

Report of a Primary Inspection

Harmony Primary School, Belfast

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Education and
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Empowering Improvement

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Harmony Primary School is a co-educational controlled primary school situated in the Glencairn area of North Belfast in an area of significant socio-economic need. There are 213 children attending the primary school with a further 53 children in the two full-time nursery classes. The enrolment number has remained steady over the last four years. Fifty-eight percent of the children have free school meals entitlement. Twenty-six percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), 16 of whom have a statement of educational need.

A new principal was appointed in March 2022 and a new vice-principal was appointed in 2024. The school operates across nine classes and has a Department of Education-funded Nurture Room in the primary school and has two full-time Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO). The school is part of a newly established Area Learning Community comprising of eight local controlled primary schools. In 2023 the school achieved the Northern Ireland Forest Schools 'Oak Award'*. The school has also achieved the Majorie Boxall Quality Mark Award* in support of its work on nurture and the silver Eco Schools 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 most of their responses were positive. All of the children indicated that they feel safe in school and that they can talk to someone in school if they are worried or have a problem, and almost all of them agreed that the school encourages them to eat healthily and exercise daily. In a small number of written comments, the children highlighted their appreciation of the care and support they receive to help them with their learning. In discussions with groups of children from years 3, 5 and 7, they told us how much they enjoyed the games and equipment in the playground, the educational visits they have had and the range of presentations by visiting speakers who enrich their learning.

Fifty percent of the parents responded to the questionnaire. Almost all of them indicated that their child is making good progress in school and that they receive helpful information about their child's progress. Almost all of the parents indicated that they know about the school vision and how to raise a safeguarding concern. In the 26 additional written responses, the parents were positive about the quality of education and the care and support that their child was receiving. They also highlighted the warmth and professionalism of the staff who know their child well and truly care about their wellbeing and development. There were a small number of comments referencing how the behaviour of some of the children could be better managed.

Almost all of the teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaires. Their responses were highly positive about all areas, including the school vision and their contribution to achieving it. In written comments they spoke positively about the school's importance in the local community and how the school leaders support and encourage them to participate in professional learning opportunities.

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

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Harmony 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 define, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The children and staff in Harmony Primary School are living out the shared vision to provide a 'nurturing, safe and supportive environment, developing links between home, school and the local community' underpinned by the values of co-operation, compassion, respect, equality and open-mindedness.
- Through the transformative work of the school leader, there is an effective organisational structure in place which is empowering the staff to develop their leadership roles and enabling them to take responsibility for and ownership of their aspects of the school improvement journey.
- The detailed and strategic school development plan has been informed by the views of the school community and is complemented by the informative parent- and child-friendly versions.
- Highly effective support is in place to ensure the early identification of need for those children with special educational needs and to provide targeted support, enabling them to make good progress in their learning.
- The recent focus on promoting positive behaviour, including the provision of games equipment to engage the children purposefully at break and lunch times, alongside the work on living out the school values, has impacted well on the children's attitudes to learning and their behaviour.

- The school leaders and staff recognise the impact of low levels of attendance on the children's progress in learning and have introduced a range of strategies to improve attendance levels.
- Recent work on developing an appropriate line of progression in literacy and the medium-term literacy planning is of a good quality and is guiding teaching and learning well. The school has identified appropriately as a next step, the review of the planning for numeracy to ensure greater continuity and progression across all year groups.
- The school leaders have identified as a key priority for whole-school improvement, the need to raise further the standards the children achieve in literacy and numeracy.
- Significant work has been carried out to develop outdoor learning across the school and nursery which is facilitating effectively the development of the children's curiosity, exploration and investigative skills.
- The children in the primary school and nursery unit settle well to their work, are respectful to their teachers, classroom assistants and peers, and respond enthusiastically in their learning.
- The creation of a Family Hub facility, along with the employment of a family support worker, is successfully establishing the school at the heart of the community and is having an immensely positive impact on the children's wellbeing and on levels of parental and community engagement.
- A culture of collaborative working is evident across the school. The staff lead and take responsibility for their professional learning, which is research-informed and links intrinsically to their vision for school improvement.
- 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 raise further the standards achieved by the children in literacy and numeracy.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

A key priority for the principal on her appointment to Harmony Primary School was the establishment of a shared vision, focused on the holistic development of the children within a **'nurturing, safe and supportive environment, developing links between home, school and the local community.'** The extensive work on developing the school vision involved the whole school community and was

supported by the Controlled Schools Support Council and the Education Authority's School Improvement Service. The vision is underpinned by the values of co-operation, compassion, respect, equality and open-mindedness which are promoted effectively by the staff. This year a school motto was developed with the children which provides the children with a strong sense of identity and represents the core values 'Together we learn, together we succeed, in Harmony'. The school's vision is clearly reflected in Harmony Primary School where a dynamic and thriving shared ethos is being lived out by both the children and the staff.

