

Report of a Pilot Inspection
St Brigid's Primary School, Downpatrick

May 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Brigid's Primary School is a maintained, co-educational primary school situated on the outskirts of Downpatrick. Most of the children attending the school come from the town of Downpatrick and the townland of Saul. A Specialist Provision (for Early Years) was opened in the school in September 2022. Enrolment in the school has remained steady and stands currently at 262. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of children identified as having special educational needs (SEN), from 20.23% in 2021 to 29.8% in 2024. The number of children with educational statements has risen from 14 in 2021-22 to 30 in 2023-24. This change in pupil profile has impacted significantly on the utilisation of the school's accommodation, with every available space, including shared and outdoor areas, being utilised by staff and allied health professionals to support all of the children.

The principal has been in post since 2018 and a vice-principal was appointed in March 2022. Since 2020, there have been significant and ongoing changes in co-ordination roles and responsibilities to meet the changing context of the school.

The school operates a breakfast club from 8am and an after-school club to 5pm. There is significant traffic congestion outside the school at the beginning and end of the school day which has necessitated staggering starting and finishing times for all the children to ensure everyone's safety.

The school has achieved a number of awards in the last two years including the: ICT Excellence Award; Digital School Award; Spirit of Catholic Education Award; Families First Award for the 'Best Nurturing Team'; Eco Schools Green Flag Award; and, Autism Impact Award.

B. VIEWS OF CHILDREN, PARENTS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children, staff and parents in advance of the pilot inspection. A summary of the questionnaire responses was shared with the principal and the chair of the board of governors.

Almost all of the year 7 children (98%) responded to the questionnaire. Their responses were very positive. All of the children indicated that: they know who they can talk to if they are worried or have a problem; they learn how to manage their emotions and express them in a way that is helpful to them and others; the teachers and assistants help them when they find it difficult to learn; and, everyone is welcomed, valued, and respected. In addition, almost one-half of the children who responded provided written comments which were wholly positive about their school experience. In particular, the children commented on: their amazing teachers, classroom assistants and friends; the wide range of after-school clubs and trips; and, their enjoyment of practical and outdoor learning, and physical education (PE).

Inspectors also met and spoke with children who have a Digital 'Techno Turtles' role within the school and groups of children from years 3, 5 and 7. All expressed their enjoyment of, and progress in, learning across the curriculum. The children shared their sporting achievements and showcased their developing skills in using technology, playing musical instruments, and singing.

Almost all of the teachers responded to the questionnaire and their responses were wholly positive. Just under one-half of the teachers who responded provided additional written comments which expressed their appreciation of the supportive and nurturing environment, excellent community links, and inspirational and supportive school leadership.

Almost all of the support staff responded to the questionnaire. A very small number provided additional written comments. The responses were mostly positive, reporting that they enjoy working in the school and feel safe and respected.

Just over one-third of the parents (66) responded to the questionnaire. Their responses were very positive. There were (28) written comments; these parents highlighted their appreciation of the: caring staff who have an excellent relationship with the children; wide range of learning experiences for the children; excellent progress of the children; and, inclusive ethos of the school. In discussions with a small number of parents, they spoke positively about the approachable and dedicated staff and the excellent pastoral and educational provision.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the school to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The inspirational and creative staff who are passionate about providing excellence for all children; they recognise the children's unique starting points and provide well-chosen learning experiences to progress every child's learning.

- The school’s senior leaders take a strategic and innovative approach to improvement planning which empowers all learning co-ordinators to take collective responsibility in the identification and delivery of the key priorities.
- The current approach to active learning is having a positive impact on the children’s engagement in and enjoyment of learning and their wellbeing. The staff have identified appropriately the need to ensure that all children are being provided with opportunities to correct their errors when engaging in practical learning activities.
- The inclusion of all children in the life of the school is a central feature of the provision. The school’s vision of providing excellence in education for all children is evident in the high-quality provision for all children with special educational needs.
- The children are resilient, confident and enthusiastic learners who have highly developed communication, using mathematics and digital skills.
- The children are competent, responsible, and discerning users of digital technology across the curriculum.
- The school has successfully created a community of learning that is characterised by collaboration, respect, and a shared commitment to excellence.
- 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.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The inspirational and creative staff are passionate in their vision “*to provide excellence in education for all*”. They recognise the children’s unique starting points and provide well-chosen learning experiences to progress every child’s learning. They provide a warm, welcoming, and inclusive school community that fosters a love of learning and empowers each child to succeed.

