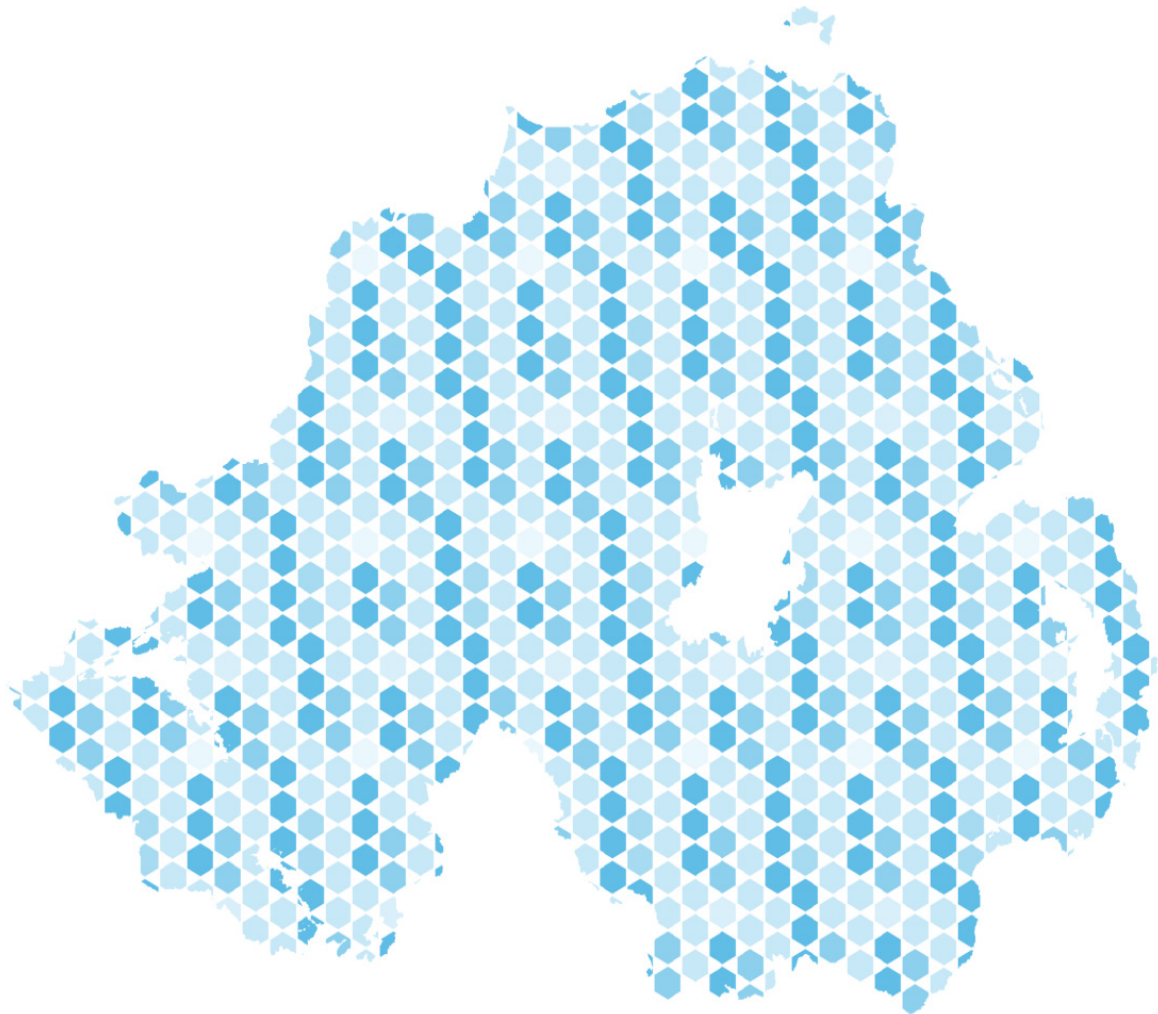


PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Cookstown Primary School

Report of an Inspection
in May 2010

CONTENTS

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

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, the Inspectorate relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

INTRODUCTION

1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT

Cookstown Primary School is situated on a shared site with the nursery school and the High School on the Coolnafranky Estate in the centre of the town. Almost all of the children come from the town and the surrounding rural areas. The enrolment in the primary school has declined over the past five years and currently stands at 370 children. In addition, there are 21 children in the learning support centre (LSC) which caters for children with moderate learning difficulties and autistic spectrum disorder. At the time of the inspection, approximately 20% of the children were entitled to receive free school meals and 29% of the children were identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning.

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; and
- the quality of leadership and management.

In addition, the contribution of information and communication technology (ICT) in developing and supporting learning and the school's arrangements for pastoral care, including child protection were evaluated.