A new organisational structure has been established with both senior and middle leadership teams, and clear roles and responsibilities for areas of the curriculum. The staff have engaged in professional learning to support them in developing their roles, and there is palpable excitement and enthusiasm among them as they take responsibility for and ownership of their aspect of the school improvement journey. A culture of engaging in planned and productive staff and key stage meetings has been established successfully and keeps all staff involved in, and informed of, the school priorities.

The detailed three-year school development plan (SDP) has been informed by staff views and the views of the wider school community. There is also an informative version of this year's SDP for parents and an appropriate child-friendly version which was shared with the children. A plan for monitoring and evaluation across the school year is in place, which includes observations of lessons by senior leaders and a whole staff exercise of levelling samples of the children's literacy work. Going forward, it will be important to ensure that a full range of monitoring and evaluation approaches is planned and implemented. An in-year review of the action plans has taken place to identify the impact of the improvement work on the children's learning experiences and on their progress, and on the staff, parents and the community.

The school governors are highly committed to the school and very proud of the success of the work that has been undertaken to raise the profile of the school and establish it at the heart of the community. They bring a wide range of skills and experience to the governors' role and provide good support to the principal and staff.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The significant work undertaken by the middle leaders and the staff to review and update the literacy planning processes is ensuring the children's progress in learning. The medium-term literacy plans have been adapted appropriately for each key stage, guide well the learning and are amended as required in response to the ongoing evaluations by the teachers. As a result, the refined formats are supporting effective learning and teaching. Focus groups of children ensure that the children's views on their learning in literacy are used well to inform the ongoing development.

Within the nursery unit, the reviewed planning format, reflects the children's interests and is informed by detailed observations of their learning, providing more dynamic and enriching learning experiences. Moving forward, the school has identified the need to review and amend the line of progression and planning for mathematics to provide more effective continuity across year groups and ensure appropriate levels of challenge aligned to the children's development. The inspection endorses this as an appropriate priority.

The enthusiasm and leadership of the coordinators, and the successful establishment of collaborative working practices, is successfully raising staff expectations for the children's learning and is fostering reflective and responsive practices across the school. As curriculum planning continues to evolve, a review of the World Around Us topics is recommended to reflect contemporary issues and the children's interests.

Where the learning was supported most successfully, the teachers regularly provide appropriately challenging and engaging activities, where the children are actively encouraged to think critically, justify their responses, and explore concepts in greater depth, supporting their problem-solving and reasoning skills. The teachers' use of thought-provoking questions helps the children to make connections between ideas, while structured challenge ensures high expectations. Interactive activities, whether through group work, hands-on learning, or digital tools enable the children to take ownership of their learning, making lessons enjoyable and engaging.

The senior leaders have invested substantially in developing play and outdoor learning resources. The teachers are using these resources to good effect, enabling the children to engage in meaningful investigation and exploration and supporting their emotional health and wellbeing. In discussions with the year 5 and year 7 children, they told us how much they value the opportunities to engage in activity-based learning, indoors and outdoors, and how it is helping them to develop their understanding and apply their knowledge in practical ways. The nursery and foundation stage staff have successfully created outdoor learning environments that incorporate real, authentic, and natural resources, further enhancing the children's curiosity and problem-solving skills. A review of the current timetabling to provide the children in all classes with more time for learning outdoors and the provision of more natural resources for indoor play could enhance further the children's learning.

The development of the children's digital skills is embedded across the curriculum. The children make effective use of a range of tools to enhance creativity, refine communication and build digital proficiency, developing skills in design, presentation and problem-solving. The use of digital technology is integrated well within literacy and numeracy lessons, increasing the confidence of the younger children, while expanding the abilities of older children in skills such as coding.

The senior leaders have reviewed strategically the school priorities on the current development plan to focus on promoting positive behaviour, demonstrating a clear understanding of the importance of creating a supportive learning environment for all children and staff. As a result of the staff professional learning, the introduction of new policies and the clear links to the school values, the school is successfully ensuring that the children are ready to learn in an environment where respect, emotional regulation and positive, affirming interactions contribute to effective learning. A whole-school values scheme is enhancing the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding curriculum, creating a unified ethos that drives behaviour and curriculum choices and is fostering a warm and welcoming atmosphere throughout the school. Values are reinforced consistently through lessons, classroom discussions, assemblies and displays, which are helping the children to develop a clear understanding of behavioural and learning expectations.

A structured approach to wellbeing includes the engagement with organisations and initiatives such as Uber Heroes, Belfast Giants and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to assist the children in feeling safe, supported, and ready to engage positively with their learning. The 'Sunshine Room' provides quality nurture support to a small number of children and training in the Nurture in 5* approach has been shared to provide all staff with additional strategies and embed the principles of nurture across the school.

