

Report of a Primary Inspection
Alexander Dickson Primary School

September 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Alexander Dickson Primary School is a rural school situated in the village of Ballygowan in County Down. The school has four composite classes, with 82 children attending the school. Thirty-two percent of the children have free school meals entitlement and 24% have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Whilst there has been a slight decrease over the past four years in the overall enrolment number, the number of children who started year 1 this year is more than double that of last year and sits at 16. Over one-half of the staff, including the principal, have been appointed in the last three years.

Recent improvements to the accommodation within the school have included redecoration, furniture upgrades and a new interactive whiteboard for each classroom. A new library opened in 2022, and a garden area was developed in early 2024. A community pre-school operates from the school's grounds and the school's well-developed outdoor play area is utilised by the children from the pre-school and the children in years 1 and 2.

The school has established partnerships with a range of groups including, the Ballygowan Seniors and the Comber Regeneration Community Partnership and has recently developed shared education links with two local schools. The school operates a breakfast club and offers an extensive range of after school clubs.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

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

Most of the year 7 children (80%) responded to the questionnaire and the majority of 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; they are treated with care and respect; are encouraged to set targets to improve their work; and all indicated they are proud to belong to this school and community. Inspectors also met with children from years 4, 5, 6 and 7 who spoke positively of their experiences of learning in the school, the support and encouragement they receive from the staff and how the school's values of honesty, kindness and friendship are promoted throughout their learning.

All of the teachers responded to the questionnaire and their responses were wholly positive. A small number of the teachers who responded provided additional written comments which highlighted the child centred collaborative approach of the staff in providing a nurturing environment where the children are safe, feel valued and learn. All of the support staff responded to the questionnaire. Their responses were mostly positive, reporting that they: feel their wellbeing is promoted; are supported to do their job effectively; and understand the needs of individual pupils and support them accordingly.

Sixty-two percent of parents responded to the questionnaire and most of their responses were positive. Over one-third also included written comments; these parents, together with a small number who met with us, highlighted their appreciation of the: hard-working staff; range of learning experiences provided to meet the needs of their child; and sense of community within the school.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the Alexander Dickson Primary 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;
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- A successful collaborative working relationship exists among all staff who are dedicated to promoting positive engagements within the school community and successfully create an attractive environment in which the children are 'ready, respectful and safe' in their learning.
- Middle leaders, including those appointed recently, are enthusiastic and motivated to lead and coordinate their curricular areas of responsibility. They acknowledge that the monitoring and evaluation processes are at an early stage and recognise the importance of gathering first-hand evidence to measure the impact and progress of key priorities for development.
- The staff know and understand the needs of the children very well. Through carefully considered approaches and strategies and tailored group and individual support, they meet effectively the needs of all of the children.
- The behaviour of the children is exemplary; they engage positively with each other, settle quickly to learn, are confident and have well-developed self-management and independence skills.
- The voice of the child is encouraged and valued by the staff which is exemplified in the modified child-friendly versions of key documents which broaden the children's understanding of the areas for school improvement and how to stay safe.

- The children have a great sense of pride in and belonging to their school and all stakeholders are committed to building and fostering a community of learning.
- 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.

Area for action:

- to develop further the range of monitoring and evaluation processes to include the use of first-hand evidence to measure the progress and impact in addressing the key priorities for development.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

All stakeholders share and are wholly committed to the vision of the school, creating an environment in which the children are 'ready, respectful and safe' in their learning. The recent staff changes and consequent review of roles and responsibilities of staff have supported the identification of key priorities for development.

The strategic school development planning process has been informed by self-evaluation, including feedback from all stakeholders and a review and analysis of available qualitative and quantitative data which has resulted in the identification of appropriate key priorities. The middle leaders recognise the importance of gathering first-hand evidence to monitor and evaluate more closely the impact of their actions. They acknowledge the need and would welcome the chance to develop further their leadership roles and skills in effecting improvement.

The dedicated governors, who are actively involved in the local community, are wholly committed to the vision of the school and support well the work of the staff. The link governors work closely with middle leaders and have developed further their understanding of the school's identified key priorities.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The long- and medium-term planning guides effectively the work of the staff. They undertake regular reflection and evaluation of learning and teaching. They use these evaluations to good effect, along with the available data, to identify children's starting points, interests and strengths which ensures that the children make progress in their learning. Through identifying clearly the intended learning and the delivery of an adapted curriculum they meet effectively the needs of all children.

