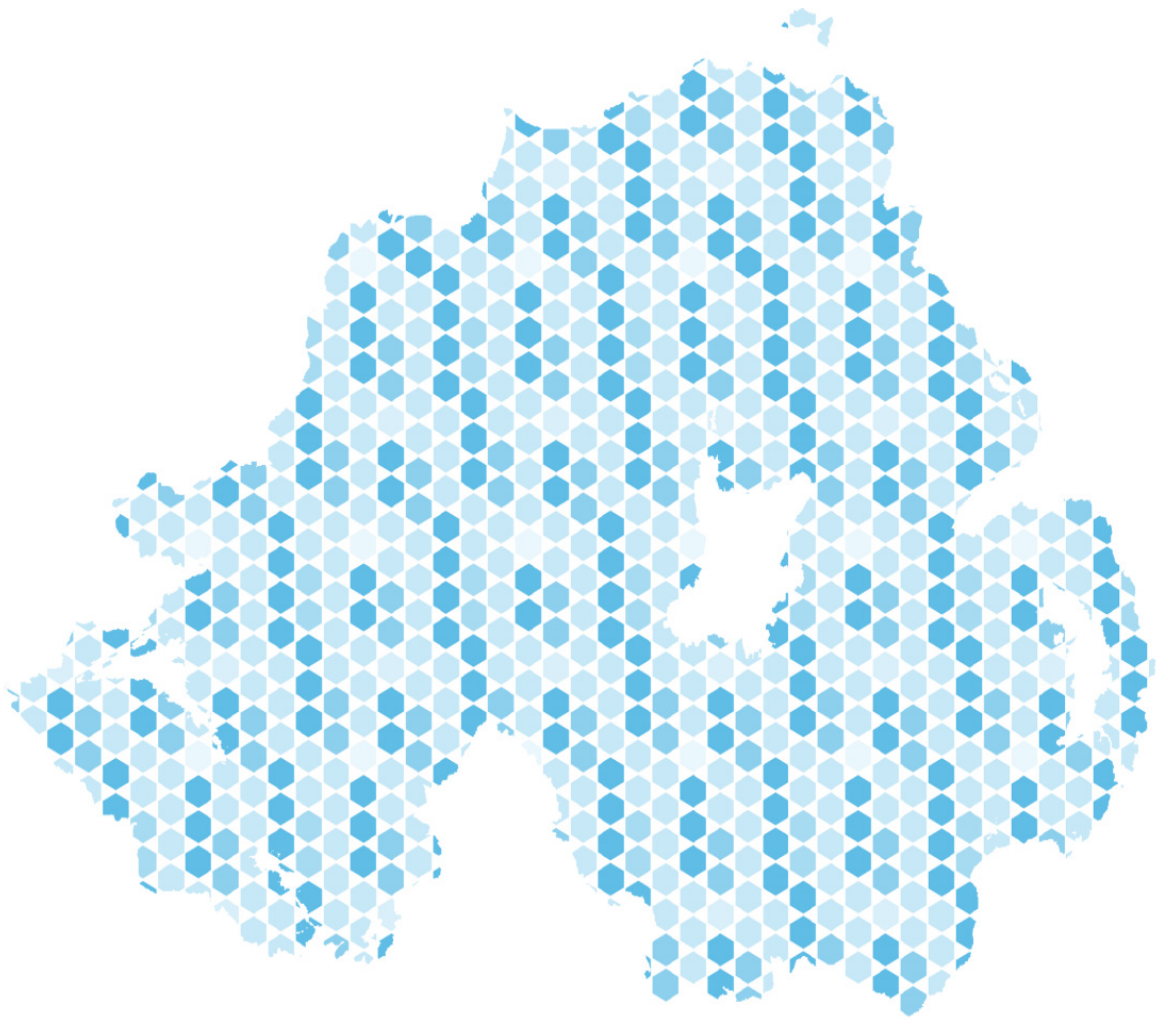


# PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training  
Inspectorate

St Colmcille's Primary School,  
Downpatrick

Report of an Inspection  
in December 2011



## CONTENTS

<b>Section</b>		<b>Page</b>
	STATISTICAL INFORMATION	
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
2.	ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	2
3.	THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	5
4.	LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	6
5.	CONCLUSION	7
	APPENDICES	

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



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

St Colmcille's Primary School is situated in Glebetown Drive, in the Ballymote district of Downpatrick. The majority of the children come from the local area. The enrolment has decreased over recent years and currently stands at 166 children. At the time of the inspection, approximately 64% of the children are entitled to free school meals (FSM). The school has identified approximately 38% of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. The school has a special learning unit (SLU) that provides for the needs of 22 children with moderate learning difficulties and complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that require statements of special educational needs (SEN).

