

EDUCATION AND TRAINING
INSPECTORATE

PRIMARY INSPECTION

St Clare's Primary School and Nursery Unit,
Belfast

DE Ref No 103-6630

Report of a Follow-up Inspection in June 2024



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Department of Education
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Follow-up to the inspection of St Clare's Primary School, Belfast, BT13 2SE (103-6630)

Introduction

St Clare's Primary School and Nursery Unit is a maintained co-educational primary school situated in West Belfast, with an enrolment of 465 children which includes 52 children in the two full-time nursery classes. Sixty-three percent of the children in the school and nursery unit have free school meals entitlement and 24% of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). There are 32 children with a statement of educational need. A Department of Education funded nurture class, 'The Sunshine Room', has been in operation since 2013 to support children with a range of emotional needs.

The school is part of the West Belfast Area Learning Network Community and has close links with two local primary schools, enabling staff to work collaboratively to share resources and expertise. They also link with two controlled primary schools through an interface project called 'Moving Up, Moving On' (MUMO), funded by an award from the National Lottery. A wide range of externally accredited awards have been achieved since 2019 including: the Eco-Schools' Green Flag Award; the Rights Respecting Schools Award; the Inclusion Quality Mark; and the Education Authority's (EA) 'School of Sanctuary' Accreditation.

This follow-up inspection was carried out in June 2024 and provided the school with the opportunity to demonstrate its progress in addressing the areas for action from the time of the inspection in May 2016 and the monitoring visit in October 2021.

Over this period, there have been significant changes to the leadership roles within the school. A new principal was appointed in 2018. The senior leadership roles of the literacy, numeracy and special educational needs co-ordinators were redistributed in 2019, and in 2022 a number of middle leaders were appointed. The number of newcomer children has risen significantly from 22 children in 2016 to 109 in 2024, making up one-quarter of the school population. This includes 28 children who have been granted refugee status and nine children with asylum seeker status. In 2019 a Sensory Room was opened, and in September 2023 a key stage (KS) 1 specialist class was established for children with social and communication needs.

Views of parents, staff and children

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents, staff and the children in year seven in advance of the follow-up inspection. A summary of the responses, including any issues raised, was communicated to the principal.

All of the year seven children responded to the online questionnaire. The majority of their responses were positive, and the children all agreed that they are treated with care and respect by the teachers and other adults, and that there are adults that they can talk to if they are worried or have a problem. The children provided 23 written comments which were wholly positive. They highlighted their appreciation of the help and support of their teachers with their work and for the emotional support they receive. The children also valued the welcoming and inclusive practices, for 'children from all over the world'.

The inspectors met with groups of children from years three, five and seven. They spoke very positively about their experiences in the school, including the respectful relationships and the opportunities for them to engage in music, sport and drama activities.

Thirty percent (101) of the parents responded to the online questionnaire, with 56 providing additional written comments. Almost all of the responses were positive and, in the written responses, the parents highlighted their appreciation of: the support provided to families; the caring, nurturing staff; and the high-quality provision for newcomer children and for children identified as having special educational needs. They also value the proactive senior leadership who are visible and accessible in the mornings and afternoons and are always willing to listen and help.

Almost all of the staff completed the confidential questionnaire, and their responses were almost all positive. There were 39 written responses from the staff in which they highlighted the priority given across the school to the wellbeing of the pupils, parents and staff. They praised the leadership for supporting their professional development and creating a sense of community and belonging. The staff are extremely proud of the school and how well they work together as a team with the children's best interests at heart.

Key actions

During this period, the key actions which affect the work of the school are set out below.

- The EA provided external support with aspects of leadership and management, including school development planning and whole-school improvement, and the development of numeracy provision across the school.
- The staff availed of an extensive range of professional learning opportunities, including those from the EA and the ETI's 'Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together' Workshops.
- A review and restructuring of roles and responsibilities at senior and middle leadership level was undertaken, including implementing a range of monitoring and evaluation processes.

