

Report of a Primary Inspection
St MacNissi's Primary School, Newtownabbey

November 2024



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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * indicates that there is further information in Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St MacNissi's Primary School is a maintained co-educational school situated in Newtownabbey. It opened in 1975 and is in its fiftieth year. The school is accredited by the University of Exeter as a Thinking School*. There are 180 children enrolled, a small number of whom are newcomer children. The children come from the immediate parish of St Mary's on the Hill and from the neighbouring parishes. Around 7% of the children have free school meals entitlement and 8% of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN); a very small number of whom have a statement of SEN.

Recent additions to the accommodation include a new classroom in the main school building, two outside modular classrooms and an administrative hub with a secure and attractive entrance area. The school received a substantial donation from a local benefactor which was used to accommodate an existing voluntary pre-school in one of the modular classrooms. All of the children attending the pre-school setting progress to the primary school. Following the closure of St MacNissi's Parish Church and its pre-school for children aged between two and three years, the primary school also accommodates this second pre-school group in the other modular classroom. It is now known as St MacNissi's Eager and Able to Learn.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, LEARNERS AND STAFF

Before the inspection, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued confidential online questionnaires to the children in year 7 and to all parents, teachers, learning support staff and other support staff. All of the year 7 children responded to the questionnaire and almost all added written comments: their responses were highly positive. In their comments, the children highlighted their enjoyment of their lessons, their appreciation of opportunities to take on leadership roles and the importance of living out the school's vision and values. In their responses to the online questionnaire and in discussions with the inspectors, all of the children expressed clearly that they feel safe and secure in school. They know that all of the staff are there to help them and are aware of what to do if they have any concerns about their safety or wellbeing.

All of the teachers and one-half of the learning support staff responded to the questionnaire. Two-thirds of the teachers added written comments in which they expressed their appreciation of the support they receive for their own professional development and the school's respectful, collaborative culture where their views are valued.

Just over one-half (51%) of the parents responded to the questionnaire, with almost two-thirds of these adding written comments in which they expressed their appreciation of the school's welcoming ethos, the approachable, supportive staff and the enjoyable learning experiences provided for their children. A small number of concerns raised by parents were shared with the principal and representatives of the governors.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the St MacNissi's 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's child-friendly vision is fully realised in the children's evident enjoyment of their learning.
- The well-embedded processes for monitoring all aspects of the provision are extensive and robust. The senior leaders have prioritised appropriately the re-engagement in first-hand observations of learning to inform the school's self-evaluation processes, identify highly effective practice and share it with all staff.
- A key strength of the provision is the whole-school focus on the development of thinking skills which enables all of the children to structure their thought processes, reflect on their learning, develop ideas and solve problems.
- Assessment for learning strategies are highly effective and consistently applied across the year groups.
- The early identification of the children who have barriers to their learning and the quality of the support provided for them are key strengths and are having a positive impact on the children's outcomes.
- The skilful teachers and classroom assistants use a range of strategies effectively, including active learning and multi-sensory approaches, to meet the children's individual needs.
- Throughout the school, the children are confident, attentive, fully engaged in their learning and responsive to their teachers.
- The senior leaders foster a vibrant and inclusive community of learning which prioritises the ongoing professional learning of all staff.

- 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 identified by the school:

- for senior and middle leaders to re-engage in first-hand observations of learning in order to inform the school's self-evaluation processes and identify and share highly effective practice.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school's long-standing vision, 'Learning every day in a fun and safe way', has been re-visited recently by all of the staff to re-affirm its importance and relevance. The vision is expressed in child-friendly language and, as a result, is well understood by the children who referred to it often in their responses to the ETI confidential questionnaire and in discussions with the inspectors. The vision is fully realised in the children's evident enjoyment, engagement and progress in their learning. In their responses to the online questionnaire, the parents reported that their children are happy, enjoy all aspects of school life, make progress in their learning and develop essential life skills within this close-knit school community.

The vision is supported by the values of respect, compassion, community, diversity, teamwork and independence. These values are lived out in the classrooms, corridors and playground through all the interactions between the children and their peers, between children and staff, and with adult visitors. In this way, the staff fulfil the school's mission statement and commitment to 'developing each child's potential to become a positive contributor to society.'

The processes for monitoring all aspects of the provision are extensive, robust and well embedded. The co-ordinators' rigorous evaluations are based on a close analysis of assessment data, pastoral information and the work in the children's books, complemented by the views of parents and their children. The resulting identification of strategic priorities for improvement informs well their action plans, notably for writing across the genres and for mental mathematics. The evidence gathered in the course of the inspection demonstrates that this work is already having a demonstrable impact on the children's learning. The action plans have recently been refined and include a small number of targets, focused closely on the key improvement actions, and set out clearly how progress will be monitored and the impact measured.

