

Report of a Primary Inspection
St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit

February 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit is a maintained co-educational school located in Newry City, County Down. The school was created in September 2014 as a result of the amalgamation of St Colman's Abbey school for boys and St Clare's Convent school for girls. The new state of the art school building opened in March 2016. There are 19 classes in the school including the Educational Centre for Physical Difficulties (ECPD), a dual-day nursery unit, with separate morning and afternoon classes, and 'the Bloom Room', a Department of Education funded Nurture Class, that supports children with emotional needs.

The school enrolment has remained steady over the last three years and currently stands at 487 including 53 children in the nursery unit and six children in the ECPD. Nineteen percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). Almost 30% of the children enrolled are from Newcomer families and 29% of all children have free school meals entitlement. Nearly all of the children come from the city and surrounding area.

The school provides "early bird" morning activities and a range of after school clubs for the children including the popular homework club; the activities are very well attended.

The school is a Rights Respecting School* and has been appointed as an ambassador school within the Eco-Schools Green Flag* scheme. The school has achieved several awards and external accreditations that include: Northern Ireland Forest School Status*; Digital School Northern Ireland*; 360safe, Online Safety Mark*; Sustrans*; United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Young Environmentalists of the Year - The People's Choice Award*; and The Community Education Partnerships Award*. The school is currently working towards the Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award* for its nurture provision and has also recently been highly commended in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Excellence Awards*.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

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

Most of the year 7 children (70) responded to the questionnaire, their responses were extremely positive. All the children feel safe in school and have adults who they can talk to if they are worried or have a problem. Sixty-nine of the seventy children provided written comments which highlighted: their love for the school; the importance of the school code; the caring, helpful, supportive teachers and adults; the extensive range of activities before and after school; and the respectful way they are treated by everyone in the school. The children are immensely proud of their school and of being members of the St Clare's Abbey Primary School community.

In discussions with inspectors, the children spoke with enthusiasm about their experiences in school; they said they love school and that learning is fun. When asked to describe their school, some of the words used by the children were, “perfect, lovely, magnificent, safe, happy, and caring”. All of the children were keen to tell us about the school code and how they enjoy trying to crack the code by being “fair, gentle, well-mannered, hardworking, generous and honest” to others. The children also spoke very positively about the help they receive from the kind teachers and adults in the school.

Forty percent (150) of the parents responded to the online questionnaire, 90% (95) of whom provided written comments. Almost all the responses were highly positive of the life and work of the school. In the written comments, the parents described the school as being “wonderful, inclusive, warm and welcoming”. They commented on the children being happy, excited going to school and thriving in their learning. The parents also commended: the excellent care and support provided for the children; the effective communication with parents; the extensive range of opportunities for the children’s learning and development beyond the classroom; and, the fantastic, dedicated leader and ‘amazing staff team’.

The teaching and support staff responses were wholly and highly positive. They described the school as being a great place to work, where staff morale is very high, children flourish, and everyone is valued and respected. The staff are happy, feel supported and are proud to work in the school.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside St Clare’s Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit 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 define, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The school’s vision “Loving God, Loving Others and Loving Learning” is integral to and fully infused into all aspects of school life. The inspirational leadership team empowers all members of St Clare’s Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit to thrive and fulfil their potential.

- The children are creative, confident and resilient learners who achieve high standards in communication, using mathematics and digital skills, and who have well-developed thinking skills and personal capabilities.
- The meaningfully connected curriculum fosters the holistic development of the children, supporting their academic and personal growth and ensuring they are well-prepared for the next stage of their learning.
- The pioneering and innovative play-based learning programme sparks the children's curiosity, encourages critical thinking and allows the children to explore the authentic resources and take risks in their learning.
- There is a comprehensive, consistent and collegial approach to planning for learning, across the school and nursery unit, which is wholly child led and meets very effectively the needs, interests and abilities of all the children.
- The school's use of digital technology is sector-leading, providing extensive opportunities across the curriculum for the children to develop digital skills for life.
- The rich nurture provision and the Educational Centre for Physical Difficulties (ECPD) are at the heart of the culture of inclusion in this school. The children are cherished and thriving both socially and academically with the support of the dedicated and skilful staff.
- The exemplary and inclusive provision for Special Educational Needs (SEN) is research informed, adaptive and highly effective and enables each child to overcome barriers and make measurable progress in their learning.
- The school values collaboration with all stakeholders and has created a successful and inclusive community of learning which benefits the growth and development of all.
- 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