### 1.2 FOCUS

The inspection focused on:

- the children's achievements and standards in literacy and numeracy;
- the quality of provision for learning; and
- the quality of leadership and management.

In addition, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning, and the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection were evaluated.

### 1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, SUPPORT STAFF, GOVERNORS, AND CHILDREN

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching and support 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 years 6 and 7.

One hundred and twenty-seven questionnaires were issued to the parents of children in the primary school and the SLU; approximately 38% were returned to the Inspection Services Branch, and 13 included additional written comments. Almost all of the responses to the questionnaires indicated a high level of satisfaction with the provision in the school and the SLU. In particular, the parents valued the caring, supportive and inclusive ethos; the dedicated and approachable staff; and the wide range of after-school activities available to the children. The responses to the questionnaires were shared with the Principal and governors.

Six of the teachers and six members of the support staff completed the confidential on-line questionnaire. Almost all of the responses were positive about all aspects of the work of the school. They appreciate the team ethos in the school and are highly supportive of the Principal. The governors commended all of the staff for their dedication to the children's well-being and are committed to supporting the teachers' ongoing professional development. They paid particular tribute to the Principal for her leadership, her focus on school improvement and her very good knowledge of the whole school community.

The children in years 6 and 7 talked positively about the school. In particular they underlined the very good support and care they receive from the staff, the wide range of extra-curricular activities and the opportunities provided to support their interests and development. They indicated that they are happy and secure in school and are fully aware of what to do if they have any concerns regarding their work, safety or well being.

#### 1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is very good.

Among the strengths are the inclusive, welcoming ethos where each child is valued and nurtured, the pleasant and well-behaved children and the effective use made of circle time to develop the children's social skills, tolerance and responsibility. The whole-school approach to rewarding positive behaviour encourages the children to develop their talents and raises their self esteem; and the extensive after-school programme enhances the children's experiences and supports their learning.

#### 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 through, for example, the emphasis placed on healthy breaks, the provision for and effective organisation of playground games and the good programme of physical education available to all of the children which encourage them to adopt healthy lifestyles.

#### 1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The links with the parents and the local community are strongly focused on supporting and enhancing the children's learning. There are appropriate procedures for keeping the parents of the children in the primary and the SLU well informed about the school, and their children's progress; for example, weekly newsletters, curricular meetings and the recently-launched school website. Effective links established with the local post-primary schools are helping to ensure that the children are supported appropriately as they transfer to the next stage of their learning. In addition, there is very good liaison with outside agencies working with children who require additional support with aspects of their learning; for example, the local SureStart project. A speech and language assistant and a language therapist from the local health trust and a family worker are shared and funded jointly with other schools in the Extended Schools initiative.

## 2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

### 2.1 LEARNING

Almost all of the children settle quickly to work, displaying good organisational skills and a high level of enthusiasm for their learning. In the foundation stage (FS) they learn through a very effective combination of formal and play-based activities which promote their sense of enquiry and support the development of their language and early mathematical skills. The children in key stage (KS) 1 and KS2 enjoy in particular the practical tasks and opportunities to learn actively. When working in pairs and small groups, they interact well with one another, listen attentively and respond positively to what the others have said.

Appropriate targets are set out in the individual educational plans (IEPs) for those children who require additional help with aspects of their learning and development. These IEPs outline appropriate strategies to support the children's progress and are of a very good quality. The school's detailed internal assessment data indicates that almost all of these children are making good progress and achieving standards in line with their ability.