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

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents, 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 children from year 6. One hundred and twenty questionnaires were issued to the parents; 43% were returned to the Inspection Services Branch and 19 of the returns contained additional written comments. Almost all of the responses from the questionnaires were highly affirmative, indicating very strong support for the life and work of the school. In particular, the parents praised the outstanding opportunities provided through the extensive range of extra curricular activities, the excellent leadership provided by the Principal, the caring, supportive teachers and support staff and the importance of the school within the community.

Just over four-fifths of the teachers and the support staff completed the online confidential questionnaires with 11 providing written comments. Almost all of the responses were positive about nearly all aspects of the work of the school. In particular, the staff commented on their enjoyment of working in the school and the very good working relationships which exist among all of the staff.

The governors expressed their strong support for the work of the school and emphasised their considerable appreciation of the commitment and dedication of the Principal and the staff. They highlighted the high regard in which the school is held by the local community and their own active role in contributing to and supporting the school.

The year 6 children talked openly and very positively about their experiences in the school. They value the extensive support provided by their teachers and the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities provided for them by the school. They also reported that they feel safe in the school and are aware of what to do if they have any concerns regarding their work, safety or well-being.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) reported to the Principal and representatives of the governors the very few concerns emerging from the parent and staff questionnaires.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is very good. The school has in place appropriate policies, action plans and procedures for its pastoral provision. Working relationships are excellent at all levels within the school and the staff are highly committed to the care and welfare of the children. They work effectively together to promote and to maintain a caring, well-organised and supportive environment for learning.

The children are very welcoming, courteous and display very good personal and social skills. They respond positively to the teachers' high expectations and their behaviour is always very good, and at times exemplary. There is a wide range of after-school activities, which are well attended and valued by the children and the parents.

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 outstanding attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, for example, there are effective policies in place to guide and support the development of the whole-school healthy eating programme and links made with relevant agencies to reinforce healthy lifestyle messages.

1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The parents receive regular and useful information about the life of the school through news sheets, letters and the school website. There is an active Parents and Friends Association which provides additional support and resources; this organisation is an integral part of the school community.

The children's learning experiences are enhanced through visitors to the school and visits to places of educational interest. Participation in the Schools Community Relations Programme and involvement with the British Council Comenius Multilateral Partnership, links the school well with other schools both locally and further afield.

The school has developed extensive links and partnerships with the local and wider community which enrich the experiences and social opportunities for the children, staff and parents.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The children are very keen, highly motivated and enthusiastic learners; they engage readily in the activities and work steadily with perseverance. The children have a very positive attitude to their work and are prepared to attempt more difficult and challenging learning activities. In the most effective practice throughout the key stages, the children contribute to the development of topic work and reflect on their learning through purposeful plenary sessions or through peer assessment opportunities.

An analysis of the key stage (KS)2 assessment data over the past four years show that in English and mathematics the school's performance is below the Northern Ireland average. Correspondingly the levels of attainment in English and mathematics remain just below the average when compared with schools in the same free school meals category.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall quality of provision in English and literacy is very good.

There is a rich literacy environment in the school. The recently appointed literacy co-ordinators have a very good understanding of the quality of the school's provision and of the standards achieved by the children. Key aspects including sharper target-setting and improved strategies to support underachievers in literacy are identified as areas for development in the School Development Plan (SDP). There is a comprehensive whole-school literacy policy to guide the teachers' planning. The teachers have realistically high expectations of the children and they plan conscientiously for the children's experiences in literacy within and across year groups to ensure consistency and progression. Literacy is promoted effectively across the curriculum and the teaching of literacy is often of a high standard.

The children experience a wide range of activities to develop their talking and listening skills. The children contribute very well orally in class, and speak confidently and with fluency. They listen attentively to their teachers and to one another. In KS2, ICT is used effectively to develop the children's oral presentational skills and to provide a real audience particularly through the use of appropriate online communication forums.

The school encourages an enjoyment of reading amongst the children and they have regular opportunities to read for research, personal interest and pleasure. The children's reading skills are very good and are developed systematically across the school. Teachers use effectively whole-class, small group, paired, individual and as the children progress, independent approaches and strategies such as shared and guided reading to enhance reading skills. In the foundation stage (FS) and KS1, most of the children are developing independent reading skills effectively. The provision of multimedia resources and novels complement the school's reading scheme. Increasingly, the teachers are using reading opportunities across the curriculum to reinforce reading skills in meaningful contexts. Parents are involved in an effective paired reading programme to support and enhance the children's reading. In KS2, the children read with increasing confidence and during the inspection they were able to talk confidently and enthusiastically about their favourite authors, books and characters. While most of the children reach a good standard of attainment in reading by the end of KS2, there is a significant minority for whom the standards need to be higher. The school recognises this and has identified reading as a priority area for development.

