



Fifty School Reports: what inspectors say

*Quality of
educational provision
in primary schools*

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Contents

Foreword	3	3 Curriculum Areas	17
Introduction	4	3.1 Language	17
1 Whole-School Issues	7	Gaeilge	17
1.1 Board of management	7	English	18
1.2 In-school management	7	3.2 Mathematics	19
1.3 Staffing and organisation	8	3.3 Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE)	20
1.4 Accommodation	9	3.4 Arts education	21
1.5 Parental involvement	10	Visual arts	21
2 General Curriculum Issues	11	Music	22
2.1 School planning	11	Drama	22
2.2 Teachers' planning	12	3.5 Physical education	23
2.3 Principles and methodologies	12	3.6 Social, personal and health education (SPHE)	24
2.4 Resources	13		
General	13	Conclusion	25
Information and communication technology (ICT)	14		
2.5 Assessment	15		
2.6 Special educational needs	15		

Foreword



Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say comments on quality and standards in a small number of Irish primary schools. It is based on an analysis of the Inspectorate's findings from fifty school reports furnished on a variety of primary schools during the 2001/2 school year. The report presents evidence of practice that is more or less typical of what exists in Irish

schools today, and the analysis presented is therefore a snapshot of national provision.

Inspectors evaluated key aspects of the work of schools under the following broad headings: curriculum, learning and teaching, assessment, organisation and management, resources, and home-school links. The report is a first step in bringing the work of the Inspectorate to a wider audience. It identifies practice evident in the schools inspected and draws attention to the existence of good or very good quality provision. It also indicates areas for development, both from the standpoint of the school and of the education system as a whole.

This report is intended for teachers, principals, school management, parents, policy-makers, researchers and the general education community. It will provide a basis for encouraging debate at school and at system level on the quality of education provision in primary schools. It will also assist services such as the Primary Curriculum Support Programme and the School Development Planning Support initiative in the effective targeting of support for schools.

The *Education Act 1998* places a statutory responsibility on the Inspectorate to evaluate quality and standards in schools. In aiming for school and system improvement, the Inspectorate's work is concentrated on the three dimensions of evaluation, development, and support. I am confident that the experience of writing this report, and the discussions emanating from its findings, will assist the Inspectorate in developing its functions in the interests of all stakeholders in primary education. I also hope it will be of value in informing the debate on educational provision and outcomes in primary schools.

Eamon Stack
 Chief Inspector
 Department of Education and Science

December 2002

Introduction

The School Report (Tuirisc Scoile) process

A School Report (Tuirisc Scoile) is furnished on every primary school at regular intervals. Since 1993 the Inspectorate has reported on almost 97% of schools. During the 2001/2 school year, 326 such reports, involving 1,615 teachers, which represents 10% of all primary schools and approximately 7% of all primary teachers, were furnished. *Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say* presents an analysis of fifty of the reports selected from the year's quota. The selection is broadly representative of the various categories of primary school in terms of size, type, and location.

The Tuirisc Scoile process involves an evaluation of the organisation and work of the school as a whole. Each report refers to

- environmental factors that influence the effectiveness of the teachers' work
- the organisation and atmosphere of the school and the general programme of work that is in operation, and
- the general development of pupils and their progress in the various areas of the curriculum.

During the Tuirisc Scoile process inspectors

- discuss the objectives and procedures for the inspection with the principal and other staff members
- evaluate the work of the school through class visits, the assessment of curriculum content and teaching methodologies, document review, interviews, and discussion

- meet the principal and other staff members to discuss the outcomes of the evaluation before the completion of the report
- discuss matters relevant to and arising from the inspection with the chairperson of the board of management
- prepare a final report.

Following consideration of the report within the Department of Education and Science, a copy is issued to the board and to the staff of the school.

The Tuirisc Scoile process is designed to provide the board of management and school staff with an objective evaluation of the school across a broad range of activities. The individual report is written with a view to informing the school on the outcomes of the evaluation and providing it with a basis for development planning and school improvement.