The school’s dedication to continuous improvement is evidenced in the school’s robust self-evaluation processes. These processes are comprehensive and consistent, involving regular discussions with the children and staff, online surveys, and ongoing analysis of a wide range of assessment and pastoral information. The school’s senior leaders take a strategic and innovative approach to school improvement which empowers all learning co-ordinators to take collective responsibility for the delivery of the key priorities and reflects the school’s motto of “*Learning and Growing together*”. Middle leaders work collaboratively and strategically to produce a small number of shared improvement plans that prioritise the holistic development of the children.

The board of governors play a crucial role in supporting the staff. The governors are assigned as 'link governors' to areas of learning co-ordination within the school. Regular meetings between link governors and learning co-ordinators ensure that the board is well-informed about the work of the school. The governors who met with inspectors articulated clearly the positive impact of recent improvement work undertaken, particularly in relation to the children's wellbeing, outdoor learning and physical education. Their collective and varied knowledge, skills and experience provide invaluable support to the staff.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff use a wide range of qualitative and quantitative evidence and knowledge about the children to plan a relevant, connected curriculum where the children understand the practical application of what they learn. The emphasis on active learning, both indoors and outdoors, provides the children with creative opportunities to make cross-curricular connections, promote teamwork, and develop their communication, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In the most effective practice, the active learning opportunities are pitched appropriately, and the staff provide support and challenge for all children. The staff have identified appropriately the need to ensure that all children are being provided with opportunities to correct their errors during practical activities. Well-embedded routines ensure the children can identify the learning intentions and the skills to be developed. They reflect regularly on their learning through effective self- and peer- assessment of work. Digital technology is integrated seamlessly into the learning and teaching sessions.

Over the last three years, the staff have prioritised the children's health and wellbeing through their focus on emotional wellbeing and physical education, in response to the increasing number of children who present with wellbeing needs. Parents reported to inspectors that the friendly and supportive staff presence at the school gate helps the children to start their day with a positive mindset. In addition, all staff have accessed nurture training and implement a verbal wellbeing programme. This programme includes the use of a wide range of strategies, such as calming activities and movement breaks, which help the children to understand and regulate their emotions, and fully engage in their learning.

At both whole-school and class level, the staff use an approach called 'Mood trackers' to monitor closely the children's emotions and respond with appropriate strategies and interventions to support those children who have social and emotional wellbeing needs. The school's senior leaders recognise the importance of staff wellbeing and, using the Education Authority's '*Being Well Doing Well*' audit, have identified appropriately the need to consider further strategies to provide wellbeing support for the classroom assistants.

The staff have implemented a new programme that ensures a well-rounded PE experience for all of the children. The focus on physical activity complements the school's efforts in promoting emotional wellbeing, creating a holistic approach to the children's health. To empower further the children and create a safe space, the school has implemented child-friendly versions of the safeguarding policies,

including an anti-bullying policy developed by the school council, which ensures that the children have a clear understanding of the school's processes. The positive impact is evident as, in discussions with the children, they reported that they are happy, feel safe and cared for, and know how to look after their wellbeing.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The school's vision of providing excellence in education for all children is evident in the high-quality provision for children with SEN. Detailed information about the children's learning needs, from the pre-school transition forms and the individual education plans (IEPs), is used strategically to plan lessons and to identify the professional learning and development opportunities staff require to meet the children's needs. The inclusive, flexible and responsive professional learning is disseminated appropriately to all staff and embedded in the daily practice.

