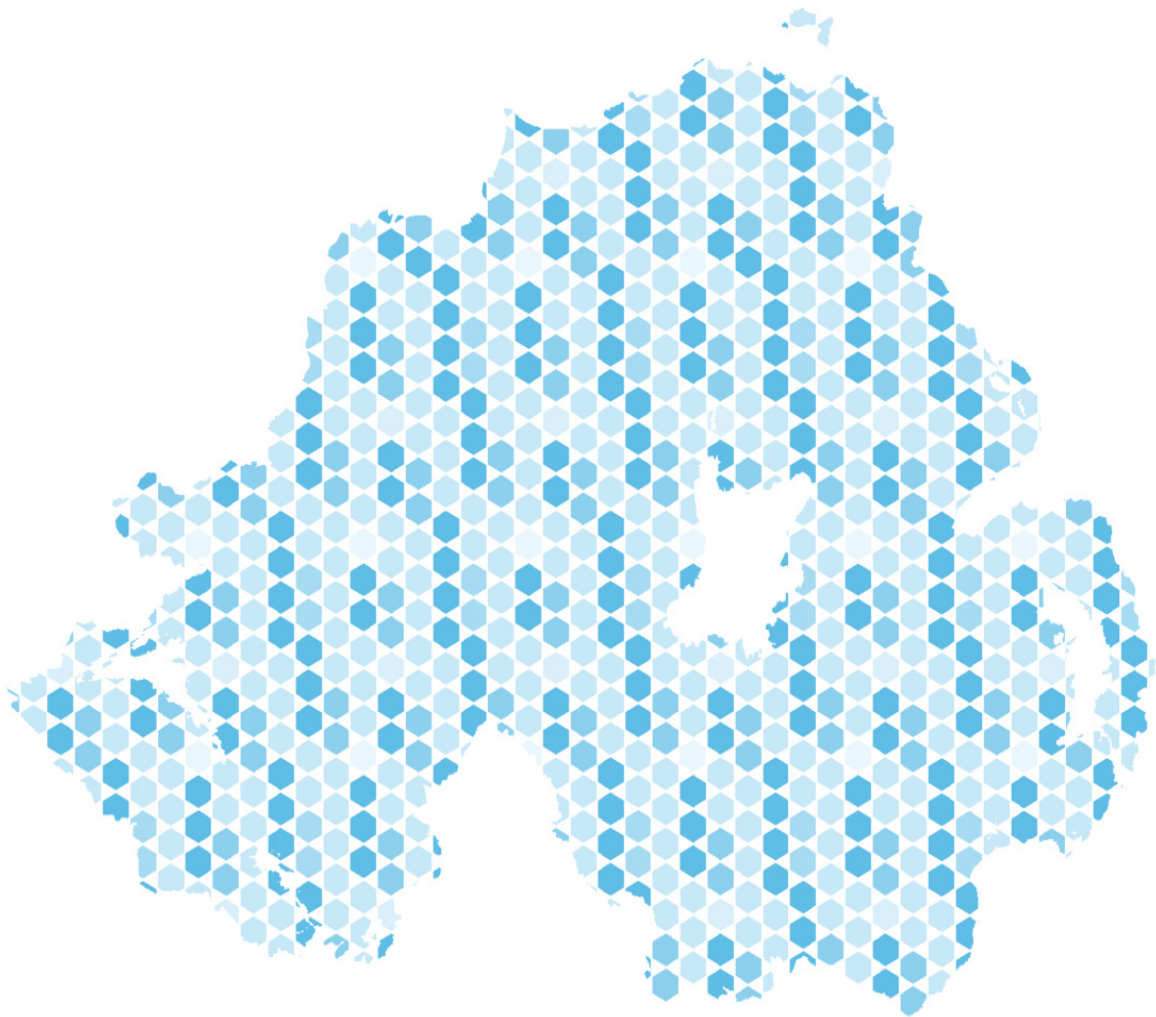


PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

St Brigid's Primary School,
Ballymena

Report of an Inspection
in May 2011



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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 Brigid's Primary School is a co-educational maintained primary school situated on the northern outskirts of Ballymena. The school opened in 2007 following the rationalisation of maintained primary education in Ballymena. Most of the children come from the surrounding residential area. The enrolment has risen steadily over the past four years and currently stands at 332. The school has identified 23% of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning. Approximately 27% of the children are entitled to free school meals, 87 are newcomer children and 23 are traveller children.