The governors are well informed about the school's development work: their support for the strategic developments to extend the school's provision, including the partnership with the two pre-school groups sharing the site, is highly valued by the senior leaders.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The well-planned staff professional learning programme is aligned with the school's current priorities for improvement. Its impact is evident in the consistently high quality of the classroom practice and in the confident work of the co-ordinators. Significant time has been invested in developing long- and medium-term planning across all areas of the curriculum: the result is that the planning ensures good progression in the children's knowledge and understanding across the school. Significantly, the medium- and short-term planning addresses explicitly the development of the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities central to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. As a result, during their lessons, the children manage information skilfully, work maturely with their peers and approach tasks flexibly and creatively.

Additionally, as an accredited Thinking School*, the associated principles and practices are demonstrated consistently in the learning and teaching. They have a positive impact on the children who know how to structure their thought processes, reflect on their learning, develop ideas and solve problems. As they progress through the school, the children are increasingly adept at choosing independently which thinking frames to use within any given context and can articulate confidently their ideas and findings.

The children are well settled and supported effectively in their learning by a skilful staff team. Teachers make robust use of a range of assessment information to plan and adapt their approaches and resources to meet individual needs. Effective questioning and opportunities for active learning maximise the children's engagement in, and enjoyment of, their lessons. At all levels across the school, the supportive relationships encourage the children to take risks in their learning, 'have a go' and use mistakes as opportunities to learn.

The recent focus on developing the children's competence and confidence in mental mathematics and writing, underpinned by the teachers' detailed long- and medium-term planning, is already having a demonstrable impact on the children's progress. For example, the children are confident in their use of a wide range of mental mathematics strategies and flexible in their mathematical thinking. Across the year groups, the children's writing is detailed, well structured and increasingly accurate in expression.

The school recognises the importance of developing further the children's digital skills to enable them to become responsible digital citizens and discerning users of digital technology. Through the strategic focus on information and communication technology (ICT), the school has established a clear progression in ICT across the year groups. Through the recent work on desktop publishing, the children have designed a new front cover for a novel, which included deciding on font size and colour, researching appropriate images, saving their work and evaluating and improving it over time. In discussions with the inspectors, the children explained clearly how they stay safe online.

The staff work very effectively as a team to promote every aspect of the children's health and wellbeing. The children's physical wellbeing is prioritised through, for example, the purposeful time given for active play at break and lunch which is used well for imaginative play and energetic games in the playground and grassed areas. The children and their teachers report that, as a result, the children are more settled when they return to class and are ready to learn. The rationale behind the school's healthy eating policy is well understood by the children and the principle of bringing healthy snacks and lunches is well embedded across the year groups.

The school has been pro-active in promoting the children's mental and emotional health, by introducing age-appropriate programmes led by school staff and external providers to help the children develop practical tools for life and become resilient learners who can manage their emotions in challenging situations. In discussions with inspectors, the children spoke very positively about how they had benefitted from these sessions and from using the strategies they had learned. The preventative curriculum and the children's personal development are enhanced by meaningful contributions from external agencies.

The working relationships at all levels in the school are consistently respectful and reflect accurately the guiding principles of the pastoral policies, in particular for promoting positive behaviour.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The school's commitment to inclusion and equality is evident in its mission statement and the inclusive classroom practices. A key strength of the school's provision is the early identification of, and support provided to, those children who have additional needs. A well-established transition process between the pre-school and the primary school, a strong partnership with the health visitor and the strategic use of diagnostic assessment tools, enable this early identification to take place.

The school is responsive to the identified needs of the children through the provision of a range of interventions, particularly in foundation stage and key stage one. The recent introduction of the Talk Boost* and phonics programmes, alongside the well-establishing Reading Partnership* and literacy and numeracy support programmes, have been highly effective in improving the children's language and communication, phonics and spelling, reading and numeracy skills. The dedicated and highly skilled teachers and classroom assistants use a wide range of multi-sensory approaches, and assistive technologies to engage the children, make the learning explicit, and as a result the children are making good progress in their learning.

By involving both the children and the parents in the development of individual education plans (IEPs), the school fosters a collaborative approach to supporting children with SEN. A particular strength of the IEPs is the clear identification of support strategies. The school has identified appropriately the need to reduce the number of targets in the IEPs to make the monitoring of the children's progress more manageable for all staff and for the children themselves.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff value the successes of all of the children within and beyond the school curriculum. Through assemblies, the children have opportunities to bring in awards from outside school and talk about their achievements in front of their peers. Through these opportunities the children are developing their confidence as presenters alongside their verbal communication skills.