All planning, assessment, learning and teaching observed were effective. In the more effective learning and teaching observed, the use of open-ended questioning is promoting successfully the development of the children's personal capabilities, thinking and problem-solving skills. Further opportunity to develop creativity, critical thinking and reflection on their own and others' work would enhance further the

children's understanding of how to improve their work and extend their learning. The recent focus on the promotion and development of the children's reading, through the reciprocal reading approach (a method of guided reading where children take on group roles to explore and find meaning in texts), has supported well the development of reading fluency and comprehension skills for almost all of the children.

The daily opportunity for physical exercise through the children's participation in the 'daily mile' initiative, the promotion of healthy eating, regular opportunity for a reflection on emotions, and tailored support for those with social needs, are supporting well the children's health and wellbeing. The 'reflect and reset' approach developed by the school as part of their positive behaviour practices is supporting well the children's behaviour and their readiness to learn.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The vision to develop the children's learning in a safe and respectful environment is embedded throughout the school and promotes well the children's self-esteem and confidence in their learning. The children with SEN are supported effectively through individual and small group withdrawal sessions. The classroom assistants provide good support to the teacher and employ a range of strategies which impact positively on the children's focus on their learning. Individual education plans (IEPs) are monitored and evaluated regularly. The input from the child to the IEP is valued and encouraged and provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their progress.

The staff seek additional support from external agencies such as the Health and Social Care Trust's Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE (NI)) and the Education Authority's Behaviour Support and Education Psychology services. They employ strategies to ensure the children's needs are met fully. This collaborative sharing of strategies and approaches has developed the confidence and skills of the staff in supporting the children in their learning.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The values of Alexander Dickson Primary School are at the core of the school and the children display them in practice through their respectful engagement with the staff, visitors and peers. Their behaviour is exemplary, and they display a mature approach to their learning, work well collaboratively and actively support each other. Digital technology is used effectively by the staff, both to support the children's learning and as a tool to promote and celebrate their achievements both in school and the wider school community.

The children have good opportunities to develop their leadership roles through, for example, the school council and eco-committee. The voice of the child is encouraged and valued. Key information and policies are shared with the children through modified child-friendly versions of the school development plan and child protection policy which have broadened the children's understanding of the areas for school improvement and of how to stay safe.

The school council includes representation from across the school and, during discussions with us, the children articulated their desire to enhance their school environment for all. The Eco-committee is developing their roles within the school through their participation in recycling, raising awareness of energy conservation and the development of a new sensory garden. These leadership roles are promoting successfully the children's communication skills and helping them to develop a sense of responsibility.

The children take great pride in their work which is neat and of good quality. They work collaboratively, take turns and show effective levels of self-management and independence during practical learning opportunities. They engage confidently with the adults and are able to explain their progress in learning. The children make independent choices in their learning and access freely the resources, including digital technology, required to support their learning.

There is an acknowledgement and celebration of the children's achievements and successes through assemblies and the presentation of awards and certificates. Special events such as the year 4 to 7 production of "Robin and the Sherwood Hoodies" have provided the children with the opportunity to showcase their musical and creative talents.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff are committed to building and fostering a community of learning where all work in partnership to provide a respectful and safe learning environment.

The parents receive information through newsletters, social media, online digital platforms and a range of meetings throughout the year and are actively encouraged to share their views and experiences of the school in order to inform the school development planning process.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) plays an active role in the school and has been proactive in raising and sourcing funds to purchase resources to enhance the children's learning experiences, for example, to develop the school's garden area.

The school is strengthening its relationships with the wider school community. The established link with 'Ballygowan Seniors' gives the children valuable opportunities to develop an appreciation and connection with the older generation. The school also works closely with the Comber Regeneration Community Partnership through which the children have contributed to the development of their local community during planting workshops, developing the children's appreciation of their civic responsibility.

The school has fostered good relationships with the local pre-school which, along with the shared use of the school's outdoor learning spaces, is helping the pre-school children when they transition to year 1 in the primary school. In discussion with year 7 children, they spoke of their visits to the local post primary schools which impacts positively on their transition from year 7 to year 8.

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

The vibrant community spirit fostered in Alexander Dickson Primary School creates successfully a positive, welcoming environment in which all of the children are valued and participate actively in their learning.

Alexander Dickson Primary School is well placed to take forward the area for action detailed in the body of this report. Through DI engagement, the ETI will monitor the progress of the school in addressing the area for action.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

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%

APPENDIX 2: SMALL SCHOOLS

In all schools where the enrolment number is below the minimum number of 105 in a rural setting, as set out in the Department of Education's [Sustainable Schools Policy](#), 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.

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