellent working relationships;
- the well behaved, courteous and welcoming children;
- the quality of the pastoral provision;
- the sound provision for the health and well-being of the children;
- the hard-working and committed teachers;
- the excellent support provided by the non-teaching staff;
- the sound quality of the teaching observed; a majority was consistently good and a minority was characterised by excellence; and
- the sound basis of progress recently made in improving the teaching of literacy and in embedding ICT in learning and teaching.

3.2 The area for improvement is the need to:

- develop further the processes to bring about improvement, through sharing and evaluating classroom practice and making more effective use of performance data to ensure that all children achieve consistently high standards.

3.3 In the areas inspected, the school has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified an area for improvement which the school has the capacity to address.

The school's progress on the area for improvement will be monitored by the District Inspector.

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