

PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

St Mary's Primary School,
Belfast

Report of an Inspection
in October 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 CONTEXT

St Mary's Primary School is situated in inner city Belfast. Around 90% of the children come from the Irish Traveller Community; the remainder comprise Newcomer children whose first language is not English, and a small number of children from the local community. The enrolment has declined slightly in recent years and stands currently at 100. Almost all of the children come from the greater Belfast area and they are transported to school by bus. At the time of the inspection, around 65% of the children were entitled to free school meals (FSM). The school has identified approximately 39% of the children as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning, including 8.8% who have statements of special educational needs.

1.2 St Mary's Primary School has participated in the Belfast Education and Library Board's (BELB) Achieving Belfast programme for four years. Achieving Belfast is a long-term, sustained intervention whose aim is to address under-achievement and improve educational outcomes and standards in schools. The school was identified based on a range of factors including educational attainment that is well below the Belfast area board average at the end of key stage (KS) 2, and the high number of children coming from areas of social disadvantage.

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, the teaching and support staff to complete confidential questionnaires prior to the inspection. Meetings were held with representatives from the Board of Governors (governors), and the children from year 6.

One hundred and two questionnaires were issued to the parents; approximately 19% were returned to Inspection Services Branch: seven contained additional written comments. An analysis of the questionnaires and the comments made by the parents and the staff were shared with the Principal and the governors. All of the responses indicated a very high level of satisfaction with the school. In particular, the parents highlighted the helpful and caring staff and the progress made by their children since entering the school.

A total of fourteen teachers and support staff completed the on-line questionnaires. The staff returns were wholly positive in relation to all areas of school life.

The governors expressed their appreciation of the commitment of all the staff to the children, the good team-work and the efficient organisation of the school.

In discussions held with the year 6 children, they talked enthusiastically about many aspects of school life, including the helpful teachers and adults; they indicated strongly that they feel happy in school, enjoy their learning and know what to do if they have any worries about their safety.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

The quality of the arrangements for pastoral care in the school is very good. There is a supportive, inclusive ethos and all staff are very committed to the care and well being of the children. The children are very welcoming and their behaviour is exemplary. A whole school approach to promoting and rewarding positive behaviour encourages the children to be involved fully in the life of the school. The children's work and achievements are celebrated through attractive displays and through regular whole school assemblies.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has very good arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education and other relevant departments.

1.6 HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The school gives very good attention to promoting healthy eating and physical activity. This is encouraged through the introduction of healthy food choices for break and lunch. Across the school, the children have regular opportunities for energetic outdoor play and sports, including the KS2 swimming programme, which encourage the children to adopt healthy lifestyles.

1.7 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The school maintains useful links with parents through the helpful home-school diary, regular newsletters, curricular meetings and daily contact by the bus escorts. The school reports, nevertheless, that parent-teacher meetings and school events are not well attended by the parents. A few parents were involved in designing a parental questionnaire which aimed to seek the views of all the parents on various aspects of school life. It will be important for the school to further encourage parents to engage with their children's learning. There a strong link with An Munia Tober which has involved the children in several arts projects. Good links have been developed with the local secondary schools and with the neighbouring College of Further Education.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

An analysis of the KS2* assessment data indicates that in English and mathematics, over the past four years, the school's performance was below the Northern Ireland (NI) average and the average for other primary schools within the BELB. Compared with similar schools

* The key stage outcomes should be interpreted with caution for small primary schools as a large percentage change from year to year can often be attributed to a very small number of children.

in the same FSM category, the children's levels of attainment in English and mathematics fall between the lower quartile and the median for both indicators. The school's internal data demonstrates that those children who attend school regularly achieve standards that are in line with their abilities.

Throughout the school the children settle quickly into their work; they engage with the learning and demonstrate high levels of motivation. They respond positively to the tasks set and the learning activities are matched closely to their varying abilities. The children benefit from practical activities and they develop important concepts in pairs and groups. Suitable targets are outlined in the children's individual education plans (IEPs).

