

Report of a Primary Inspection
Gracehill Primary School and Nursery Unit

September 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Gracehill Primary School and Nursery Unit is a controlled, co-educational primary school situated in the UNESCO World Heritage village of Gracehill outside Ballymena in County Antrim. There are 15 classes in the school, including the part-time nursery class. There are currently 427 children attending the school and nursery unit. Most of the children come from the local and wider Ballymena area. Almost 9% of the children are identified as having special educational needs (SEN); 6.5% of the children have free school meals entitlement, and 4% of the children are newcomers. The attendance rate is high at 95.5%.

There have been significant changes to staffing structures, roles and responsibilities over recent years. Since September 2022, the vice-principal has been in the role of acting principal for extended intermittent periods, most recently in September 2024. Two members of staff were appointed to the senior leadership team in June 2024. An acting vice-principal and an acting SENCO were appointed in September 2024. There were five temporary teachers in post at the time of the inspection.

The school is currently working towards its tenth Eco schools 'Green Flag' award.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children, all staff and parents in advance of the inspection.

All of the children in year 7 completed the questionnaire and almost all of their responses were positive. They reported that everyone in the school is welcomed, valued and respected, and almost all are proud to belong to the school community. Fourteen percent of the children included additional written comments, highlighting their enjoyment of attending school and their appreciation of the recognition the teachers give to their achievements.

The inspectors met with groups of children from years 3, 5 and 7, including representatives from the school council and eco-committee, who commented positively on their experiences of school. In particular, the year 7 children relish the opportunities to develop their pastoral and leadership skills in roles such as, playground pals, first aid buddies, and canteen helpers.

Just over one-quarter (27%) of the parents responded to the questionnaire and most of their responses were positive. Additional written comments were provided by almost one-half (48%) of the parents. Almost all of the parents report that their child is making good progress and that they receive helpful information about their child's learning. A small group of parents also met with an inspector and commented positively about their child's learning experiences at school. They appreciate the dedication of the staff and the pastoral care shown towards their children. They also made a few suggestions on how the schools could improve home/school communication.

All of the teachers responded to the questionnaire, 33% of whom provided additional comments. Nearly all of the responses were positive. Just over one-half of the non-teaching staff completed the questionnaires and one-fifth added written comments. The responses were mostly positive.

A summary of the questionnaire responses, including the issues raised, was shared with the acting principal and the chair of the board of governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Gracehill 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; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The school community's commitment to the child-centred vision of 'caring, learning, and achieving together' is evidenced by the fostering of a welcoming and inclusive environment for all.
- The newly formed school leadership team have established, at pace, a new process for whole-school self-evaluation and have identified appropriate priorities for school development.
- The school has identified the need to review the teachers' planning to ensure it provides progression in learning and takes greater account of the widening ability range within the classes to meet the needs of all learners.
- The children are highly motivated learners who are articulate in expressing their views and ideas.
- The children are benefiting from opportunities to develop their leadership skills which is increasing their confidence, self-esteem and maturity.
- The school is committed to creating opportunities and valuable links for children to learn and work together in the classroom, across the school, and in the local community.

- The children in the nursery unit are developing well their independence and their understanding of the routines within a safe and stimulating learning environment.
- 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.

Areas for action:

- to reinstate processes for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the actions to effect improvement consistently throughout the school; and
- to review the planning for progression in the medium- and long-term planners to meet the needs of all of the learners within the school.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school and nursery unit has a welcoming and inclusive Christian ethos. The longstanding school vision ‘caring, learning, and achieving together’ continues to be relevant and underpins all aspects of school life. All of the staff articulate the vision clearly and work together effectively to provide a safe, caring environment enabling children to flourish.

Recent changes in staffing roles and responsibilities in the senior and middle leadership have led to a timely review of the school’s self-evaluation processes. The identified priorities for development are appropriate and aligned well to the vision.

The children are encouraged and enabled to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the school vision which helps them develop their overall wellbeing, learning, academic progress and holistic development. They are very caring and empathetic towards the needs of others and the older children in year 6 and year 7 enjoy helping the younger children in the playground and canteen.

The governors have a broad range of skills, expertise and experience which are used well to address the developmental needs of the school. The governors are very supportive of the senior leadership team and are fully aware of the vision. It would be beneficial to develop further the oversight role of the governors in the monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum provision.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The newly established senior leadership team has demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in adapting to the recent and significant staffing changes. From September 2024, the staff have undertaken the analysis of qualitative and quantitative assessment data and an audit of information and communication technology (ICT) provision to identify a number of appropriate priorities for development. The senior leaders have established a range of processes for

monitoring and evaluating the impact of the school improvement work. They are keen to implement fully self-evaluation and action planning processes by focusing on the impact of the development work on the children's learning through: reviews of the children's books; observations of learning and teaching across the key stages; and discussions with focus groups of children.

The positive relationships for learning throughout the school foster a conducive environment for the children's learning. The planning, teaching and assessment was mostly effective and is characterised by the use of active learning approaches to engage and motivate the children and develop their language, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The nursery unit is broadening the children's learning experiences by developing and utilising the expansive outdoor space to foster a nurturing environment. The recent focus on developing the outdoor play provision in the Foundation Stage has enhanced the learning environment and is providing enjoyable opportunities for the children to explore the world around them.

Through self-evaluation, the school has identified a need to review the teachers' planning to ensure it provides progression in learning and takes greater account of the widening ability range within the classes to meet the needs of all learners.