St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit's vision 'Loving God, Loving Others and Loving Learning' binds and anchors the school community together. It is integral to and fully infused into all aspects of school life. The thoughts, words and actions of the school community are guided by the values of St Clare, St Francis and Blessed Edmund Rice which are reflected in the school code. Everyone in the school strives to uphold the code by trying their best to be 'fair, gentle, well-mannered, hardworking, generous, and honest'. The school vision and values support the holistic development of the children; helping them to acquire the 'social skills and moral attributes needed to contribute positively to the community' and, instilling in them 'a true love for learning to help them achieve their full potential' and to be the best they can be.

There is a highly effective, strategic, innovative approach to school improvement, guided by the inspirational leadership team that empowers the staff to take responsibility for and work collaboratively in teams, to deliver the key priorities identified in the comprehensive School Development Plan (SDP). The priorities are informed through robust self-evaluation, are child centred and focus appropriately on enhancing attainment and emotional well-being; developing the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities; and, harnessing parental engagement to support the children's learning. The SDP is helping the school to transform its vision into reality.

The governors are highly committed to and actively involved in the life and work of the school. They have a wide range of experience, professional knowledge and skills which they use to good effect to support the school in achieving its vision. The governors have a high regard for the principal and value the work of the staff; they are immensely proud of the excellent reputation the school has in the local community.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The children are creative, confident, resilient learners who have well-developed thinking skills and personal capabilities (TSPC).

There is a detailed, consistent, collaborative approach to planning for learning, across the school and nursery unit, which is meeting very effectively the needs, interests and abilities of all the children. The teachers' evaluations of the planning are insightful and are used to very good effect to inform future planning and to monitor the progress of individual children.

The holistic development of the children is at the heart of the curriculum design, planning, and delivery. The children have access to a broad and balanced curriculum which is underpinned by high quality learning and teaching and enriched by a wide range of learning experiences beyond the classroom. The teachers make meaningful and intentional connections across the curriculum and provide real-life and purposeful contexts for the learning, through which the children are developing high level skills of problem solving, flexible and critical thinking. This is particularly evident during the high quality, pioneering, outdoor play-based learning opportunities in the nursery unit and foundation stage; and through the well-considered use of the school forest and the quarry area for skills-based learning in the World Around Us, through which the cross-curricular skills of communication, using mathematics, and information and communications technology (ICT) are seamlessly infused. Across the school, children are provided with numerous opportunities to nurture their creativity and express their thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of the world. Whether through artwork, singing, music-making, or role-play, these activities allow children to communicate in diverse and meaningful ways, fostering a rich environment for artistic and personal expression. Effective delivery of the curriculum by the staff ensures that the children are well-equipped for the next stage of their learning journey.

The learning and teaching throughout the school and nursery unit is of a high quality. Lessons are well-planned, build effectively on previous learning and provide realistic levels of challenge for the children. The highly skilled teachers interact intuitively with the children, use effective questioning to extend their thinking and encourage them to take risks in their learning, which in the children's own words, help them to "become better thinkers by having a go". A key strength is the successful use of the plenary session to not only consolidate the learning and bring the lesson to a close, but to extend further the children's thinking, talking and listening skills.