The background to this report

This report is presented in the context of legislative, curricular and social change, where renewed emphasis is placed on the need for education of the highest quality to meet the educational needs of all pupils. The *Education Act 1998*, *Equal Status Act 2000* and *Education (Welfare) Act 2000* have implications for the working of schools and for the Inspectorate. Schools are also embracing the challenges of implementing the *Primary School Curriculum (1999)* and engaging

in the process of development planning. This work is supported in the main by the School Development Planning Support initiative and the Primary Curriculum Support Programme.

In this context, information on the quality of educational provision in schools is crucial. The Tuirisc Scoile process yields such information. Whereas the target audience for the Tuirisc Scoile until now has been the individual school, the exercise now completed is a first approach in collating the evaluation findings from a number of school reports. This complements continuing work in the refinement of inspection procedures and practices being carried out by the Evaluation Support and Research Unit of the Inspectorate and, in particular, will inform the process of reporting on system issues.

The structure of the report

The report is laid out in a format broadly parallelling the structure of the Tuirisc Scoile. The “Whole-School Issues” section deals with aspects of school life such as school management, staffing and organisation, and parental involvement. “General Curriculum Issues” address the elements of planning, principles and methodologies, assessment, special educational needs and resources. The section “Curriculum Areas” reports on teaching and learning in each of the subjects covered under the six curriculum areas of the *Primary School Curriculum*.

The final section draws conclusions for schools and for the system on key issues that impact on the quality of the educational experience of pupils in primary schools.

The review process

Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say was compiled by a small team of inspectors supported by the Evaluation Support and Research Unit of the Inspectorate and involved a detailed analysis of the fifty reports. Following consideration of each report, information was extracted in accordance with a matrix of indicators. The information was then categorised and scaled, facilitating the compilation of composite statements on each aspect reported on in the Tuirisc Scoile reports.

While this report presents evidence of practice observed in the schools inspected, it is not a precise scientific study, nor does it claim to be comprehensive. Nonetheless, it provides a snapshot of educational provision in Irish primary schools.

In compiling this report, the following scaling mechanism was applied to inspectors’ commentaries and evaluations in order to delineate broad categories of performance in the schools whose reports were analysed:

QUALITATIVE TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT	LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE INDICATED
Very good	Optimal performance
Good	Competent performance
Fair	Scope for development
Weak	Experiencing difficulty

QUANTITATIVE TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT	PERCENTAGES OF REFERENCES IN REPORTS ANALYSED
Almost all	More than 90%
Most	75% – 90%
Majority	50% – 74%
Fewer than half	15% – 49%
A few	Up to 15%

Towards school and system improvement

On a general level, the provision of composite statements on the operation of fifty schools will be of interest to all the stakeholders in primary education, in that it provides insights into the quality of educational provision in these schools.

More specifically, it

- affords boards of management opportunities to identify issues to which they may wish to give priority in their school's future development
- provides school staffs with a basis for self-evaluation and raises issues for discussion and reflection
- acknowledges the role of parents in the education of their children and draws attention to the ways in which that role can be furthered, and
- underlines the importance of system-based support services for schools in the context of curriculum implementation and planning for school improvement.

1. Whole-School Issues

1.1 Board of management

“It shall be the duty of a board to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the pupils and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the school ...”

(Education Act 1998)

Most boards of management are rated in inspectors’ reports as being good or very good in the performance of their duties. A few are seen to be fair, and very few are regarded as being weak. The manner in which a board carries out its duties and the nature of its interactions with other members of the school community are the two broad themes that are commented on regularly in reports.

Many examples of good practice are cited. Most frequent reference is made to supporting the work of schools, meeting regularly, discharging duties diligently, facilitating progress, change and development, and taking an active interest in school affairs. Cultivating good working relationships with teachers and parents, being committed and being informed also receive favourable comment.

