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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Focused Inspection

**Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain
Belfast**

Inspected: May 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain is a co-educational Irish-medium primary school situated in north Belfast, occupying the premises of the former Frederick Street Nursery School. The school was opened in 1998 and achieved grant-aided status in 2002. The children who attend the school live in the area surrounding the school, as well the New Lodge, Newington, Carrick Hill and Antrim Road areas of the city. Over the last five years the enrolment has increased from 48, and currently stands at 65; 54% of the children are entitled to free school meals. Around 8% of the children have been identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning; one child has a statement of special educational needs (SEN).

1.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection included the opportunity for the parents and teachers to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors) and the children from year 6. Seventy-one questionnaires were issued to parents; approximately 32% were returned to the Department of Education (DE) of which 6 contained additional written comments. The responses from the parental questionnaires highlighted the caring and friendly staff and the support offered to their children. All of the teachers completed the questionnaire and reported that they enjoyed working in the school. The governors expressed their appreciation of the work of the Principal and staff in promoting the school in the local community. The school secretary, caretaker and classroom assistants contribute significantly to the life and work of the school.

1.3 The inspection focused on the work in mathematics and the effectiveness of the school's SEN provision. In addition the inspection evaluated the work in information and communication technology (ICT) in promoting and supporting learning and teaching in mathematics. The inspection also evaluated the school's procedures for pastoral care, including child protection.

2. THE QUALITY OF THE CHILDREN'S WORK

2.1 The school has a friendly, caring atmosphere with a distinctive ethos based on immersion in the Irish language. Working relationships between the teachers and the children are very good. The behaviour of the children through the course of the inspection was exemplary. The majority of children are interested in their work and try hard to complete their tasks to the best of their ability.

2.2 The children in year 6, who met with the inspection team, spoke positively about their experiences in school; they reported that they enjoyed school, they described how the older children support and care for the younger children, and indicated that they know how to get help if a problem arises.

2.3 The arrangements for pastoral care and child protection have a few strengths. There are, however, important areas for improvement which require prompt action to ensure that the policies and procedures are fully in line with the guidance outlined in the relevant DE circulars. In particular, the school needs to review and update the policy documents and guidance materials for pastoral care and child protection. In addition the reviewed policies need to be communicated effectively to teaching and non-teaching staff, children, parents and governors. The District Inspector will return to the school within a six-week period to ensure that these important issues are addressed appropriately.

2.4 The school gives very good attention to promoting health and well-being including opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. There are effective policies and programmes in place, for example healthy breaks and participation in programmes that promote healthy eating, drinking water and taking regular exercise, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles. An assessment of the nature and quality of the school's arrangements for health and well-being practices should be included in the school development plan (SDP) in order to comply with statutory regulations.

2.5 The teachers are hard-working and committed to meeting the children's learning needs. They work well together as a team in the interests of promoting further the children's learning opportunities. The quality of teaching observed during the inspection was always sound and on occasions very good. In the best practice, the teachers used short, active learning activities to motivate and maintain the children's interest in their work. The work in some less effective lessons was over-directed by the teacher with a focus on completing worksheet materials, and few opportunities for the children to apply their learning to problem-solving and investigative activities.

2.6 The teachers plan conscientiously for the children's work across the curriculum. The planning currently lacks coherence and consistency, and does not address adequately the needs of all the children in all classes. There is a need to update whole-school planning to ensure that it identifies clearly the intended learning outcomes in terms of skills, curricular content and language, and that the learning needs of all of the children in the composite classes are met consistently. In addition, it is important that the planning identifies how the children's progress will be monitored and learning evaluated.

2.7 The teachers mark the children's work regularly; they annotate the work with positive, often personalised comments. There is a need for the staff to develop guidance on marking for improvement and agree features of the children's work that demonstrate progress. Teachers can then indicate through comment and example how the children may actually improve the quality of their work.