The school recognised the need for the children to be physically active in positive ways in the school playground; the provision of playground equipment and organised games at playtimes was spoken about very positively by the children and has resulted in more purposeful and rewarding playtimes. The classroom assistants play a critical role in the promotion of positive behaviour, skilfully identifying early signs of dysregulation and applying effectively targeted interventions. The use of mindfulness practices within the classes should be reviewed to ensure their role in enhancing the children's wellbeing is maximised.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff within the school and nursery unit are skilful in identifying any barriers to learning that the children may face. Early intervention to support the children's needs is prioritised through a range of in-class, withdrawal and small group support across both the school and nursery unit. Whole-class progress evaluations provide the teachers with valuable insights, allowing interventions to be well-targeted and impactful. The staff's current focus is on developing the use of personal learning plans (PLPs) for those children identified as having SEN. In the most effective practice, the targets on the PLPs are appropriate and measurable. The teachers gather a range of evidence of the children's progress in achieving their targets. Going forward, the PLPs could be improved further by agreeing and outlining the parent's role in supporting their child at home.

The role of the classroom assistants has been developed significantly in recent years. They have benefited from recent professional learning opportunities and provide skilful support for the children. This includes the use of Sensory Circuits* which they implement each morning with the children who need it, enabling the children to start the day in a positive and calm way. The classroom assistants are aware of the children's targets and the agreed strategies that are outlined on the PLP and they record observations of the child's progress in learning to discuss with the class teacher and SENCO.

A Behaviour Team has been established; the team works with appropriate staff to recognise the indicators for when a child with SEN is becoming dysregulated and to implement specific support strategies. As a result, the children are being well supported to manage their behaviour and re-engage with their learning.

A significant barrier to learning within the school is the level of attendance of the children. The school has put in place a range of rewards to support higher levels of attendance and has supported successfully a number of children and families to improve their child's attendance and so engage better with their learning. There

remains a culture of term-time holidays and casual absences which is impacting negatively on progress in learning for a minority of the children. The school is therefore continuing to work strategically with parents to highlight the importance of regular school attendance.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The school's definition of success is suitably broad and includes the children's academic and many other achievements in school, as well as their sporting and cultural achievements outside school. The teachers use social media regularly and effectively to share with families and the wider community the children's work in class, their kindness to others and their contributions to the local community. It is notable that successes and important life events for the staff and parents are also celebrated in this way. The extent of the parental engagement through social media channels indicates clearly that they value the immediacy of the information to celebrate their children's achievements.

The children in the primary school and nursery unit settle well to their work, are attentive to their teachers and classroom assistants, and respond enthusiastically in whole-class discussions. During the inspection their behaviour was consistently good. When working in pairs or small groups, almost all of the children in the primary school engage readily and stay on task. The staff in the nursery unit have focused successfully on working with parents to develop the children's personal and social skills. As a result, the children play purposefully, concentrate for sustained periods and interact well with others, particularly during their outdoor learning.

The children have a clear understanding of the points and awards system for the quality of their work, positive behaviour and living out the school's values. The end-of-year celebration assemblies, including a specific assembly for year 7 children preparing for transition to post-primary school, enable the children and parents to reflect on their child's progress from the beginning of September. From the nursery unit, the children are encouraged to take on additional responsibilities, for example, rinsing the dishes at the school Breakfast Club or nursery snack time. All year 7 children have an opportunity to take on leadership roles, including peer mentors, playground prefects and as members of the school council. The children who are digital leaders have delivered recently a session for parents on the effective use of digital devices. The children told us that they appreciate these opportunities to contribute to the life of the school and to develop their leadership skills.

There are attractive, stimulating displays in classrooms and corridors throughout the school which celebrate the children's work in art and design, in a range of media including digital presentations. The children are proud of their contributions to these displays.

The teachers set a consistently positive tone in the classrooms and in the playground. They use verbal praise regularly to affirm the children's learning and positive behaviour. The school has identified appropriately the assessment of, and for learning, as an area for development. The marking of the children's work is, in most cases, regular and written comments are positive. Enhancing self-assessment approaches will enable children to set learning targets, reinforcing independence and

accountability in their learning. Encouraging the children to refine their work in response to feedback will build a stronger sense of responsibility and allow them to take greater ownership of their progress. More opportunities for the children to articulate their learning experiences will strengthen their ability to reflect on and evaluate their own learning.

Across the year groups, the children's books are kept neatly, reflecting the pride they take in their work. Overall, the books provide evidence that the children are making progress in their learning through a variety of experiences in both literacy and numeracy. However, there is inconsistent progression across the year groups, particularly in numeracy. For those children whose attendance is relatively low, there is clear evidence that their progress in learning is being affected adversely.

