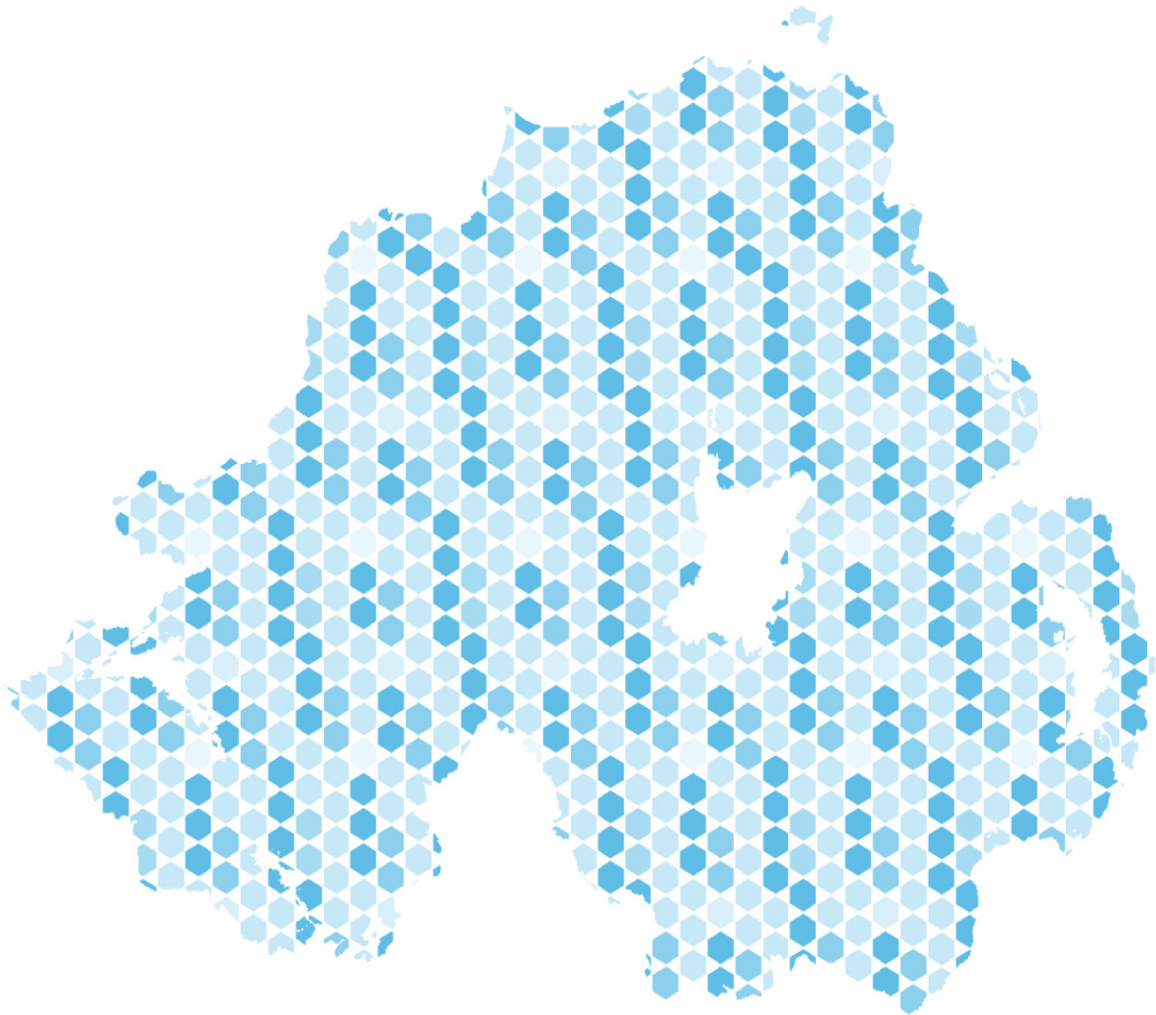


PRIMARY INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

The Thompson Primary School,
Ballyclare

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

The Thompson Primary School is situated in the village of Ballyrobert, close to Ballyclare in southeast Antrim. It draws the majority of its children from the surrounding area. Enrolment in the school has remained steady over the last five years and currently stands at 150. Approximately 9% of the children are entitled to free school meals (FSM) and the school has identified just under 20% of the children as needing additional support with aspects of their learning.

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 forty-nine questionnaires were issued to the parents; approximately 48% were returned to Inspection Services Branch and 21 contained additional written comments.

The responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with the educational and pastoral provision of the school. In particular, the parents acknowledged the sense of community, the development of the children's personal and social skills, the support for children with special educational needs and the hard work and commitment of the staff. In the written comments, the majority of the parents expressed their satisfaction with the work of the school; a minority of the parental comments expressed some concerns in relation to, for example, meeting individual needs and communication.

All of the teachers and nine of the support staff completed the confidential online questionnaire and one teacher made an additional written comment. Nearly all of these responses were very positive and highlighted the strong support of the staff for the work and life of the school.

In discussions held with a group of year 6 children, they talked enthusiastically about their experiences in school. The children highlighted in particular, the support they receive from the teachers, their enjoyment of the learning experiences and the extra-curricular activities and trips available to them.

The children indicated that they are happy and secure in school and that they know what to do if they have any concerns about their safety or well-being.

The views of the parents, teachers, support staff and children, together with the concerns expressed by a minority of the parental written comments, and the matters raised by the support staff questionnaires have been reported to the Principal and representatives of the governors.

The governors expressed their strong support for the work of the school; in particular, they highlighted the inclusive ethos, the innovative learning approaches, the support for children with special educational needs, the hard work and commitment of the staff and the improvement in the standards the children attain. They also reported their concern that the building of a new school had not yet been realised.

1.4 PASTORAL CARE

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

The children are very polite and welcoming and their behaviour is exemplary; this is encouraged by the whole school approach to the promotion of positive behaviour. The school motto, 'Every Child Matters,' is exemplified by the caring, child-centred approach embraced by all who work in the school and the emphasis placed on the holistic development of the children in a mutually respectful ethos. The children have access to a range of artistic, sporting and other activities and this enhances significantly the acquisition of wider skills and dispositions. Their willingness to make a positive difference to the lives of others is encouraged and is evident in the many charitable activities with which the school is involved.

1.5 CHILD PROTECTION

The school has satisfactory arrangements in place for safeguarding children. These arrangements broadly reflect the guidance issued by the Department of Education but the following minor areas need to be addressed: the system for ensuring that all the parents receive information relating to child protection matters needs to be applied more rigorously; and the school needs to seek the views of the parents with regard to its pastoral care policies.

1.6 LINKS WITH PARENTS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The school has worked hard to develop its links with the parents and with others who support the children's learning. The parents receive monthly newsletters and are involved in concerts and other events that celebrate the children's achievements and contribute significantly to the community dimension of the school. There is a supportive Parent Teacher Association, which raises funds to provide important additional learning resources such as the interactive whiteboards. The school has good links with local post-primary schools; in particular, the link with Ballyclare High School, a specialist school for ICT, has been instrumental in developing further the children's ICT skills. The school benefits from links with local churches and other external agencies; their involvement in school life enriches the learning experiences of the children. The staff values the professional advice given by a range of support agencies, including, the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) Psychology Service, Autistic Spectrum Disorder support staff and the Literacy Teacher Support Service.

2. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

2.1 LEARNING

The children are motivated and enthusiastic learners. They interact well with their teachers and with one another and demonstrate high levels of engagement in the learning activities. Across the school, the children have opportunities for independent and collaborative learning and these contribute well to the development of their personal and social skills.

The children's ICT skills are very good; by year 7, they use a wide range of ICT applications with confidence and make informed decisions about the effective use of ICT. The school's participation in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) Key Stage (KS) 2 ICT pilot accreditation scheme extends effectively the children's skills and improves standards; a majority of the children achieve Level 4.

An analysis of the KS2 assessment data over the past four years shows that in English and mathematics, the school's performance was below the Northern Ireland (NI) average. When compared with schools in the same FSM category, over the past four years, the children's level of attainment in English and mathematics has improved from well below the NI average to a level in line with that of similar schools. The school's internal standardised information indicates that the majority of the children are performing at a level commensurate with their abilities. This improving trend reflects the hard work of the staff and the heightened focus placed on the children's acquisition of, and progression in their skills, knowledge and understanding.

The overall quality of provision for children with special educational needs is good and most of the children with special educational needs make good progress over time.

2.2 ENGLISH AND LITERACY

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

The literacy co-ordinator provides effective leadership and has a clear and perceptive understanding of how the school needs to develop their literacy priorities to raise further the children's standards in English. The on-going development of English includes the detailed review of teaching reading and the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the children's written work. The foundation stage (FS) teachers implement effectively the new phonics scheme; the staff has identified appropriately the need to develop the phonics scheme into KS1 and KS2. The English and literacy action plan identifies appropriately the revision of the long-term planning for writing and the more detailed analysis of the standardised data in relation to English as relevant areas for further development.