2.8 The school has invested in a commercial whole-school scheme for mathematics. Too often class work is guided by the use of photocopied resources. There is no whole-school scheme of work for mathematics identifying opportunities for consolidation and differentiation and ensuring progression. The school's numeracy policy indicates that opportunities to develop and apply the children's mathematical skills will be identified as appropriate in other schemes of work. The inspection team endorses the need to move forward on these areas.

2.9 In the foundation stage and in key stage (KS) 1, there is evidence to show that the children have opportunities to develop early mathematical language, concepts and skills. By the end of KS2, however the outcomes the children achieve, reflected in the performance data held by the school and the responses of the children, point to standards in mathematics that are not as good as they could be. The use of ICT as a teaching tool to develop the children's numeracy skills needs further development. Importantly the school will need to monitor and evaluate the progress of individual children to ensure that their ICT skills are being developed progressively to support learning across the curriculum.

2.10 The school gathers a range of data relating to the children's progress. There is a need for more effective use to be made of this data to promote improvement and ensure that the children receive appropriate support relevant to their needs.

2.11 The school has identified approximately 8% of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. Good links have been established with a range of external support agencies, in order to meet the children's needs. Withdrawal sessions are provided for some children, and the needs of others are met by the class teachers. The school does not maintain a SEN Register and does not categorise children's needs formally according to Code of Practice, apart from one child with a statement of special educational needs. There is a need for the school to adopt a more formal and rigorous approach to its provision for those children who require additional support. All teachers need to maintain appropriate education plans for the children who have additional learning needs. The school has identified the need to make individual targets for improvement more sharply focused. In addition the arrangements for monitoring and evaluating progress need to be set out more clearly.

2.12 The children in the year one and year two class engage in regular sessions of play-based learning and are developing the confidence to talk about what they are doing and what they have learned. In the sessions observed the children developed their skills in estimating length and began to investigate non-standard measures, demonstrating positive attitudes towards learning. The teacher and classroom assistant interact effectively with the children, supporting them when appropriate. Visual time-tables and classroom routines promote independence in the children's learning and develop further their social skills. There is a need to review the planning for the play-based sessions and outline the opportunities to promote the children's numeracy skills and build effectively upon their interests and curiosity, and exploit the full learning potential of all resources.

2.13 The staff comprises the Principal and three other teachers, two of whom are beginning teachers in their second year of teaching. All have availed of appropriate centre-based in-service training on a wide range of issues. There is a need for the school to review its procedures to support the beginning teachers in the school. It is appropriate that staff have identified the need to develop further their Irish language skills.

2.14 The Principal has been in post for seven years; he has established good working relationships with various groups in the community. He knows the children and their families well and understands the needs of the children. The Principal now needs to become more strategic in working with teachers to plan for ongoing school improvement and raised levels of attainment. The preparation of clear action plans and the identification of appropriate success criteria should assist the staff to guide, monitor and evaluate the extent of improvement.

2.15 The SDP needs to be updated and reviewed in line with the requirements of the Education (School Development Plans) Regulations NI 2005 Order on School Development Planning, and to reflect the findings of the inspection report.

3. CONCLUSION

3.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the exemplary behaviour of the children;
- the very good arrangements for promoting healthy eating and active lifestyles;
- the quality of the teaching sessions observed during the inspection;
- the hardworking staff who work well together as a team;
- the effective links established with a range of external agencies and organisations; and
- the work of the Principal in promoting the school through the development of effective working relationships with the local community.

3.2 The areas for improvement include the need to:

- review, update and communicate the policy documents and guidance materials for pastoral care and child protection in line with the relevant DE circulars;
- develop a more strategic approach to planning for learning and teaching to improve the standards the children achieve, in particular those children with additional learning needs; and
- review and update the SDP to reflect agreed priorities for improvement and the findings of this report.

3.3 In the areas inspected, the school has some strengths in its educational provision. The inspection has identified important areas for improvement, which need to be addressed promptly if the school is to meet effectively the needs of all the learners.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing these areas for improvement.

ACCOMMODATION

- The school does not have a staffroom.

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