The school has prioritised the emotional health and wellbeing of both children and staff. Well-established partnerships with a range of charities and organisations are significantly enriching the children's understanding of, for example, online safety, anti-bullying strategies, and mindfulness techniques. The school's commitment to fostering a healthy and active lifestyle is evident through the children's participation in the 'daily mile' initiative and sporting activities held on both the school grounds and in the village square.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

There is clear sense of inclusion for all children within the school community, in line with the school's vision, with all children equally valued and celebrated. The caring ethos created by staff enables all of the children to have a sense of belonging and to participate fully in their learning. In discussions with the children, they spoke with pride about how everyone is treated fairly and of the many opportunities they have in school to help others. In the most effective lessons, classroom assistants are deployed well to work effectively with groups and individual children and, where appropriate, extend their support to others within the class. Withdrawal support in literacy is provided for small groups of children, by the very recently appointed SENCO and by the learning assistant who work closely to develop the children's literacy skills.

There has been a significant increase in the number of children with more complex special educational needs (SEN) over the past three years. At the time of the inspection the teachers were carrying out diagnostic assessments to gain a greater understanding of the children's abilities and needs to further inform their planning.

The children identified as having SEN would benefit from more specific and measurable targets in their individual education plans (IEP) to ensure their needs are more clearly identified and appropriate support strategies are implemented in the classroom. Improvements to the target-setting process would also support the monitoring and subsequent amendments to the IEP, as necessary.

Although early in the academic year, the nursery staff have already identified children who may benefit from additional support and have identified a range of strategies to address those needs.

The school council and eco-committee, which are accessible to all, are valued by the children and provides them with the opportunity to democratically elect their class representatives. The members of both groups said that they are proud of their achievements and recognise their responsibility to represent the views of others in relation to school life and the environment.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

In the nursery unit, the children are making good progress as evidenced by their growing independence and knowledge of the routines. The children interact confidently with their peers and adults and show a particular interest in mark-making. Their achievements are celebrated through attractive wall displays of the children's work which are annotated with the children's thoughts and ideas. Their artistic and creative pieces are of a very high standard. The children are curious about the world around them and participate enthusiastically in sensory and energetic play outdoors.

For all children their individual successes, both inside and outside of school, are acknowledged and celebrated to build the children's confidence and self-esteem. The staff affirm the children's good behaviour and achievements in class through a range of age-appropriate reward systems which encourage learning and positive behaviour. The children showcase and have their achievements celebrated in assemblies, at community events and on the school website.

The children engage well in their learning and support each other sensitively and constructively in paired and group work. They are very proud of their achievements and the associated class rewards linked to the school's values.

The children spoke enthusiastically and confidently with inspectors about their learning, the support they receive from their teachers, and their enjoyment of school life in general. They were articulate in expressing their views and ideas and were respectful of others. The children are proud of their school, they are well-mannered and courteous and treat each other, the staff and visitors with respect. The children in Key Stage (KS) 2 enjoy the opportunities provided for them, including membership of the school council and eco-committee, as playground pals for the younger children and being encouraged to take part in assemblies. This has helped them to feel valued and has developed their: communication and leadership skills; levels of independence; and sense of responsibility in the school and wider community.

The children are highly motivated and work well both independently and collaboratively. They engage enthusiastically with ICT, using it effectively to showcase their learning through, for example, voiceovers in presentations and creating movies. When presented with opportunities, the children demonstrate their ability to predict, problem-solve and be creative. Most of the children are making progress from their individual starting points. To improve further the outcomes they attain, they would benefit from increased opportunities to apply their cross-curricular skills, particularly in using mathematics, to real world contexts.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The school is committed to achieving its vision by providing opportunities for children to learn and work together in the classroom, across the school, and in the local community.

The children benefit from sporting and musical activities and enjoy participating in a range of charitable events organised by the active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) throughout the year. The school links with the local church and village association to provide opportunities for the children to contribute to, and participate in, village events which are developing well their self-confidence and is instilling in the children the importance of the school in the community.

A group of children in year 7, 'The Bramley Bunch' spoke enthusiastically about their business enterprise which involves selling organic apples grown in the school grounds to the staff and to a local restaurant, which is impacting positively on their understanding of basic business skills and enhancing their financial capability. The school has recently established links with another local business to develop further these skills and to promote the children's awareness and understanding of career opportunities in the local area.

Senior and middle leaders value staff professional learning and have disseminated internally professional learning to the staff and facilitated input from external agencies. This has benefitted the staff in developing the outdoor learning provision at foundation stage which is having a positive impact on the children's learning experiences. Staff are also committed to their own professional learning and a small number have completed accredited professional qualifications. As the school continues to develop their self-evaluation processes, all staff will benefit from professional learning linked to the school's identified priorities, through collegial teamwork and should be involved in the evaluation of the impact of this learning on the children's progress.

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

Gracehill Primary School and Nursery Unit is successfully achieving its vision. The holistic development of each child underpinned by an inclusive nurturing ethos is allowing children to flourish and thrive. Almost all of the children are happy, confident learners who take pride in their school and enjoy their talents and achievements being celebrated by the wider school community.

The inspection has highlighted a small number of areas for action to enable Gracehill Primary School and Nursery Unit to achieve its vision more fully. ETI, through the engagement of the District Inspector, will continue to work with the school as it takes forward the areas for action detailed in the body of this report.

5. APPENDIX

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%

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