An analysis of the KS2 assessment data over the past four years shows that in English and mathematics the standards are below the Northern Ireland (NI) average. Over the past four years the percentage of children attaining the expected level or higher in English has risen steadily; in the last two years it has been above the average for schools in the same free school meals (FSM) category. In mathematics, the school's performance has fluctuated from slightly above to below the average for similar schools in the same FSM category.<sup>1</sup> The Principal and senior leadership team (SLT) have identified appropriately the need to improve standards further and have implemented a range of appropriate strategies to raise the children's levels of attainment; the inspection findings confirm that this is an area for further improvement. Importantly, there is evidence that the intervention strategies deployed and actions being taken are improving the standards the children attain.

## 2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall quality of provision in English is very good.

In all key stages a variety of well-planned opportunities for the children to work and interact with others effectively develops good thinking, talking and listening skills. In the FS, the teachers use effective questioning strategies to enable the children to participate well in talking and listening sessions and during activity-based learning experiences. The school has accessed a range of appropriate speech and language support for the significant number of children who have additional needs in communication and language development. In KS1 and KS2 almost all of the children co-operate well in pairs and small group discussions. They enjoy taking part in drama activities such as role-play and hot-seating. They listen respectfully to each other's views and respond appropriately. In most of the classes the teachers extend the children's ability to express their ideas through open-ended questions and well-focused plenary sessions.

The majority of the children read at a level corresponding with, or above, their chronological age; the school's internal assessment data shows they are making good year-on-year progress. The school has implemented a structured, engaging phonics and reading programme across the year groups which enables the children to sound, identify and make sense of unfamiliar text. Attractive and age-appropriate books have been provided for all classes and the teachers encourage an enjoyment of reading through giving the children regular opportunities to read for research, personal interest and pleasure. During the inspection the children in years 4 and 7 displayed a high level of fluency and understanding in their reading. They spoke positively about the novels and authors they enjoyed reading in school and at home.

Children who have additional needs in literacy are supported effectively through well-targeted in-class support and very effective withdrawal sessions to ensure that their individual needs are met. All of the children involved in the Reading Partnership programme have benefited from this additional support and made good to significant progress.

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<sup>1</sup> The Key Stage outcomes should be interpreted with caution for small cohorts of children as a large percentage change from year to year can often be attributed to a very small number of children.

Most of the children attain good standards in their writing. Their achievements are celebrated in attractive displays throughout the school. In the FS there are very good opportunities for the children to write in meaningful contexts and become independent writers through stimulating activity-based learning experiences. As they progress through the year groups, the children write increasingly competently in a range of forms including poems, diary entries, recounts and reports. They also have opportunities to write for different audiences and purposes across the curriculum.

The school has identified appropriately the need to improve the standards attained in the end of KS2 assessments in literacy and implemented a range of effective strategies to raise standards in English. The current co-ordinators have devised action plans for improving the children's writing, developing their reading for comprehension skills and targeting under-achievement in literacy. These action plans specify the most urgent areas for development and are integral to the School Development Plan.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is integrated well in the schemes of work for literacy; it is used effectively for research and in the editing and drafting process.

### 2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The overall quality of the provision for mathematics is very good.

In the FS, the children are developing their confidence in the use of mathematical language and their understanding of mathematical concepts through an appropriate range of practical activities, games and action songs. This includes stimulating and enjoyable play-based learning activities both indoors and outdoors where the children explore and investigate through real-life contexts. For example, during the inspection, activities in the Christmas Shop, the Baby Clinic, and the Bakery provided the children with excellent opportunities to develop their accurate use of mathematical language and develop their understanding.

In KS1 and 2, the children develop their numeracy skills and thinking through an increasing number of opportunities to apply their learning in problem-solving activities and in meaningful contexts. The children work with enthusiasm and enjoyment; they display increasing fluency and confidence and have a good understanding of number, measure, shape and space and data handling.