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, GOVERNORS, SUPPORT STAFF AND CHILDREN

The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the parents and the teaching and support staff to complete confidential questionnaires 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 seven questionnaires were issued to the parents; approximately one-half were returned to Inspection Services Branch and 16 contained additional written comments. The responses from the questionnaires were highly affirmative. The parents commented positively on: the overall quality of education provided by the school; the opportunities for the children to gain in confidence and develop their social skills; the leadership of the school; and the approachable staff.

Fifteen of the teachers and fourteen of the support staff completed the confidential online questionnaires. The responses from all of the teachers, and almost all of the support staff, were wholly supportive of the work of the school.

The governors expressed strong support for the work of the school. In particular, they drew attention to how well the school's inclusive ethos supports the children's diverse range of individual, social and educational needs. They commended the dedication of all of the staff and reported excellent working relationships at all levels.

In discussions, the children in year 6 reported that they feel very safe and secure and are aware of what to do if they have concerns about their safety or well-being. They talked eloquently about many aspects of school life including their enjoyment of learning, the caring teachers and their satisfaction with the wide range of extra-curricular activities open to them.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has reported to the Principal and representatives of the governors the views emerging from the parents', teachers' and support staff questionnaires.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

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

The school has a very inclusive and supportive ethos which promotes well the children's cognitive, spiritual and social development. The strength of the ethos is characterised by the school community living out its values and the pride it takes in supporting and celebrating the cultural diversity that exists; the quality of the support for newcomer children is outstanding. The school leadership ensures that the provision is open to, and accessible by, all of the children. A whole-school approach to promoting and rewarding positive behaviour develops the children's confidence, self-esteem and nurtures a sense of pride in them-selves and in their school. The children have a say in decisions that affect them through an effective school council. There are high levels of participation in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, which enriches their personal development and learning experiences in a wide range of sporting, cultural and social contexts. There are strong parental and parish partnerships and the out-workings make a positive impact on the local community. The children are very friendly and are very supportive and caring of one another. They respond well to the staff's high expectations and their behaviour, both in and out of class, is exemplary.

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 (DE).

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating through the involvement in a healthy eating programme and the healthy break scheme. Physical activity, as part of a healthy lifestyle, is also promoted well, for example through the school's involvement in the University of Ulster's Sports Outreach programme. The work of the children, through the School Council, makes an outstanding contribution to the whole-school healthy eating and healthy lifestyle agenda.

1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The school gives a high priority to maintaining productive links with the parents and the local community. The parents are kept well-informed about the work and life of the school through a weekly bulletin, and a regular newsletter. The parents are consulted pro-actively and are invited to attend a range of meetings which encourage them to become involved in supporting their children's learning including, for example, the Barnardo's Ready to Learn initiative.

The school has established important links with a wide range of external organisations; these links impact positively on the children's educational experiences. The school is one of four schools in Northern Ireland (NI) to host a Polish Saturday school for newcomer children and staff. There are excellent links with other schools through the Dunclug Partnership, and through the Sentinus project which promotes science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) based activities. The school also has very good curricular and pastoral links with the local post-primary school which aids the transition of the children to the next stage of their education.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The children are highly motivated, confident and achieve good standards. They are respectful, and value the cultural diversity which exists within the school. The children have an excellent disposition towards learning; they are reflective in their learning and work very well both independently and with one another.

The children who need additional support with aspects of their learning and the newcomer children take pride in their achievements and enjoy the withdrawal sessions. They co-operate well with the learning support assistants and can make connections between their learning in the support sessions and in other areas of the curriculum. They work well alongside their peers in class and have high levels of self-esteem. The newcomer children and children in need of additional help with aspects of their learning make very good progress.

An analysis of the key stage (KS) 2 assessment data over the past three years shows that: in English, the school's performance has fluctuated between the average and below the average for NI and similar schools in the same free school meals category; and in mathematics, the children's levels of attainment have ranged from above to below average. Over this period the proportion of newcomer children in year 7 increased from 11% to 41%; this had a significant influence on the key stage outcomes. The Principal and senior leadership team (SLT) have identified appropriately the need to improve standards and have implemented a range of strategies, particularly in literacy, to raise levels of attainment; the inspection findings confirm that this is a key area for improvement. Importantly, there is evidence that the intervention strategies deployed and actions being taken are improving the children's standards at the foundation stage (FS) and in KS1.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