The staff know the individual starting points and needs of every child. They make extensive use of qualitative and quantitative data to plan for the next steps in learning and to ensure that every child's needs are met. As a consequence, the children at all key stages are engaged fully and confident in their learning, and are attentive, and responsive to their teachers. They enjoy learning, demonstrate independence and maturity, and work enthusiastically alongside their peers in pairs or small groups.

Within the classroom, staff praise and affirm children's achievements as a natural part of the daily routine. The specific and consistent focus on assessment for learning across the year groups allows the children to see and understand their progress during their lessons. In addition, to peer- and self-assessment, they respond well to the verbal and written feedback from their teachers which supports them in correcting errors, re-drafting their writing when required and improving the quality of their work.

Success is embedded by curriculum co-ordinators who are committed to the school's vision and are making a discernible impact on the quality of provision for the children and on the outcomes they attain. Senior leaders and co-ordinators use the Thinking School* strategies for their own self-evaluation to drive sustained, conscious improvement. Using the strategies is enabling them to be creative, focus on solutions and share collective responsibility to enhance further the children's learning experiences.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The school is dedicated to fostering a vibrant and inclusive community of learning, to live out its vision statement: "Learning every day in a fun and safe way." The leaders seek actively to involve all members of the school community in the learning process, creating a collaborative, dynamic and supportive environment for all.

A key aspect of the school's commitment to community building is the focus on, and investment in, staff professional learning. Teachers and classroom assistants are pro-active in accessing professional learning opportunities aligned closely with the school's priorities. These opportunities not only enhance individual skills, but also impact positively on the teaching practices and on the children's outcomes. Additionally, the re-introduction of key stage meetings this year is providing a platform for staff to reflect collectively on curriculum implementation and its impact on the children.

The school's involvement in the Newtownabbey Empowering Schools Together* (NEST) partnership strengthens further its commitment to learning. By collaborating with other schools within the network, the staff are sharing effective practice, learning from the experience of others, and being equipped collectively to meet further educational challenges.

Through various leadership roles, such as reading and maths champions, digital leaders, and Eco Council members, the children have meaningful opportunities to contribute to the development of the provision. Year 7 'buddies' support the younger children, promoting a sense of belonging. The school council members play an active role in school life by listening to the suggestions of their peers, advocating for change, and promoting a sense of fairness. The children articulate clearly how they carry out their roles and talk with confidence about the difference they make to their school.

Parents are considered vital partners in the children's learning journey. The school provides opportunities for parents to participate in curriculum meetings and workshops, such as those focused on the use of online maths programmes and reading strategies. By involving parents in their children's education, the school strengthens the home-school connection and creates a shared commitment to children's success. The parent-teacher association is active in raising funds for additional resources which have a direct benefit to the children's learning: for example, for additional ICT resources.

Productive relationships with businesses, community organisations and local services, such as, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, and various business enterprises, provide the children with valuable real-world learning experiences and an introduction to potential careers. For example, the business enterprise initiative facilitated by Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council enabled children in year 7 to make profits which covered the costs of running a school show.

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

St MacNissi's Primary School is successfully realising its vision for the all-round development of the children through the whole staff's child-centred approach to learning and teaching and the consistently high levels of care they provide. The senior leaders plan strategically to identify the children's changing needs and prioritise staff professional learning to meet effectively these needs.

The ETI will continue to work with St MacNissi's Primary School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the whole-school focus on the development of thinking skills; and

- the early identification of, and support provided to, the children who have additional needs.

St MacNissi's Primary School is well placed to take forward the priorities they have identified through their own development planning processes.

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

- Page 1** **'Thinking School'** status is awarded by the University of Exeter in recognition of a school as an educational community in which all members share a common commitment to giving regular careful thought to everything that takes place. This will involve both students and staff learning how to think reflectively, critically and creatively. Please see: [Thinking Matters – What is a Thinking School?](#)
- Page 5** **Talk Boost** is a catch-up programme devised by Speech and Language UK for children aged 4 to 7 who have difficulties with talking and understanding words.
- Page 5** **Reading Partnership** is an approach to improve children's reading confidence which was developed at the University of London. It is all about getting children to love reading and become enthusiastic about it. The children work one-to-one with a qualified Reading Partner tutor who may be a teacher or classroom assistant and will read and talk about a chosen text to increase their enjoyment and confidence in reading.
- Page 7** **Newtownabbey Empowering Schools Together (NEST)** is an initiative of Community Relations In Schools (CRIS) which has been invested in the Newtownabbey area, its schools and communities since 2012 – through collaboration, family work, pupil programmes and collaborative dialogue with leaders of our current partner schools.

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