Where difficulties arise in the operation of boards they relate to underdeveloped relationships between boards of management and other members of school communities, to problems with the upkeep of schools, and to matters giving rise to resignations from boards. As a result, the recommendations made in this area concentrate on the need to make better provision for the maintenance of school buildings, to initiate the process of renovating or extending schools, to improve

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- boards of management fulfilling their duties
- boards of management supporting the work of schools
- boards facilitating progress and development
- the cultivation of good relations within school communities

CONCERNS

- underdeveloped relationships between boards and other members of school communities
- internal difficulties of boards of management
- shortcomings in maintenance of school buildings
- low levels of involvement of boards in school affairs

communications and relationships within school communities, and to become involved in school policy matters.

1.2 In-school management

In-school management refers to the work of the principal and holders of other promoted posts within the school.

In-school management and organisation is considered good or very good in most reports. Principal teachers, in particular, are praised for their abilities to lead, manage, administer, motivate and win support from their colleagues. These strengths are felt to have a positive impact on the work of their schools.

The work of deputy principals, assistant principals and holders of special duties posts is commented on in just under half the reports. This may, in part, reflect the inclusion of schools of different sizes in the sample. In the majority of instances, duties at school management level are defined and are carried out diligently, thus contributing to the efficient organisation and management of schools.

The examples of good practice cited in reports are wide-ranging and relate mainly to the work of principal teachers. These include good management, strong leadership, careful maintenance of records, dedication to task, cultivation of a collaborative approach to planning and decision-making, and winning the support of and motivating staff. Inspectors also report on effective practice in the promotion of planning and development, efficient administration, the development of interest in standards and pedagogy, concern for the welfare of pupils, and the cultivation of good relations within the school community.

Recommendations are made in relation to in-school management in a few instances. Half of these relate to the need to define or review the duties attached to posts of responsibility and to achieve greater balance between organisational and curricular duties. Clear recommendations are made regarding the development of the whole-school planning process, and inspectors also advise that more effective approaches to school discipline and stronger lines of communication with parents should be developed.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provision of good leadership ■ cultivation of a collaborative approach ■ promotion of good relations and communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ duties of post holders not clearly defined ■ school planning process not progressing adequately ■ poor lines of communication with parents

1.3 Staffing and organisation

The staffing of a school is determined by terms and conditions set down by the Department of Education and Science and reflects pupil numbers and specific learning needs of the pupils in each school. It is the responsibility of the principal to deploy staff and to allocate teaching duties within the school itself.

In most schools reported on, the deployment of staff and organisation of the school is either good or very good. Observations by inspectors on the organisation of classes suggest that, in general, Department of Education and Science guidelines on class size are observed. In a number of schools, some divergence from these guidelines is noted, in that one or more classes contain more than thirty pupils. Other positive aspects of staffing and organisation identified include access to pupil support services, such as those provided by learning-support and resource teachers, and the contribution of school secretaries and caretakers.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ appropriate deployment of staff and organisation of school ■ observance of Department of Education and Science guidelines on class size ■ access to services of support teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ divergence from Department of Education and Science guidelines on class size ■ lack of co-ordination of support for pupils with special needs ■ payment for tuition during school hours

External tutors are employed in a few schools to provide tuition in subjects such as music, drama, and physical education. Payment by pupils for tuition by an external tutor during school hours is contrary to the principle of free primary education and raises fundamental questions regarding equality of access to aspects of education in schools. Staffing and organisation difficulties relating to the co-ordination of support services for pupils with special needs exist in a few schools.

1.4 Accommodation

School accommodation matters are the responsibility of the school patron and are delegated to the board of management. These matters include the adequacy of the accommodation, maintenance, and cleaning.

