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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -  
Promoting Improvement*



*Providing Inspection Services for*  
Department of Education  
Department for Employment and Learning  
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

## **Education and Training Inspectorate**

### **Report of a Focused Inspection**

**Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh  
Strabane**

**Inspected: October 2009**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 SCHOOL CONTEXT**

Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh is an Irish-medium primary school situated in temporary accommodation in the Ballycolman Estate in Strabane. Most of the children live in Strabane and a number come from a wider rural catchment. The school's current enrolment is 121. Almost a third of the children are entitled to free school meals and around 20% are identified as having 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; the quality of leadership and management and the contribution of information and communication technology in promoting and supporting learning.

### **1.3 THE VIEWS OF THE PARENTS, TEACHERS, GOVERNORS SUPPORT STAFF 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 year 6. Ninety-two questionnaires were issued to parents, 27 were returned to the Department of Education (DE) and seven contained additional written comments. Six teachers and eight support staff completed online questionnaires. The opinions expressed in the various questionnaires were very positive. The few issues raised were discussed with the Principal and the governors. The governors spoke in detail about their role in the life of the school. They value the school's warm, supportive atmosphere; the achievements of the children; the dedication of teaching and non-teaching staff; and the commitment and leadership of the Principal. The children in year 6 spoke very positively about their experiences in school. They reported that they feel safe at school, and know how to get help in the event of a concern.

### **1.4 PASTORAL CARE**

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care is very good. Among the strengths are the welcoming, family ethos within the school; the very good behaviour of the children; the quality of the working relationships throughout the school; the establishment of a children's council; and the opportunities for the children to participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, competitions and events which enhance their learning experiences.

### **1.5 CHILD PROTECTION**

The school has very good arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued in the relevant DE circulars. The governors, staff, parents and children are fully aware of the school's procedures.

### **1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity, for example, through the promotion of the 'smoothie morning' and links with health-promoting organisations, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

## 1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The parents are very active in their support of the work of the school. They share the values and vision of the school and participate well in the numerous formal and festival events within the school calendar. Daily homework diaries and regular parent homework classes are strong features of the good staff-parent working relationships. Extra-curricular activities such as the daily children's breakfast club, after-school sporting and cultural activities, and adult Irish classes are well attended and valued. The school serves its parents and the immediate community very well.

## 2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

### 2.1 LEARNING

The children, including the vast majority of those who require additional support with aspects of their learning, are making good progress and achieve suitably high standards. They are well-motivated and engage enthusiastically in their learning. They have a suitable range of learning experiences including whole-class, group, paired and independent work. Information and communication technology is used effectively to support and extend the children's work in literacy, numeracy and in other areas of learning.

### 2.2 IRISH, ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall quality of provision in Irish and English is good. By year 7 the standards in Irish are very good and in English they are good, with the majority of children achieving standards that are in line with their age and level of ability.

Throughout the school there are very good opportunities for the children to develop their oral and aural skills. In the Foundation Stage (FS), there is an appropriate emphasis on talking and listening. The children develop their spoken Irish through well-planned interactions with their teachers during play sessions and through stories and rhymes. English is introduced formally in year 4 and the children have good opportunities to discuss a wide range of issues in both Irish and English across all areas of learning.

Reading is taught systematically using graded reading materials in Irish in the FS and Key Stage (KS) 1. The parents are encouraged to become involved in their children's education and to read with them in Irish and in English. The teachers organise homework workshops, where parents who do not speak Irish, are guided on pronunciation of the key vocabulary in the reading books. There is, however, an over-reliance on photocopied materials which results at times in a narrow focus on literal comprehension and grammar activities.

Formal reading in English is introduced in year 4 and most of the children transfer effectively the skills first developed in Irish. The literacy co-ordinator has correctly identified the need to develop further a common approach to the teaching of phonics in both Irish and English. Reading is valued and promoted throughout the school and each class has an attractive library area with texts in both Irish and English. The school hosts two book fairs annually where parents purchase books in both languages. By the end of KS2 the children achieve good standards in reading in Irish and English in line with their abilities.

The quality of presentation of the children's written work is good. In the FS the children have good opportunities for mark-making through play activities and begin to form letters correctly. As their skills develop with the help of teacher modelled, shared and guided writing, they begin to write simple words, sentences and stories. By the end of KS1 the children are able to write independently in both Irish and English. Throughout KS2 the children develop their

writing skills through the use of planning sheets and re-drafting to improve their work. In the best practice the children are encouraged also to review their own work to identify good aspects and an area for improvement. The children's standards in writing by the end of KS2 are good and generally in line with their ability. However there is an overly strong focus on grammar and punctuation activities. The teachers need to plan more effectively a wider range of contexts, including open-ended contexts, for the children's writing and to provide greater challenge and more opportunities for extended writing.