In discussion with the children in years 4 and 7, they spoke confidently about their mathematical experiences, and made good to very good use of their mental mathematics skills in number, place value, shape and space, measures and data handling. As a result of the teachers' ongoing evaluations of the mathematics programme, a wider range of flexible problem-solving strategies has been developed which includes mental mathematics activities in relevant contexts which are used weekly. For example, 'Investigation Wednesday' and 'Puzzle of the Week' develop the children's mathematical thinking and understanding both in school and at home. The school is in the process of introducing more focused sessions of carefully-chosen strategies for those children identified as requiring further support in numeracy. These strategies are designed to address gaps in their learning and enable the children to develop greater confidence in their own work.



Across both key stages the teachers use engaging practical activities to promote the children's sense of enjoyment of their learning; for example, mental mathematics sessions are an integral part of lessons and there are clear connections made with other areas of learning. Effective questioning and opportunities for further discussion broaden the children's understanding of key concepts and vocabulary in mathematics. The standards of numeracy presentation are very good. The children enjoy their learning in mathematics and numeracy and make good progress in line with their ability.

The numeracy co-ordinator provides very good leadership and has a clear and progressive vision for the development of mathematics and numeracy within the school. She is a highly effective role-model of good practice and has been pro-active in supporting the school staff, the parents and the children in the improvement of this aspect of curriculum provision. She monitors and evaluates effectively the quality of the provision through the scrutiny of the teachers' clearly-differentiated planning, the analysis of data and the sampling of the children's work. The school has identified appropriately the need to improve the levels of attainment in the end of KS2 assessments in numeracy. The ongoing development of the provision for mathematics and numeracy continues to be prioritised within the School Development Plan.

The use of ICT is being developed effectively through most of the school to reinforce the children's mathematical thinking; for example, interactive whiteboards are used well to support learning and the children have good access to a range of computer software packages.

### **3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING**

#### **3.1 PLANNING**

There is very good comprehensive planning in place to guide the day to day work of the school. The planning for both English and mathematics facilitates a very good structure for lessons, enabling coherence and progression. The teachers meet the needs of all of the children through a wide range of teaching and learning strategies, including active learning and through effective differentiation. The teachers' evaluations are purposeful and inform future teaching and learning.

The planning for SEN is well integrated across the year groups. The class teachers have developed effective IEPs for each child on the SEN Register; almost all of the children make very good progress and achieve the targets in their education plans. The IEPs are reviewed regularly and progress is shared with the children and parents.

#### **3.2 TEACHING**

The teaching observed during the inspection ranged from satisfactory to outstanding. Nearly all of the teaching was good or better, with almost one half of the lessons being very good.

There is a well-embedded culture of active learning in all of the classrooms. In the best practice observed: an effective range of teaching and learning strategies was used; there was appropriate review and consolidation of learning; the learning resources, tasks and teachers' questions were matched well to the needs and abilities of all of the children; and the teachers responded well to the children's oral responses. The teachers managed skilfully the small number of children with complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, enabling them to learn with their peers and integrate well in classroom activities.

The classroom assistants provided sensitive and well-directed support and contributed significantly to the children's progress. In a very few of the lessons observed, the sessions were overly adult-directed which delayed the children's engagement in the learning activity; and the tasks were not sufficiently challenging for the more able children.

### **3.3 ASSESSMENT**

The teachers use a wide range of internal and standardised tests to assess the quality of the children's learning and inform future practice. They make very good use of the analysis of assessment data to monitor the progress and attainments of the children, track every child's progress and identify at an appropriately early stage the children who are under-achieving or are having difficulty with aspects of their learning. The assessment arrangements enable the school to monitor and evaluate effectively the provision for the wide range of learning needs of all the children.

In the best practice the teachers make supportive oral and written comments on the children's written work and clearly indicate how it can be further improved. The school needs to disseminate this best practice in order to ensure a consistent whole-school approach and to provide evidence of the children's progress.

There is an effective whole-school approach to SEN. The teachers use a wide range of diagnostic testing and teacher observations to identify early those children who require additional support with their learning and to put in place targeted specific intervention strategies.

The parents are kept well informed about their children's progress through regular updates, consultations with the teachers and an annual written report.

## **4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

### **4.1 LEADERSHIP**

The quality of leadership and management in the school is very good.