In almost all reports, inspectors comment on the provision and maintenance of school accommodation. In the majority of instances, these comments are positive and school accommodation is considered to be good or very good. Frequent reference is made to high standards of maintenance and to clean and hygienic classrooms and ancillary accommodation. Boards of management, school staffs and parents are regularly complimented on their contributions to this work. Aspects of the provision and maintenance of accommodation are considered to be fair in fewer than half of the schools and to be weak in a few. In half of such instances, the boards of management have already begun the process of rectifying the situation.

The most frequently cited examples of good provision and practice include the regular cleaning and painting of schools, high standards of maintenance, planned programmes of improvement, and the involvement of boards of management, school staffs and parents in development or renovation projects. Boards of management are commended for taking the initiative in the renovation and extension of schools, and staff members are praised for making the best use of available accommodation to create high-quality learning environments for pupils.

The reports suggest that a degree of improvement in either the quality or the amount of accommodation is required in almost half the schools. Many features of school buildings and their surroundings receive some mention, but most frequent reference is made to the need for sufficient or suitable classrooms and for ancillary accommodation, including toilets and general-purpose rooms. In a few instances, the need to improve standards of cleaning and maintenance is clearly enunciated.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ high standards of cleaning and maintenance ■ collaborative and timely approach to improvement of accommodation ■ provision of high quality learning environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Need for improvements in the amount and quality of accommodation

1.5 Parental involvement

“... the Principal shall ... encourage the involvement of parents of students in the school in the education of those students The board shall promote contact between the school, parents of students ... and the community ...”

(Education Act 1998)

Most reports refer to home-school relationships. Contact with parents is frequently described as positive, and parents are described repeatedly as supportive of school policies and initiatives and of teachers' work. More than half of the reports mention that schools set aside time to discuss pupils' progress with parents; both formal and incidental meetings are described. Most schools issue written report cards to parents, outlining pupils' progress on an annual basis. In some instances newsletters and bulletins are issued to parents and a few schools are commended for the distribution of information booklets to parents. A few schools encourage active parental involvement in shared reading, in individual education plans for pupils with special needs and as classroom assistants supporting learning activities. In contrast, a few reports recommend that better involvement of parents in individual education plans be facilitated, that more consultation between the learning-support teacher and parents be organised, and that parental involvement in school development planning be furthered.

Parents' associations have been established in the majority of schools, and they are invariably reported as supportive. Fund-raising, the

provision of support at events (games, concerts, and school tours), after-school activities, transport on school outings and involvement in school maintenance are among the main initiatives of these associations. The organisation of parent information events, the provision of courses for parents, involvement in reading initiatives and the provision of library support are activities noted less frequently. Fewer than half the reports make direct reference to parental involvement in school development planning and then most commonly in such areas as discipline and relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Inspectors' recommendations for enhancing parental involvement refer to the need to establish associations and to set up more formal communication between the associations and the schools.

A few schools have a home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator or similar co-ordinator. Their involvement includes activities such as home visits, facilitation of courses or projects, and networking with the wider community. The formation of local committees, the facilitation of parents as home visitors and the involvement of parents in school development planning are noted in a few instances. A few reports refer to the existence of a parents' room in the school.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ active parental involvement ■ vibrant parents' associations ■ organisation of parent information events, and the provision of courses for parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of parental involvement in school development planning ■ absence of effective communication between parents' associations and schools

2. General Curriculum Issues

2.1 School planning

“A board shall ... make arrangements for the preparation of a [school] plan ... and shall ensure that the plan is regularly reviewed and updated.”

(Education Act 1998)

Almost all reports refer to school planning, and positive statements are made in the majority of instances. The aspects most frequently identified are the content of the school plan, the planning process and those involved, and issues of review and revision.