Appropriately, the school has identified the raising of standards in literacy and numeracy as a key priority for whole-school improvement. While a suitable range of assessment data is gathered by teachers, the senior leaders recognise the need to use quantitative and qualitative information more systematically, along with the teachers' professional judgment, to inform the raising of standards for all children.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

There is a vibrant, living shared vision in Harmony Primary School. A crucial part of implementing this vision was taking time to build genuine relationships with staff and the community. These relationships permeate the community of learning, and the staff and the governors are highly committed to building parental and community partnerships.

The recent strategic decision by the school leader, supported by the governors, to employ a family support worker and the creation of a Family Support Hub facility, has had an immensely positive impact on community and parental engagement and on the children. It is integral to ensuring that the children and their families receive the care and support they need to thrive. This highly effective work contributes significantly to the school's commitment to their vision and values and supports the children to develop in a nurturing environment. The family support worker, with the support of the senior leaders, works tirelessly to access funding and practical resources which enhance and support the work of the hub. Through a proactive, compassionate, and highly effective approach, the family support hub works with staff, children and parents to identify and address challenges, including low attendance levels, and identify tailored interventions that foster well-being and success.

The availability and range of parental workshops and personalised support empowers families and is fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for the children's learning and development. Strong partnerships with families are being developed and are met with sensitivity and expertise. Through the provision of early support strategies, fostering positive collaboration between school and home and guiding families to additional services, the Family Support Hub ensures children and families receive the help they need. It strengthens the school's commitment to ensuring that every child feels safe, nurtured and supported, while embodying the school's aspiration: 'Connecting home and school makes us a great community of learners'.

The school council is actively involved in the life of the school, and they have been instrumental in reviewing the after-school provision and in the creation of a drama club. They also identified the need to have a safe pathway up to the nursery unit which has now been installed. The school is represented on the 'Glencairn Community Project'* and the views of the children in Harmony Primary School have been sought by the principal and shared so that their views impact on the action plan for the wider area. The active Parent/Teacher Association supports the work of the family support hub and organises and delivers a series of social events throughout the school year.

Within the nursery unit the engagement with parents and the recently established home school visits facilitate the children's smooth transition to the nursery. The children in year 7 are also supported well in their preparation for the transition to post-primary by a number of programmes delivered through community links including the local church.

The extensive range of collaborative networks in place is contributing to a growing culture of shared responsibility, community engagement and continuous improvement. The school is a member of a local Area Learning Community with seven other primary schools. This cluster provides valuable opportunities for staff with key responsibilities to meet, engage in collaborative discussions and share practice.

The teachers and classroom assistants have had a range of appropriate professional learning opportunities within and beyond school to support them in their roles. As a result, a culture of collaborative working underpinned by an ethos of trust is clearly evident. Harmony Primary School is looking confidently towards the future with a staff who are committed to providing a collaborative learning community for all.

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

Harmony Primary School is a vibrant learning community fully committed to living out their motto 'Together we learn, together we succeed in Harmony'. The extensive work that has been undertaken in a short period of time has impacted positively on the children's learning experiences and the quality of provision and has fostered successfully a culture of shared responsibility and community engagement.

ETI will continue to work with Harmony Primary School, including to share the example of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the strategic work of the school leaders to create effectively a community of learning which supports the achievement of the school's vision.

Harmony Primary School is well placed to take forward the area for action. The district inspector will monitor the school's progress 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: NOTES

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Northern Ireland Forest Schools 'Oak Award'

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

Eco Schools Silver Award

The Eco-Schools programme provides the opportunity to foster environmental awareness while linking to many curriculum subjects. Eco-Schools is the world's largest environmental education programme. It is a pupil-led initiative with the aim to make environmental awareness and action an intrinsic part of the life and ethos of a school. Achieving the Silver award indicates that the school has met the Eco School criteria and have at least six months evidence of running the Eco-Committee and are following the seven steps of the Eco-Schools Programme.

Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award

The Marjorie Boxall Quality Mark Award involves assessing the work of a nurture group against a set of quality standards. These standards are derived from the Six Principles of Nurture and their clearly defined operational characteristics.

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Nurture in 5

Nurture in 5 is a programme delivered by the Education Authority which provides a practical application of emotional health and wellbeing techniques within a nurturing approaches framework.

Sensory Circuits

Sensory Circuits involve a sequence of physical activities that are designed to alert, organise and calm the child. The sensory circuit aims to facilitate sensory processing to help children regulate and organise their senses in order to achieve the 'just right' or optimum level of alertness required for effective learning.

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Glencairn Community Project

The Glencairn Community Project facilitates events and programmes in line with key strategic public health and community development strategies, helping residents to stay well and prosper, fostering positive social interaction, and improving physical and mental health.

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