## **2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY**

The overall quality of provision for mathematics is very good. The scheme of work provides clear guidance on progression in the children's mathematical learning across the classes. The teachers plan thoroughly for their lessons and make very good use of a range of practical equipment, interactive whiteboards and educational games to develop the children's mathematical understanding and to make learning practical and interesting. Good account is taken of the range of the children's individual abilities and differentiated and practical group work is common across all classes.

In the FS and KS1, the children are given good opportunities through play-based learning to explore mathematical concepts and by year 4, almost all are developing well their understanding of number, early shape and space, and written computation. Mental mathematics is a strong aspect of this work.

By the end of KS2, almost all the children achieve the expected level or above in mathematics. An upward trend in achievement is constant over the past four years and reflects the careful attention given to ensuring the children consolidate the basic concepts through practical activities, thorough teacher planning and sharply focused learning intentions.

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

### **3.1 PLANNING**

The school has developed whole-school policies and schemes of work for literacy and numeracy which provide useful guidance for the teachers. The teachers conscientiously prepare mid- and short-term planners which are monitored and evaluated by the Principal and co-ordinators on a weekly basis. The children are given some opportunities to contribute to the planning process. The teachers evaluate effectively their planning and the children's progress to inform future learning.

### **3.2 TEACHING**

The teaching observed during the inspection ranged from satisfactory to very good. In most lessons, it was good or very good. In the best practice, the work is well-paced and matched to the interests and needs of all the children. The intended learning outcomes are discussed with the children at the beginning of the lesson and there is good opportunity for the children to review and consolidate their learning at the end. The teachers employ a suitable range of approaches and skilful questioning to encourage the children to develop and extend their learning. The language of the classroom is planned carefully and delivered accurately. Expectations are high. An important feature of the good practice is the effective support the classroom assistants give to the children. The very good practice observed in the school should be disseminated to all classrooms.

### 3.3 ASSESSMENT

The school's structures and procedures for assessment are good. The teachers mark the children's work regularly and often give helpful advice on how work can be improved. The children are encouraged, at times, to become involved in self- and peer assessment. The teachers are making good use of the assessment data available to them to monitor the performance of the children and set targets for improvement. The staff are aware of the need to develop further this aspect of their work to enable them to have a better overview of progress across the school. The parents receive a detailed written report on each child's progress and effective arrangements are in place for formal parent and teacher consultations.

### 3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The quality of the provision for children with special educational needs is good. Procedures for identifying children with learning difficulties are based on teacher observation and formal staff discussion and supported well by close monitoring of individual children's progress. In all classes, differentiated and individual education planning is evident and used with good effect, to ensure that the children engage and benefit from the learning activities planned for them. While the majority of the children make good progress in their learning and demonstrate an improved capacity to work independently and build on their previous levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy, a small minority, whose progress is not secure, should receive further intensive support with their learning.

## 4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

### 4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal has been in post since 2002. She has a clear vision for the future development of the school. She has very high expectations of the teachers and the children. As a teaching principal, she is a very good role-model. She is well-supported by the school's co-ordinators and all staff. She works effectively to promote improvement and to raise the profile of the school in the community and to engage the community in the work and life of the school.

### 4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school has an appropriate school development plan (SDP) which sets out clearly the school's priorities. There are excellent opportunities for consultation about the SDP across the whole-school community. The school meets fully the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

The school has very good structures in place to monitor and evaluate its provision. It will be important to ensure that all evidence gathered through assessment and monitoring and evaluation is used more effectively to plan for sustained improvement.

### 4.3 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development is an important priority for the school. Staff are consulted about their professional development needs and this process is linked directly to the SDP. The teachers have attended a range of suitable internal and external in-service training (INSET) courses to support them in their work. Much of the school's INSET has been focused appropriately on the priorities for development, notably the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum and the needs of newly and recently qualified teachers.

#### 4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The school's accommodation consists of a number of temporary, mobile classrooms and falls short of modern standards. The teachers work hard, however, to ensure that the children have an attractive and stimulating environment to learn in.

#### 4.3 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The school is well-resourced. The governors understand their role and responsibility in the life and work of the school. They are appropriately involved in the process of school development planning, providing good strategic direction and good support to the Principal.

### 5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the welcoming, family ethos;
- the well-behaved children and their interest in their learning;
- the good quality of most of the teaching observed and the contribution of the classroom assistants to the children's learning;
- the high standards achieved by the children in literacy and numeracy;
- the very good leadership of the Principal, supported by the school's co-ordinators; and
- the support and involvement of the governors and the community in the life and work of the school.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to plan more effectively a wider range of contexts for the children's writing, and to provide greater challenge and more opportunities for extended writing; and
- to provide further intensive SEN support for a small number of children whose progress is not secure.

In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is good. The school has important strengths in most of its educational and pastoral provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the school has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor the school's progress on the areas for improvement.



**HEALTH AND SAFETY**

- There is a need to carry out a risk assessment of the security of the site including the arrangements for access during the school day.

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

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