As they progress through KS2, the children's writing skills, often modelled on familiar forms and structures are of a very good standard. The children are developing appropriate note-taking and report writing across the curriculum. The effective use of interactive whiteboards supports the children well as they progress from emergent to independent writing and motivates them to further improve the quality of their work. There is a coherent and systematic approach to the planning and integration of ICT with an appropriate emphasis on developing the children's skills across the year groups to support their learning in literacy, including digital literacy.

While the standard of the children's written work is very good and it is clear that all areas of the curriculum are being used appropriately to extend the children's independent writing, there is some evidence in the children's books of unnecessary transcription, decontextualised grammar and punctuation exercises. This aspect of work needs to be reviewed to improve the overall quality.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

The overall quality of provision for mathematics and numeracy is good.

The co-ordinator has recently led the development of the numeracy policy and is currently reviewing the schemes of work. The long-term planning is very good and outlines appropriately the progression in the children's mathematical knowledge and understanding. It is suitably broad and balanced addressing the key areas of mathematics with sufficient frequency enabling the children to make good progress. The fortnightly plans identify clearly the intended learning for the children and provide details of the teaching strategies to be used. The co-ordinator has organised well focused in-service training (INSET) for all teachers in numeracy. The INSET has succeeded in raising the profile of mental mathematics and the use of games and problem-solving activities throughout the school. The teachers make very good use of ICT, such as computer programs, programmable devices, and a range of websites to support learning and teaching in mathematics.

In the FS, the children experience a range of very well-planned, play-based activities through which they develop early mathematical language, concepts and understanding appropriate to their age and ability. They are beginning to develop their skills in mental mathematics and have good opportunities to sort, match, count and make patterns and sequences in a variety of contexts. In the best practice observed, the children were given time to think about their work and to share their understanding with others.

At KS1, the children display a positive attitude to mathematics. During the inspection most of the children demonstrated confidence in their understanding of shape and space, place value, measures, estimation and number facts. Many of the learning opportunities make good use of a broad range of practical equipment to help consolidate the children's understanding.

In KS2, the lessons provide the children with opportunities to extend their learning through an appropriate range of teaching approaches such as investigative and problem-solving tasks. The tasks are frequently set in real life contexts and are linked to other areas of the curriculum. By the end of KS2, most of the children have a very good understanding of place value, number facts, estimation, measures, and shape and space, and are flexible in their mathematical thinking. By the end of KS2 most of the children attain good to very good standards in mathematics.

A particular strength of the provision is the differentiation of the learning activities for the more able children to provide greater challenge and extension in their mathematical experiences. In order to raise further the standards at KS1 and KS2, there is a need for the

teachers to differentiate more effectively for children who are experiencing difficulties with learning in mathematics and to use the assessment data available to help identify appropriate numeracy targets for these children.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers plan conscientiously for their work. The planning is focused appropriately on the intended learning outcomes for the children. Key aspects of the children's learning and development, such as thinking skills and personal capabilities are given important consideration. Success criteria are agreed with the children at the outset of lessons and, in the best practice observed, referred to at stages throughout the lesson to ensure key learning points are being met. In their planning, the teachers make effective links between the various areas of learning. This is helping the children appreciate connections in their learning and is making the work more interesting and meaningful.

The teachers evaluate the quality of learning and teaching regularly through year group meetings. In the main, these evaluations are reported orally. The school needs to consider the advantages to be gained from written evaluations which identify explicitly the extent of the children's learning and agreed actions monitored and reviewed.

3.2 TEACHING

The quality of the teaching observed ranged from satisfactory to outstanding with over one-half of the lessons being very good or outstanding. In the most effective practice the lessons were well paced with ample opportunities provided for active learning through group and paired work. The teachers built on prior knowledge, establishing effective connections across the areas of learning and making the learning relevant to the children's own experiences. The school has made very good progress in embracing the underlying principles of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and this is reflected in the planning and teaching throughout the school. There is effective integration of ICT to support learning in both literacy and numeracy across the key stages.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

Over the past three years the school has undertaken very significant and successful review and development of its assessment processes. Through a comprehensive audit of its provision, it has identified key issues to address and set about, in a systematic and sensible manner, to make improvements. As a result, the school is developing well processes to track carefully the progress which the children make and to set this against the children's abilities. In circumstances where children are seen to be at risk of low or under-achievement, the school is recognising this and endeavouring to address the problem through a variety of intervention approaches. There is evidence to show that the school is having significant success using this method and, most importantly, the provision for children is being better tailored to their needs and attainment is improving. The further development and embedding of these processes needs to be continued and similar attention given to the system of support for children with more significant learning needs. Within the context of the school's development and improvement of its assessment processes, it is beginning to make very good use of a variety of new assessment aids, including the further understanding and utilisation of Assessment Manager, a part of the School Information Management System, to inform and improve the quality of learning and teaching.