The role of the classroom assistants within the school is well-developed. The classroom assistants provide high quality support to the children and keep detailed records of each child's progress in meeting their individual learning targets. The positive working relationships between the teachers and the classroom assistants, and the value placed on continuous professional development for all, means that the classroom assistants are confident in their engagement with the children and have the necessary skills and strategies to support them to access and progress in their learning.

To celebrate and track each child's unique learning journey, teachers and classroom assistants create detailed scrapbooks for children with SEN to document their progress and achievements. All parents are kept informed of their child's development through regular meetings and the use of a digital communication application.

The inclusion of all children in the life of the school is a central feature of the provision in St Brigid's. The children with special educational needs are empowered to have a voice in the school through their representation on a range of groupings including the School and Eco Councils, Digital 'Techno Turtles' and Wellbeing Ambassadors. Diversity is embraced and celebrated regularly, particularly through the engagement in events, such as, National Autism Day and Down's Syndrome Day. Of particular note is the opportunity for older children in key stage 2 to take on a 'Buddy' role to support the younger children. These pastoral roles are having a very positive impact, providing stability for the children and helping them to overcome emotional challenges in coming into school and being ready to learn.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children are resilient, confident, and enthusiastic learners who show high levels of respect towards all within the school community. They are proud of their leadership responsibilities, recognise the skills they are developing and know the impact of their work on others. For example, the 'Safety Squad' have delivered important messages to the children during school assembly on the safe use of the playground equipment.

The children are confident to take risks in their learning and have developed a 'have-a-go' attitude, as they understand that mistakes are part of the learning process. The children know their own strengths and take ownership of their learning by setting personal targets to progress their learning.

The children have highly developed communication, using mathematics skills and digital skills. From foundation stage, the children can listen to and take part in discussions, explanations, role-plays, and presentations. They develop, express and present ideas in a variety of forms and formats, using traditional and digital resources, for different audiences and purposes. They are articulate in providing their opinion, expressing their emotions, and are very respectful of the views of others. Through active learning, both indoors and outdoors, the children demonstrate their mathematical knowledge, understanding and skills in a variety of ways to communicate, manage information, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions. Teachers provide the children with relevant real-life contexts that require a mathematical dimension. The children's digital skills are highly developed. They use ICT to communicate, handle information, solve problems, and showcase their learning. The children are competent, responsible, and discerning users of digital technology across the curriculum.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

One of the key strengths of the school is its emphasis on building strong relationships and creating a positive, supportive, and nurturing learning environment for all members of the school community. Extensive partnerships with local sports clubs enable the children to have access to a wide variety of extra-curricular sports activities. Similarly, the staff provide an extensive range of after-school activities, including art club, Gaelic football, dance, soccer, basketball, board game club, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) club, hurling, netball, and 'Glee' (drama) club, allowing every child to find an area of interest and to experience success. The children spoke highly of these opportunities and how they had developed their confidence; a number of children now also pursue these interests externally.

There is a culture of continuous learning among all staff who link with a wide range of external agencies to learn from and meet the broad range of needs within the school. The external support agencies include a range of Allied Health Professionals, such as, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists who provide particular support and guidance to the staff within the Early Years Specialist Provision class in addition to working with the children. There are well-established links with the local special school, with termly meetings held to share good practice and resources.

The staff recognise the importance of building a strong partnership with parents. This collaboration extends beyond regular communication. Parents participate actively in the school's development by identifying, for example, funding opportunities. Their support has translated into the development of the school's outdoor learning provision, creating a valuable resource for the children's active learning and engagement.

F. 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.

4. GOING FORWARD

In St Brigid's Primary School, the children are supported and inspired to learn, staff are empowered to innovate and grow professionally, and parents are engaged partners in their child's education. The school is a shining example of how a strong sense of community can enhance the learning experiences and contribute to the overall success and wellbeing of the children, the staff and the wider school community.

ETI will continue to work with St Brigid's Primary School, including to share the aspect of highly effective practice which should be shared more widely:

- The highly effective approaches used by the staff to support those children who have social, emotional, wellbeing and special educational needs.
- The school's highly effective inclusive, flexible and responsive approach to professional learning and development.

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