Talking and listening develop well across all the areas of learning. In the FS and KS1, play-based learning and activity-based learning respectively develop appropriately the children's oral skills and helps develop their confidence. The children benefit from listening to and responding to stories and they display a good understanding of the feelings and thoughts of the characters. As they progress through KS2, the children's talking and listening skills increase through effective group and paired work, in which thinking skills and personal capabilities, such as, working with others are integral to the structure of the lessons. Most of the teachers use effective questioning to develop the children's extended oral responses.

A significant strength of the provision for English is the systematic teaching of reading. Throughout the FS and KS1, the children acquire an appropriate range of reading strategies which enables them to decipher unfamiliar wording and to develop their understanding of text; they read with increasing fluency and expression. The teachers use reading books at an instructional level during the taught reading sessions to develop the children's reading skills at an appropriate level. In KS2, the children use group novels as their core reading books. The children respond imaginatively and critically to the teacher's well-managed discussion in shared reading activities or guided reading sessions and purposeful written tasks are matched well to the children's ability. The KS1 and KS2 children develop appropriate study and research skills. By the end of KS2, the children achieve very good standards in their reading.

In the FS, the children's letter formation, word building skills and knowledge of the basic conventions such as simple sentence structure develop well through shared and independent writing activities. By the end of KS1, the majority of children can express their ideas at a level that is appropriate to their ability. As they progress through KS2, the children extend their knowledge and understanding of the range of writing styles and the use of more sophisticated language conventions. They develop their writing capabilities through the very good opportunities they are given to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, particularly through meaningful topic work linked to the World Around Us. A majority of the teachers need to exploit the opportunities presented across the areas of learning, to enable the children to write more extended and imaginative responses using a wider range of writing styles. The standard of the children's written work is good.

The teachers make effective use of ICT resources, including the interactive whiteboard to support literacy; the children use appropriate software to support the development of writing and reading.

2.3 MATHEMATICS AND NUMERACY

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

The mathematics co-ordinator provides effective leadership for the development of mathematics and numeracy across the curriculum. She monitors and evaluates the provision for mathematics and numeracy through classroom observations, the sampling of the children's work and the analysis of performance data. The mathematics co-ordinator has identified appropriately the need to ensure that the current planning format meets better the children's individual learning needs, and the more rigorous use of performance data to monitor and evaluate the children's learning in order to raise the standards further. The overall programme for mathematics and numeracy is suitably broad and balanced and provides good coverage of the processes in mathematics, number, measures, shape and space and handling data.

In the FS and KS1, the children's mathematical concepts and mathematical language develop progressively, through a wide range of well-chosen practical, oral and play-based activities. The teachers place appropriate emphasis on developing the children's knowledge of basic number operations, sorting, matching and identifying shapes through the effective use of mathematical equipment and games. For most activities, the children are grouped appropriately according to their ability, and they have good opportunities to practise and discuss their mental mathematics strategies, to understand number bonds and to sort, order and identify patterns and shapes. The children use well the early mathematical language as

modelled carefully by the teachers. In discussions with the children from year 4, they spoke with confidence about their learning experiences and demonstrated a good understanding of basic number, shape and space, and measures. By the end of KS1, the children use mathematical language with increasing accuracy to explain their reasoning when solving problems.

In KS2, the children demonstrate flexibility in their mathematical thinking, and they benefit from good opportunities to apply their mathematical skills in problem-solving and investigative work across the curriculum. In discussions with the children from year 7, they explained accurately the properties of two-dimensional (2D) and 3D shapes using a good range of mathematical vocabulary, and they displayed a good understanding of number facts, and measures. By the end of KS2, the children relate their mathematics learning to real life contexts, and they acquire a sound knowledge of place value, shape and space, and the relationship between fractions, decimals and percentages. By the end of KS2, the children attain good standards in mathematics.

The teachers make effective use of ICT to support numeracy; they use the interactive whiteboard, games and practical resources to motivate the children and to develop and consolidate a range of mathematical skills and concepts.

3. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

3.1 PLANNING

There is very thorough planning which guides well the work of the school. The planning provides a clear overview and facilitates continuity and progression. The medium-term planning for literacy and numeracy sets out the content, key learning intentions, teaching approaches, and assessment strategies for each year group. The evolving whole-school ICT planning identifies effectively the key skills and levels of knowledge and understanding to be developed each year; this includes appropriate programs and websites that link to relevant topics in all the areas of learning. The school has focused on developing its planning for the WAU, which is now very detailed and promotes coherence and connectedness in the children's learning experiences. A very good feature of the planning across the school is the inclusion of the children's ideas through the planning boards. The school now needs to develop this planning further so that each teacher's evaluations inform appropriately future action for individuals and groups.