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

The children benefit from a range of well planned talking and listening activities, which develop well their oral language skills. In the FS, the teachers use appropriate question prompts to enable the children to participate well in question and answer sessions at the end of activity-based learning and task-time. In KS1 and KS2, group-work is used effectively to enable the children to develop their thinking skills and to form and express their opinions through activities linked closely to their reading. Throughout the school, most of the children have good oral communication skills

A majority of the children achieve good standards in reading. In the FS and KS1, the children acquire the basic skills of reading primarily through phonological awareness and shared and guided reading. The school operates a banded-book system and the teachers monitor closely the children's progress to ensure that their reading skills are developing appropriately and that the children are given reading materials matched closely to their reading abilities. Novels are used well at the end of KS1 and throughout KS2 to develop reading. A particular strength in KS2 is the excellent use made of topics and resources which develop reading and writing in meaningful contexts across all the areas of learning.

The standard of the children's writing is very good in the FS, and at the end of KS1 and across KS2 it is satisfactory. The children in year 1 have a very good understanding of how their writing has developed and a significant minority can use their phonological knowledge to write independently. In KS1 and KS2, the children can write in a variety of genres and for

a range of audiences. The children use dictionaries and thesauri in order to become increasingly independent and more accurate writers. Modelled and shared writing strategies are used very effectively to develop the children's writing in years 1 to 3; this good practice needs to be developed further throughout the school in order to improve the quality of the children's writing.

The school has a comprehensive literacy policy and teachers are making effective use of the North Eastern Education and Library Board's literacy framework to guide them in their literacy planning. The literacy co-ordinator has guided the staff very effectively in carrying out a wide range of self-evaluation strategies, including audits of reading and writing. She monitors and evaluates appropriately the quality of the provision for literacy and has identified the need to improve the standard of writing, particularly at KS2. The inspection findings confirm that this is an important area for ongoing development.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

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

In the FS, the children have good mathematical knowledge and skills; they are developed effectively through a combination of play-based activities, practical mathematical lessons, games and action songs. The children explore, investigate and make accurate use of early mathematical language.

In KS1, the children participate in a range of practical activities which develop a good understanding of number, measures, shape and space, and handling data. They work with increasing independence and are able to talk confidently about their mathematics. In the best practice observed, the children had appropriate opportunities to extend their mathematical thinking, and develop mental mathematics strategies which were linked effectively to the main focus of the mathematics lesson. In discussions with the children, they spoke positively about their mathematics. They have a sound understanding of place value, measures and number.

In KS2, the children engage in an appropriate range of investigative tasks, which extend their problem-solving skills. In discussions with the year 7 children, they have a very good understanding of number, mental mathematics strategies, estimation, measures, and shape and space, and were flexible in their mathematical thinking. By the end of KS2, most of the children make good progress in line with their ability; however, in a minority of classes the work and learning activities are not matched closely enough to the needs and abilities of all of the children.

Across the key stages, the children enjoy mathematics, tasks are set in meaningful contexts, and there are explicit connections made with other areas of learning. Throughout the school, the mathematics curriculum is suitably broad and balanced.

The numeracy co-ordinator is hard working and provides effective leadership. He is committed to the ongoing development of the provision for mathematics throughout the school, and has identified appropriately the need to raise the children's levels of attainment. Consequently, numeracy is prioritised within the school development plan (SDP). The numeracy co-ordinator has developed effectively the long-term planning for number. He also recognises appropriately the need to extend the scheme of work to, and monitor and evaluate systematically, all areas of the mathematics curriculum to ensure continuity and progression in the children's learning and raise further the standards.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers prepare thoroughly for lessons and their short-term and medium-term planning for learning is highly effective. Connected learning is being developed well through thematic planning. In most classes, the teachers' evaluations are used effectively to inform future planning for learning, and appropriate cognisance is taken of the varying needs and ability of the children. Within year groups, teachers work well together and plan jointly to ensure that the children have consistent learning experiences.

There are very effective links between the teachers' planning and the support for the newcomer children and the children who require additional help with aspects of their learning. There is effective communication between the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), learning support assistants, class teachers and classroom assistants which leads to early and effective intervention and ensures consistency and coherence in the children's learning.

3.2 TEACHING

The teachers are committed to inclusion and work very hard to meet the needs of all of the children. The teachers hold appropriately high expectations of the children's learning and the lessons are structured and resourced well. They value the children's own contributions towards their learning.