The Principal has been in post for five years, in which time she has overseen a significant improvement in the standards attained by the children. The end of KS assessments in English have risen by 30%, and in mathematics by more than 20%, over the past five years. She has a very good understanding of the needs of the school and the wider community. She has established a well-embedded culture of self-evaluation across the school and has shared very effectively with all members of staff and the governors her vision for school improvement. There is excellent internal communication and a strong sense of openness and collegiality within the school. The Principal is supportive of her staff, both teaching and non-teaching, demonstrating a commitment to their welfare and continued professional development.

The school is currently undergoing a period of transition in light of recent changes which has resulted in key co-ordinators' roles and teams being reorganised, following the retirement of the Vice-principal and a senior teacher. The senior leadership team (SLT) is currently being re-structured to reflect the school's changing context and its curricular priorities. As a consequence, it will be important now to focus on clarifying the new roles and responsibilities, so that those involved with the leadership and co-ordination of key aspects of the curriculum at whole-school level will most effectively support the Principal in raising standards further.

## 4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school improvement process is clearly linked to a well-constructed school development plan (SDP) underpinned by rigorous self-evaluation. It clearly outlines the curricular and extra-curricular priorities for the school. The processes for monitoring and evaluating are well embedded at all levels; all of the action plans are purposeful and informed by the analysis of data to identify the children's needs and clearly focused on raising further the standards of learning and teaching.

The SDP meets fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010.

## 4.3 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The school places a high priority on staff development and has accessed appropriate support from a range of educational support agencies. The in-school programme for staff development has been well planned and linked closely to the priorities in the SDP.

## 4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation in the school is good. The corridors and rooms are bright and attractive, with examples of the children's art, written and topic work and evidence of their achievements displayed and celebrated throughout the school. There is a dedicated library and an after-school room, with plans for a Nurture Room to be added in 2012. The buildings supervisor and his team maintain the school very well and the standards of caretaking and cleaning are excellent.

## 4.5 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The governors are well informed about all aspects of the school's provision and contribute actively to the development planning process. The school has a good range of resources to support the children in their learning with interactive whiteboards in most of the classrooms.

## 5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the courteous, enthusiastic children, almost all of whom have a positive disposition towards learning and who work well independently and with one another;
- the inclusive ethos, underpinned by the highly effective arrangements for pastoral care and characterised by the excellent working relationships at all levels;
- the very good quality of the provision in literacy and numeracy;
- the dedicated teachers and support staff who work very hard to meet the needs of all of the children and the quality of the teaching observed during the inspection, almost all of which was good or better;

- the well-targeted strategic support for the children who require additional help with aspects of their learning, including those with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs; and
- the outstanding strategic leadership of the Principal who ensures that the achievements and standards of the children remain the key focus for the school.

5.2 In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by the school is very good. The school is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of all of the children and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

**SPECIAL LEARNING UNIT**

The SLU has two classes; one caters for KS 1 children from year 1 to year 4, while the KS2 class provides for children from year 5 to year 7. The children have a wide range of need and ability and a significant minority have complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The quality of the provision in the SLU is good. The majority of the teaching observed was good or better. The lessons are well structured, with most activities closely matched to the needs and abilities of the children. There are good classroom routines and strategies employed to support the children and help them to manage their own behaviour. The unit provides a caring and supportive environment, with sensitive staff who have a good understanding of the barriers to learning faced by the children. The classrooms are bright; the children's work is displayed attractively and their success is celebrated.

The class teachers maintain good links with the parents and a range of external agencies that support the children. The classroom assistants are part of an effective team and work closely with the teachers.

The children have opportunities to integrate with their peers in mainstream classes and benefit from a range of school trips to broaden their experiences. Most of the children are motivated and achieve good standards in numeracy and literacy in relation to their ability. Due to the recent changes in staffing there is a need for the teachers to find opportunities to collaborate and to share planning, learning and teaching strategies and systems in providing for the children who have such a wide range of abilities and complex needs. The provision of interactive whiteboards in the SLU is needed to enhance the learning experiences of the children.

**HEALTH AND SAFETY**

- The boys' and girls' toilets are in a very poor state of repair. The faulty taps and doors represent a risk to the children's health and safety.
- The heating system in the special learning unit is not effective; it does not heat the rooms adequately to ensure the children's well-being.

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