A majority of reports describe effective practice in relation to school planning. Comprehensive documents are produced in most schools. Good practice exists in relation to policies and procedures in administrative areas in almost all schools, and in curriculum areas in the majority of schools. Where specific policies are mentioned, written policies in relation to health and safety, discipline, information and communication technology (ICT) and homework are the most frequently available. School planning in relation to English and the visual arts is most frequently documented. Substantial progress is noted in the planning process in a number of reports. Teaching staff and the school principal are most often cited as being involved in the process. A co-ordinated approach involving parents and management is praised in a few schools. Evidence of advanced planning is apparent in a few schools. Where priorities are established, strategic one-year and five-year plans are identified, vision and mission statements are developed, and

planning has an impact on the work of the school. Fewer than half the schools are reported to be in the process of reviewing, revising and updating school plans.

Almost half the schools are reported as requiring development in relation to planning. In a few instances, no curriculum plans exist, the principal has devised a plan that “did not work,” the school did not avail of planning time provided through the School Development Planning Support (SDPS) and Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) initiatives, policies have not been developed, or devised policies are not implemented in classrooms. The need for the revision of curriculum policies or programmes to reflect the *Primary School Curriculum* is the most frequently stated recommendation. In a few schools the promotion of collaboration and collegiality in the planning process and in the implementation of the curriculum is recommended.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ effective development and review of strategic and action plans ■ comprehensive planning documents including administrative and curriculum policies ■ collaborative planning process involving all the partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of planning for implementation of the <i>Primary School Curriculum</i> ■ low levels of collaboration in the planning process ■ difficulties in the implementation of written policies

2.2 Teachers' planning

"Each teacher is required to make adequate written preparation for his [her] school work..."

(rule 126, Rules for National Schools)

All inspectors' reports remark on teachers' planning and preparation and the majority of comments are favourable. Terms such as "substantial", "thorough", "dedicated", "professional", "practical" and "focused" feature regularly in reports. Long-term and short-term planning is reported as good in the majority of schools, while positive reference is made to monthly progress reports in fewer than half the schools. In a few instances collaborative planning, clear lesson content, links to curriculum strands, effective methodologies and careful planning for multi-class situations are praised.

While the majority of reports reflect positive practice in relation to teachers' planning, in fewer than half the reports inconsistent practice at school level is identified. In these schools, good practice is qualified by "in general", "the majority of teachers", "some teachers", and "preparation varies". This suggests lack of compliance by some teachers with rule 126 of *Rules for National Schools*, which sets out the responsibility of teachers to plan their work. Development is considered necessary in a few schools in specific areas. These include the statement of objectives in plans, a whole-school policy on teachers' planning, collaboration to support individual planning, linking teachers' planning with the *Primary School Curriculum*, and maintaining monthly progress reports.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- purposeful long-term and short-term planning
- preparation and effective use of monthly progress reports
- collaborative planning, clear lesson content, links to curriculum strands, and effective methodologies
- careful planning for multi-class situations

CONCERNS

- lack of compliance with rule 126 of Rules for National Schools
- omission of objectives in planning
- need to link individual planning to the *Primary School Curriculum*

2.3 Principles and methodologies

*"Celebrating uniqueness....development of potential
....active agent in learning....learning is developmental
....language is central in the learning process"*

(Primary School Curriculum)

Reference to the principles underpinning curriculum provision and the type and range of teaching methodologies practised in schools is made in almost all reports. Good practice in this regard is reported in the majority of schools.

A majority of schools engage in a broad range of methodologies and provide teaching in a variety of settings. While whole-class and group teaching are reported on, inspectors note a greater emphasis on the

former. Attention is given to individual pupils or to differentiated learning in the majority of schools, while a few reports give credit to schools for encouraging independent learning, co-operative learning, and paired learning. Pupils are reported as engaging in activity-based or discovery learning in almost half the schools. Project work, integrated learning and learning through the local environment are methodologies that are specifically reported in fewer than half the schools. A few schools provide opportunities to engage in projects involving a European or North-South dimension.