The children in year 7 are entered for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Information Technology (IT) Accreditation Scheme and they achieve satisfactory levels of attainment.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

The overall provision for English and literacy is good.

The children display very good talking and listening skills. The teachers provide the children with a wide range of opportunities to talk about their learning and to share their views in pairs, groups and through whole class discussions. The children are confident and show a good understanding of the rules of group discussion. The teachers further develop the children's language through effective and challenging questioning which encourages them to generate their own ideas and to make their own judgements. The majority of the children are able to express themselves and give extended oral responses.

The children learn to read using a well structured programme which meets their interests and the wide range of abilities of all the children. The teachers make very good use of a range of strategies including the systematic development of phonological awareness, the development of sight vocabulary, and novel work. In all classrooms, there is a language rich environment designed to support the development of the children's literacy skills. The children are enthusiastic about reading and are keen to talk about their favourite authors and books. They read with fluency and expression and show a good understanding of text. They make good use of the school library. The standards in reading are variable. By the end of KS2, none of the children are reading at a level commensurate with their age or stage of development.

In the foundation stage (FS), the teachers support the children well to develop letter formation, to write words and to express ideas in simple sentences. During play-based learning, the children have very good opportunities to 'mark make' and experiment with writing. In KS1 and KS2, the children become increasingly fluent in their writing across a range of genres. The children have good opportunities to write across the curriculum and a few children can produce extended pieces based on their own research.

The literacy co-ordinator provides thoughtful leadership to the development of literacy throughout the school. He has set realistic targets for teaching and learning and has identified suitable priorities. There is a systematic process for monitoring and evaluating the provision for literacy throughout the school. Steady progress has been made by a significant minority of the children, particularly those who attend school regularly.

Information and communication technology including the Interactive Whiteboards are used successfully by the staff and children to enhance all aspects of the literacy provision.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

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

In the FS, the majority of the children display an understanding of number, sorting, matching and pattern, and they acquire gradually mathematical language to discuss their learning. The teachers promote mathematics through a wide range of activities and play-based learning, and the children work confidently in pairs, groups and independently.

In KS1 and 2, the children demonstrate a good understanding of number, measure, shape and handling data, and engage well in problem-solving and investigative work. The teachers make use of effective questioning to challenge the children's thinking, to encourage extended responses and develop further their mathematical language. The children use suitable practical equipment and resources to embed mathematical concepts and to foster their independence. Across all key stages the mental mathematics activities are well paced and matched to the children's ability.

The mathematics programme is based on clear lines of progression. The numeracy co-ordinator monitors and evaluates the provision for mathematics through classroom observations, the sampling of the children's work and the analysis of the children's performance data. He provides useful guidance for the teachers and works closely with them in setting targets for improving mathematics attainment across the school. He has identified appropriately the need for more clearly planned differentiation to ensure that all children achieve in line with their ability and for more specific evaluations of lessons to take account of individual responses. At the end of KS2, the majority of the children perform below age appropriate levels and achieve standards in mathematics that are reflective of their attendance and the levels of parental engagement in their learning.

Information and communication technology is used effectively to support and enhance learning and teaching in mathematics.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

The teachers have produced good short term planning that is related closely to whole school targets. There is scope for the teachers, however, to take more account of the children's responses to the learning when planning future activities. In addition, the pre-school curricular guidance should be implemented more fully when planning an appropriate programme for the children in Reception.

3.2 TEACHING

During the inspection, the quality of the teaching ranged from good to outstanding; a majority of the teaching was very good, with a minority of the lessons outstanding. The teachers have realistically high expectations and match the work appropriately to challenge and support the children. The teachers share the learning intentions with the children and plenary sessions are used well to summarise and consolidate learning. The children engage meaningfully in lessons and there are excellent interactions between and among the children and their teachers. A wide range of creative teaching approaches is employed in order to arouse the curiosity of the children.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

The school uses a comprehensive range of testing to observe and record the children's progress. The data is analysed and shared with the teachers in order to inform their planning and teaching approaches. The assessment procedures identify those children whose needs are greatest and requiring additional support. However, the teachers need to measure more objectively the learning potential of the children in order to monitor more accurately their progress.