The teachers mark the children's work regularly and, in most cases, their comments illustrate that they recognise the effort the children make and offer them positive feedback. In the context of assessment for learning, the teachers are developing their use of marking for

improvement, in which teachers' written comments indicate to the children how their work can be improved: this very effective process needs to be undertaken more consistently across the school. In some very innovative work, the children are beginning to self-assess their own work and to peer assess one another's work; this process of self-evaluation is encouraging the children to reflect upon and to improve their own work.

A written report is sent to the parents each year. The reports are well-written and provide a very useful profile of each child's strengths and attainments across all areas of learning and the aspects they need to improve upon. In addition to qualitative statements, the reports also provide very useful quantitative data which enables the parents to appreciate how their child is progressing in relation to their peers in the same year group.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: LEARNING SUPPORT CENTRES

The children in the autism specific class (KS1) receive a very good education in the school. Planning, based on a comprehensive assessment of need, is precise and sharply focused on identifying the children's learning strengths and areas of weakness. This information is used to inform accurately the individual education plans and the targets the children need to achieve within a given time span. The children understand the targets set for them and can articulate these at group time. Skilled teaching and effective classroom assistant support result in the children making appropriate progress based on previous learning and across the subjects. The children's achievements vary but in all instances, literacy and numeracy development is of a very good standard. Excellent use is made of the assessment data which is collated and analysed with good effect to inform future work.

Fourteen children, with significant learning difficulties and additional needs, including varying behaviour difficulties and autism, are educated in two learning support centres (LSCs), specifically designed to provide intensive support in a small group setting. The children work well for the majority of the time and as their concentration and level of interest allow. Progress varies for each child but, overall, individual literacy and numeracy targets are achieved and, in a minority of instances, surpassed. Running records indicate good achievements in reading competence, including the ability to decode unfamiliar words and read with fluency and expression. Good writing and fine motor skills are evident from the children's work books and displays. Numeracy performance in basic number work, money and time is well developed. The emphasis on practical work, circle time and the use of the computer feature highly and appropriately in the daily programme. The classroom assistants provide much needed additional support to the work of the teacher. The integration activities encourage the children to learn alongside their peers in more challenging settings and larger classes. In a few instances, more discussion and planning is needed to clarify the integration process and identify the strategies needed to ensure more effective learning and socialisation.

Overall, the LSCs provide a valuable level of support for children who require additional support with their learning and are unable to learn in the current large and more challenging mainstream classes.

3.5 SPECIAL NEEDS: MAIN STREAM

The school has a high proportion of children who require additional support with their learning. This support is provided mostly through withdrawal sessions. Increasingly, the children's needs are compounded by additional conditions such as speech, language and behaviour difficulties.

All of the children, during the withdrawal sessions, behave well and are keen to learn. The children enjoy the withdrawal sessions, interact very well with the teachers and respond positively to the praise and encouragement they receive. They are developing their basic

literacy skills which support their learning in class and develop their confidence and self-esteem. However, the current practice lacks flexibility. The school's leadership team needs to review the present system for special education needs in the mainstream classes so that a more targeted, and flexible range of support is provided to meet more effectively the needs of all the children.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal has been in post for just under three years and provides outstanding strategic leadership and management. He has a clear overview of the children's educational and pastoral experiences and demonstrates an appropriate vision for the school and a clear understanding of how to achieve this. He is able to inspire, and challenge all in the school community, and since his appointment, he has developed a more collegiate leadership and accountability structure to manage the changing needs of the school. Within this evolving structure the Principal is supported well by the Vice-principal and the members of the leadership team who lead a number of important whole school initiatives and teams effectively. There is a very strong sense of collegiality within the school.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school's improvement process is clearly linked to a well-constructed SDP. A wide range of action plans are in place, notably in literacy and numeracy which support effectively a culture of school improvement. There are very good opportunities for consultation about the SDP within the school community and the plan is underpinned by a well-conceived programme of staff development which is evaluated systematically and linked appropriately to the main priorities identified for improvement. Staff development needs are met through carefully selected in-service training which, in addition to external support, makes effective use of existing expertise within the school. The SDP meets fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

4.3 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

There is very good communication between the Principal and the governors; the governors are hard-working and highly committed to the whole school community. They are well informed about school developments, and are involved appropriately in decisions regarding the strategic direction and development of the school.

The school deploys its financial resources appropriately, providing the children with a suitable curriculum. The school is making very good use of all available resources to support the needs of all the children.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the quality of the school's ethos in which all the children are made to feel welcome and are valued;
- the very good quality of the arrangements for pastoral care;
- the good to very good standards attained by most of the children in English and mathematics;

- the hard work and commitment of the teachers and the quality of their teaching which was very good or outstanding in over one-half of the lessons observed;
- the outstanding strategic leadership and management provided by the Principal; and
- the extensive range of extra curricular provision and the high quality links established with the parents and wider community.

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

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