The quality of the teaching observed during the inspection ranged from satisfactory to outstanding; most was good or very good. In the best practice: there was an appropriate review and consolidation of learning; the children's own experiences were built upon effectively; there were explicit connections made across areas of learning; the learning resources, tasks and teachers' questions were matched well to the needs and ability of all of the children; the teaching and learning strategies used were appropriately wide-ranging; and the classroom assistants provided very effective support for individual and groups of children.

The quality of the provision for special educational needs (SEN) is outstanding. In the withdrawal sessions, the learning support team provide an effective balance of support and challenge for the children. The learning support team use a wide range of high quality resources and engage the children in well-planned activities based on the children's interests. The class teachers take account of the well-focused, realistic individual educational plan (IEP) targets. They also monitor closely the progress of the children, including those who no longer require withdrawal support.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The teachers employ a range of assessment for learning strategies. In the best practice observed during the inspection, the teachers negotiated success criteria skilfully with the children and used the plenary session to consolidate effectively the learning. The teachers give the children very good oral feedback and mark their work regularly. However, the written comments provided by the teachers do not always provide sufficient evaluative detail on what the children need to do in order to improve their work further. The teachers need to improve the quality of written feedback in order to raise standards, particularly at KS2.

The teachers keep comprehensive running records of the children's attainment. The children are encouraged, in discussion with their parents and carers, to reflect upon and improve the quality of their own work through setting meaningful learning targets. The teachers also use a range of standardised and end of key stage tests to evaluate the children's learning. This performance data is used to identify the progress that the children are making. The school has recently introduced additional standardised tests which help the school to identify any child who may be under-performing. It is important that this data is now used to inform further future learning and teaching.

Very effective use is made of assessment data to identify children in need of additional support with aspects of their learning. The SENCO oversees the systematic tracking of the progress of the newcomer children, traveller children, and children with special educational needs.

The children's achievements and standards are reported to the parents regularly through an annual written report, two formal parent-teacher meetings and informal contacts between teachers and parents as the need arises. The annual written reports provide the parents with a broad and holistic evaluation of their children's progress and attainment.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The Principal, who has been in post since the school opened in 2007, provides highly effective strategic leadership and has a clear and broad vision for the work of the school. He has successfully shaped a school identity, following the rationalisation of maintained primary education in Ballymena. He is supported by an effective Vice-principal and SLT. The Principal has established a well-embedded culture of self-evaluation across the school. He maintains an overview of development work to bring about whole-school improvement, and is supporting and building the capacity of middle and senior leaders. The Principal and SLT give a high priority to the pastoral care and welfare of all of the children. The SLT and co-ordinators have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. There is excellent internal communication, and a strong sense of openness and collegiality within the school

The SENCO provides very good leadership and manages well the additional learning support for the children with special educational needs, the traveller children and the newcomer children who require additional language support. She monitors the provision regularly to ensure that the support is tailored to the needs of the individual children. The Principal and SLT have a clear overview of the value and impact of the additional learning support and the progress made by these children.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school's process for improvement has many strengths; it is linked clearly to a SDP that complies fully with the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The current SDP was written one year after the school opened and has guided effectively the early development work of the school; appropriately, the Principal has begun to identify and prioritise the key areas for future development. The governors are well-informed about, and maintain a strategic overview of, the school's improvement agenda. They are involved actively, and support effectively the Principal and the staff, in the SDP process. There are very good opportunities for consultation about the SDP within the school community. Appropriate plans are in place to develop key areas of the provision and the

associated actions are specific and measurable. There is an agreed schedule for the Principal, SLT, co-ordinators and teachers to monitor and evaluate key aspects of the work of the school. Importantly, there is a shared commitment to, and the monitoring and evaluating informs appropriately, whole-school self-evaluation and the associated action to bring about improvement.

4.3 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

There is an effective staff development programme that is linked appropriately to the SDP priorities and meets well the needs of the school.

4.4 ACCOMMODATION

The quality of the accommodation and the standard of caretaking in the school is excellent.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the good quality of the provision in literacy and numeracy;
- the highly motivated, respectful and confident children who have an excellent disposition towards learning and work very well both independently and with one another;
- the outstanding pastoral care, provision for special educational needs and support for newcomer children;
- the dedicated teachers who work very hard to meet the needs of all of the children and the quality of the teaching observed during the inspection, most of which was good or very good;
- the highly effective strategic leadership provided by the Principal, supported effectively by the Vice-Principal and SLT; and
- the well-embedded culture of self-evaluation and the shared commitment and associated action to bring about school improvement.

5.2 The area for improvement is the need:

- to raise further the levels of the children's attainment in literacy and numeracy by the end of KS2.

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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