3.2 TEACHING

The quality of all the teaching observed was good or better and two-thirds was either very good or outstanding. In the best practice, the teachers built appropriately on the children's prior learning, questioning was used well to develop thinking skills and to extend the children's oral responses, active strategies engaged the children and plenary sessions were used effectively to both consolidate and evaluate the learning that had taken place. A consistent feature of the outstanding lessons was the teachers' awareness and skilful management of the individual needs and preferred learning styles of the children.

3.3 ASSESSMENT

There are appropriate procedures and records for keeping the parents well informed about their children's progress. There are opportunities for the parents to meet both formally and informally with the teachers to discuss their child's progress, and in addition, they receive a written annual report which provides detailed information about progress in learning.

The teachers use a broad range of strategies to evaluate the quality of the children's learning and to inform their classroom practice. They mark the children's work regularly and supportively. In the most effective practice, the teachers explain to the children what has been achieved and how, if necessary, the work could be improved. The children are encouraged to set targets to improve the quality of their work.

The school administers a range of standardised and non-standardised tests to assess the children's attainment in English and mathematics. Over the past year, the teachers have been making good use of the C2k Assessment Manager software to collate and track test results in order to identify and target those children who are capable of attaining higher levels in English and mathematics. The teachers are currently making good progress in the use of this assessment information to sustain the improving trend in the standards.

3.4 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The overall quality of the provision for children identified as requiring additional support with aspects of their learning is good.

The work in this area of the school's provision benefits from the capable management and insightful leadership of the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO). The children who require additional support with their learning receive mainly in-class support which is well informed by the individual education plans (IEPs) created by the class teachers in consultation with the SENCO. The analysis of the IEPs indicates that most children make good progress. The IEPs contain relevant long-term targets; the staff now needs to refine the short-term targets and include the children's personal learning goals so that the children can experience and recognise their own progress and success. In addition to the in-class support, the children who receive additional literacy and numeracy withdrawal lessons receive well-targeted individual support and they develop positive attitudes to learning because of the intervention programmes. The classroom assistants, who work very well in supporting the learning of individual children and small groups, make a significant contribution to the children's learning.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 LEADERSHIP

The overall quality of leadership and management in this school is good.

The Principal, who has been in post for 21 years, sets a very positive tone for the work of the school through her effective working relationships with the children, staff, governors and parents and with the external agencies which support the work of the school. She knows the children well and has high expectations of all members of the school community. The Principal is very well supported by the senior management team and co-ordinators, who provide effective leadership within their management roles and curricular areas of responsibility.

Over recent years, the school has experienced a number of changes to the staffing arrangements. The Principal has developed a collegial approach to school improvement and the professional development programme including that facilitated by the NEELB Curriculum Advisory and Support Service which has developed the staff's understanding and skills; this is having a positive impact on the quality of provision for learning and the children's attainments. The staff training facilitated by the ICT co-ordinator and the liaison teacher from Ballyclare High School, has led to improvements in classroom practice.

4.2 PLANNING FOR IMPROVEMENT

The school development plan complies with the requirements of the School Development Plans Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and sets out a range of targets for the medium and long term. The school has evaluated progress to date, has identified areas for development and has set appropriate targets for the development of English and mathematics. The accompanying action plans provide the necessary detail and complement well the whole-school priorities.

4.3 ACCOMMODATION

While the teachers make the best possible use of the space available, the dimensions of the FS classrooms are restrictive for the provision of play-based learning.

4.4 RESOURCES, FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

The school governors make a very positive contribution to the life and work of the school and support effectively the Principal and the staff. They keep all aspects of the governance of the school under review.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The strengths of the school include:

- the quality of the teaching observed, all of which was good or better and in two-thirds of lessons, was either very good or outstanding;
- the children's exemplary behaviour, positive attitudes and willingness to engage in collaborative and independent learning;
- the very good quality of the pastoral care provision, which is exemplified by the caring, child-centred approach demonstrated by all who work in the school;
- the strong links established between the school and the local community;
- the very good use made of ICT to promote and support the children's learning; and
- the effective leadership and commitment to improvement provided by the Principal, SMT and co-ordinators.

5.2 The area for improvement is the need to:

- develop further the analysis and use of performance data to inform and raise further the standards achieved by the children.

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

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- The employing authority, governors and the school leadership need to review the security of the access arrangements to the school buildings.
- The lack of car parking facilities along with the current arrangements for dropping off and collecting the children contribute to a potentially hazardous situation.

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