The whole school focus on prioritising the emotional health and wellbeing of all the children has been successful in the creation of a calm, welcoming environment where the children feel safe and well cared for. The staff are responsive to the needs of the children and use a range of research-informed strategies and interventions, for example, the Zones of Regulation*, daily well-being check-ins, chair yoga, calm corners in all classrooms, Zen Den, Sunshine Room and the unique 'exercise snack'* to support the children. The interventions help the children to recognise and articulate their feelings, manage their emotions and enhance their readiness to learn. The school's emphasis on and extensive provision of quality outdoor learning experiences has a positive impact on the children's physical and mental health.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Equity and inclusion for all in St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit is exemplified through the creation of an environment where every child feels important, valued and respected. The staff work relentlessly to meet the pastoral and learning needs of all the children. The research-informed practice aligned with ongoing professional development are key features of the exemplary SEN provision in the school.

The provision for children with additional needs or children who experience barriers to their learning is highly effective. Meticulous mapping and robust monitoring of the provision ensures the children receive support that is tailored to their individual needs. The individual education plans, created through extensive consultation with the children, include well-considered, realistic targets that help the children to experience success as they progress well in their learning. The highly responsive and adaptive nature of the special educational needs provision for the children in St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit is unique, noteworthy and sector leading.

The rich nurture provision within "The Bloom Room" successfully provides a highly supportive, inclusive environment for children who find it difficult to engage fully in their mainstream classes. The dedicated staff team know the children well and create personalised learning experiences for them. The appropriate focus on building positive relationships, and fostering a sense of belonging, supports the development of the children's social and emotional skills, alongside work appropriate to their key stage; enabling each child to reach their potential and reintegrate successfully into their mainstream classes.

The longstanding ECPD is an uplifting, inclusive environment that nurtures the children's growth and independence while also challenging them academically. The highly committed staff plan meaningful learning experiences for the children, incorporating the use of adaptive and assistive technology, alongside skilful at-elbow support, to support the children in their learning. They work in partnership with a range of specialist health professionals to ensure that the specific needs and difficulties of the children are met. The children within the ECPD enjoy their roles on leadership teams and as members of the school choir. The regular integration of the children into their mainstream classes and whole-school activities helps to further embed a culture of acceptance and inclusion throughout the school. The unique strengths of the children in the ECPD class are celebrated and every child is cherished and cared for to an exceptionally high standard.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The school's vision and values influence how they define, celebrate and embed success. The children's achievements are celebrated regularly. Weekly assemblies recognise those who 'Crack the School Code', rewarding children for demonstrating qualities linked to the school values such as gentleness, fairness, and honesty. This culture of recognition fosters a sense of belonging and pride among the children. Their exemplary behaviour during the inspection and their respectful interactions with each other reflect further the school's strong value system and positive learning culture.

The children are enthusiastic learners, who work confidently, both independently and collaboratively, sharing resources, negotiating, problem-solving, and persevering in their learning. Reflection is an integral part of their learning; they analyse their own work and provide constructive feedback to their peers. The children have a clear understanding of their own progress, as staff and peer feedback make their achievements explicit.

Writing across the school is of a very high standard. From the foundation stage, the children develop a love for writing, using play as a context to enhance their writing skills. As they progress through the school, the children produce a wide variety of written work, including stories, recounts, reports, and instructional writing; their extended writing and poetry are of exceptional quality. An intense sense of pride is evident in the presentation of their work, with consistently high standards of handwriting.

Technology is embedded across the curriculum, offering extensive opportunities for the children to develop their digital skills. With increasing confidence and competence, the children compose, code, animate, create content, collaborate, manage data, and store information using QR codes. Artificial Intelligence is being used creatively and responsibly by the children particularly in the drafting and editing process of creative writing, as well as for self and peer evaluation.

In mathematics and numeracy, the children have a sound understanding of mathematical concepts and apply their knowledge to solve problems; their mental mathematics skills are very well-developed.