Key findings

- The school's vision to 'take a truly collegial approach to school life in which each person's contribution to the school community is recognised, celebrated and valued' is realised through the highly strategic and collaborative leadership at all levels. There has been a significant investment in professional learning for senior and middle leaders which included a bespoke middle leadership capacity building programme delivered by the EA, in partnership with the senior leadership within the school. As a result, the co-ordinators are empowered to lead their areas of responsibility; they contribute to the whole-school shared action plans and monitor and evaluate effectively the impact of their actions on the children's learning.
- The governors are proactive, well informed, and well equipped to carry out to good effect their role in the school development planning process. They provide appropriate support and challenge to the school leadership. They are an integral part of school life and are mindful of the central role that the school and nursery unit plays in improving the lives of the children, families and the local community.
- The provision for children with SEN is a key strength within the school and nursery unit. This success is underpinned by the robust approaches of the 'Multi-disciplinary Team'. The team of professionals which includes, where relevant, external professionals from education and health, ensure the early identification and assessment of each child's needs and the implementation of carefully considered and regularly monitored intervention and support programmes. The skilled staff in the Key Stage 1 specialist provision and the nurture group in the 'Sunshine Room' support very well the children's individual academic and pastoral needs. Throughout the school and nursery unit, the nurturing interactions evident from every member of staff create an environment in which positive relationships ensure all children feel safe, secure and valued.
- The provision for newcomer children is of an exceptional standard. The newcomer children and their families are welcomed, supported and included fully in the life and work of St Clare's. The innovative 'Parent Support Group' project, which was designed and delivered in collaboration with the Full-Service Community Network funded by the Department of Education, has provided a social outlet for the newcomer parents and has built their capacity to become partners in their children's education through: increasing their knowledge and understanding of the English language and the Northern Ireland education system; and supporting them to help their children with homework. The parents reported that it helped them to feel they are valued members of the school and local community. The staff in the school and nursery unit are research-informed and use skilful language acquisition approaches to support newcomer children in their language learning, enabling them to access the curriculum and become fully involved in the school community.

- Through the lottery funded MUMO project, a children’s support worker and a family engagement worker engage with the parents, providing support to help the school community to make positive changes in their lives and build relationships. The parents who met with the inspectors spoke very positively about the personal support that they have received from the school and the opportunities for them to engage in parent courses, some of which are externally accredited.
- To improve the children’s comprehension skills, the school introduced a commercial online adaptive reading programme. The programme is being used effectively to monitor the children’s independent reading and comprehension skills. The children in year 5 and 7 spoke very positively about using the programme and the impact of the additional support for reading they received, which has helped them to read a broader range of more challenging books.
- The staff identified the need to provide additional support to address children’s speech and communication needs. A short-term targeted intervention programme called ‘Talk Boost’ was introduced in 2024 to support groups of children in year 1 to year 3. At the end of the 10-week programme, the children’s communication skills were consistent with their expected developmental levels. The focus on speech and language throughout the school and nursery unit was evident in all the sessions observed during the inspection. During the engaging and active lessons, the teachers’ skilful questioning and the effective development of appropriate vocabulary is impacting positively on the children’s confidence and communication skills and is supporting their writing across the curriculum and their knowledge and understanding of mathematical concepts.
- To improve the provision in numeracy, the staff have worked collaboratively to pilot and review new whole-school planning, resources and interventions in numeracy. Going forward it will be important for the middle leaders to monitor and evaluate the full impact of the new approaches on the numeracy standards attained by the children.

Child Protection

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Going Forward

St Clare’s Primary School and Nursery Unit is a vibrant learning community where children and their families are celebrated, supported and nurtured, with the overall development of every child at its core.

The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:


- the comprehensive multi-disciplinary approach to the early identification and assessment of each child's needs and the carefully considered and regularly monitored intervention and support programmes; and
- research-informed pedagogy for meeting the needs of newcomer children and their families.

St Clare's Primary School and Nursery Unit is well placed to take forward the area for action detailed in this report. No further follow-up inspection is required.

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