In all classes, the teachers mark the children's work regularly and constructively. The children receive helpful oral and written feedback on how to improve various aspects of their work. There are appropriate procedures and records in place for keeping the parents informed about their child's progress; this includes written reports and formal parent-teacher consultations. In addition, informal contacts between teachers and parents are arranged as the need arises. The annual written reports are prepared to a high standard by the class teachers and provide the parents with a comprehensive evaluation of their children's progress and attainment.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The school's provision for the children with special educational needs (SEN) is good.

The main focus of the special needs programme is to raise the children's levels of basic literacy across both key stages. The school has identified about 39% of the children with additional learning needs; almost 9% have a statement of educational need. Around 60% of these children are at stages 2 or 3 of the Code of Practice. The majority of the children on the Special Needs Register are from KS2. Most of the children experience mild or moderate learning difficulties.

In the main, the children requiring help are withdrawn for literacy support and for one-to one reading sessions. In addition, the children with specific learning difficulties are taught individually by a peripatetic teacher. The children with more acute learning difficulties receive individual support from the BELB Outreach Services. The school has a large number of classroom assistants who make a valuable contribution to the children's progress.

The IEPs are effective. They set out realistic steps and strategies to help the children access the curriculum in a thoughtful manner. The children's progress is evaluated regularly by the special needs co-ordinator (SENCO) who provides a caring environment and competent leadership to this aspect of the school's work.

A majority of the children are make gains in reading, writing and in the acquisition of a wider basic vocabulary. For the other children progress has been slower and sustained support is required.

In order to extend the range of literacy support for the children the school should consider the introduction of intensive group reading sessions for more children across both key stages. In addition, additional support for mathematics would benefit a significant minority of the children.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The overall quality of leadership and management is good.

4.1 The Principal has been in post since 2002. During this time he has raised the profile of the school providing effective advocacy for the Irish Traveller Community. He has established an effective team and enabled all of his staff to develop their areas of responsibility and leadership roles. Due to his work the school is at the leading edge of Traveller education. He manages the school's finances efficiently and has provided a wide range of human and other resources to cater well for the children in his care. He oversees the school's practices and procedures for monitoring and evaluation, and he ensures that the action plans and targets set are reviewed regularly.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school gives good attention to, and meets the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. The associated action plans based on the school's identified priorities form a coherent approach to school improvement.

4.3 ACCOMMODATION

The school accommodation consists of a main building which comprises five permanent classrooms, an assembly hall, a library, a small teaching space for SEN and a staff room. The standard of caretaking and cleaning is excellent. A strong feature of the school is its very attractive and inclusive learning environment.

4.4 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The governors are highly committed to the school and they provide valuable support to the Principal. The overall management of the school's resources is good.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the very good quality of the pastoral care and the commitment of all of the staff to the well-being of the children;
- the exemplary behaviour of the children and their high levels of engagement in the lessons;
- the stimulating learning environment and the very good use made of resources to support learning and teaching;
- the quality of the teaching observed which was very good overall; and
- the good leadership provided by the Principal and the co-ordinators.

5.2 The areas for improvement include the need:

- to engage and involve further the parents in their children's learning; and
- to measure more effectively the learning potential of all the children to enable the school to analyse objectively their progress.

5.3 In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this school is good. The school has important strengths in most of its educational provision and very good 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 in the areas for improvement.

It will be important that the employing authority, school governors and the staff plan for, and manage, issues related to the sustainability of the school provision and school budget, in order to address the current and future needs of the children and the staff.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- The school gate and front door need to be secured at all times during the school day.

ACCOMMODATION

- There is a lack of storage space.

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