The children's numerous successes in music, dance, speech and drama are recognised, celebrated and shared during the joyous weekly assemblies and through the excellent school website.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit is at the heart of the local community. The school creates the right conditions for the growth and development of a vibrant community of learning through its commitment to inclusivity, collaboration, and investment in ongoing staff professional learning. The senior leaders and governors value and support staff professional learning.

The dissemination and sharing of good practice, which is research informed, is a key feature in the school. Staff value the well-planned opportunities they have to learn from one another, building their capacity to deliver consistently, high-quality learning experience for the children. They engage in a range of strategically planned, professional learning opportunities to support the key priorities identified in the SDP and bring about further school improvement.

The parents are valued partners in the school's community of learning. Their input into school policies is encouraged and welcomed. The school collaborates very well with the parents to involve them in their children's learning through, for example, the numeracy and literacy parental workshops, ICT clinics, home-school projects and the paired reading programme. The parents are kept well informed about their children's learning through a variety of social media platforms that showcase the children's learning and achievement.

Learner participation is highly developed in the school. The primary 7 children spoke to inspectors about the numerous opportunities they have to take on leadership roles in the school, for example, by being playground monitors, anti-bullying ambassadors, digital leaders, numeracy and literacy mentors, and members of the school and eco councils. All these opportunities are supporting the development of the children's confidence, sense of responsibility, social and leadership skills, as well as benefitting other children in the school. The older children expressed their enjoyment of helping younger children in the school and supporting them with their learning.

The highly effective links and partnerships between the school, parish, other schools and businesses enrich the children's learning experiences. The children's coding and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) skills are further developed through the well-embedded partnerships and work with local businesses. In recognition of their work with community groups to enhance provision for the children the school has received the Community Education Partnerships Award.

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 school's vision in St Clare's Abbey Primary School and Nursery Unit is integral to and fully infused into all aspects of school life. This is evident in the lovely rapport and positive interactions between the children and staff, and the calm, nurturing environment that permeates the school. Everyone in the school community is committed to try their best to be 'Gentle, Generous, Hardworking, Fair, Well-mannered and Honest'. The children are happy, flourish in their learning and strive to be the best they can be.

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the exemplary and inclusive provision for children experiencing challenges and barriers to their learning;
- the innovative and progressive indoor and outdoor play-based learning programme; and
- the sector-leading provision for the development of the children's digital skills.

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: NOTES

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Rights Respecting School

The UNICEF (UNICEF UK) Rights Respecting School Award recognises a school's achievement in putting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into practice within the school and beyond.

Eco-Schools Green Flag

The Eco-Schools Green Flag is an internationally recognised award for excellence in environmental action and learning.

Northern Ireland Forest School

The NI Forest School Awards have been created to encourage local schools to take an innovative, educational approach to outdoor play and learning, encouraging and inspiring children through positive outdoor experiences.

Digital School Northern Ireland Award

The Digital Schools Awards Northern Ireland is a national awards programme which promotes, recognises and encourages best practice use of digital technology in primary schools.

360safe, Online Safety Mark

The safety mark is awarded to schools who demonstrate good practice in their online safety policy and procedures.

Sustrans

An Active School Travel Programme to encourage children to walk, cycle or scoot to school.

United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Young Environmentalist of the Year Award

UNESCO's Young Environmentalist Awards is an all-Ireland programme that rewards and recognises young people aged between 10-18 who raise environmental awareness and improve the environment.

The Community Education Partnerships Award

The award is given to schools that can demonstrate collaborating with external stakeholders to improve the educational outcomes for children.

The Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark

The Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark is awarded to schools that meet high standards in implementing Nurture principles.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Excellence Awards

The ICT Excellence Awards celebrate the innovative use of technology in transforming teaching and learning, while improving educational outcomes in Northern Ireland.

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The Zones of Regulation

The Zones of Regulation is a complete social-emotional learning curriculum, created to teach children self-regulation and emotional control.

Exercise snack

An exercise snack provides an opportunity for children to have a sensory break and choose an activity from a “menu” which will reduce stress, support regulation and enhance mindfulness.

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