Development regarding principles and methodologies is recommended in a few schools. In these instances inspectors advise on the development of a whole-school policy on teaching methodologies, greater use of group work and differentiated learning, activity-based learning, and more attention to individual needs. Less emphasis on textbooks is also recommended.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provision of a broad range of appropriate teaching methodologies ■ effective balance between whole-class and group teaching, with provision for individual needs ■ competent delivery of an appropriate curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of a whole-school policy on teaching methodologies ■ insufficient use of group teaching and differentiated learning ■ over-emphasis on textbooks

2.4 Resources

Apart from its staffing allocation and available accommodation, the school management controls a range of resources provided from grant aid or locally generated sources, such as equipment to aid teaching and learning, books, and other such material.

General

The provision and use of resources is considered good or very good in the majority of schools. Inspectors make frequent reference to well-equipped schools and classrooms, to planned approaches to provision and to purposeful and beneficial use of these resources. Provision in fewer than half the schools is judged to be fair and a few schools make weak provision. Even in schools where provision is felt to be weak, elements of good practice are identified. Some imbalance in provision and use of resources between classes is identified, with infant and junior classes coming in for more favourable mention than middle and senior classes.

Good use is made of available resources in most curriculum areas in the majority of the schools. Material resources are used to enhance learning environments, to aid teaching, to provide pupils with opportunities for active and discovery learning, and to extend their literacy skills.

Where the need for additional resources is identified, specific reference is made to mathematical material and the increased provision of library books and science equipment. Recommendations on increased investment by schools in resources have a number of stated objectives: to enable teaching staffs to implement curriculum areas more fully, to involve their pupils in more active or more appropriate methods of learning, and as an aid in the development of their problem-solving skills.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ planned provision of resources ■ purposeful and beneficial use of resources in teaching and learning ■ balanced provision of resources across curriculum areas and class levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ shortfall in provision of resources ■ insufficient use of teaching and learning resources in middle and senior classes

Information and communication technology (ICT)

Computers and their use receive attention in the majority of reports. They are referred to in relation to resources, to particular subject areas, and to learning-support and resource teaching. The majority of schools have computers available for teaching and learning, and the greater proportion of these are in classrooms. A small number of schools are reported as having computer rooms.

Where ICT is referred to, good practice is reported in under half the schools. Its beneficial use in learning-support and resource teaching is repeatedly mentioned. The positive impact of ICT on the quality of written work is cited in fewer than half the schools, and the use of ICT as an important tool in teaching and learning is praised in only a few schools. Training undertaken by school staff is acknowledged in a few reports.

While a few schools appear to be experiencing difficulty with ICT, scope for development is identified in almost half the schools. Whole-school issues related to planning and policy and to the lack of use of available computers most frequently cause concern. The development of teachers' skills and the provision of additional ICT resources are recommended in a few schools.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ access to information and communication technology ■ effective use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool ■ effective use of ICT in learning-support and resource teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of whole-school planning for ICT ■ lack of focus on teaching and learning in relation to ICT in schools

2.5 Assessment

“Assessment is an essential component of a successful teaching and learning process.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

A range of assessment tools is used by schools. These include standardised assessments, diagnostic tests, teacher observation, pupil profiles, teacher-devised tests, and check-ups from textbooks. Testing and assessment are reported upon largely with regard to English and mathematics. In general, assessment in other subjects is not elaborated upon in inspectors’ reports.

The use of at least one form of standardised assessment is a feature of the work of almost all the schools. The standardised tests most commonly used by the schools reported on are the *Micra-T* in English and the *Sigma-T* in mathematics. Standardised tests are used more frequently in English than in mathematics. While inspectors generally do not comment upon the results of standardised tests in their reports, their observations on the use of such tests by schools are favourable in the majority of instances. They report that a systematic approach to standardised testing for the purpose of measuring and monitoring pupils’ attainment or for identifying pupils in need of learning support is a feature of the work of the majority of schools.

Most of the schools use other forms of assessment in addition to standardised tests. Teacher-devised tests and teacher observation are used in fewer than half the schools reported on, and pupil profiles are employed as part of the assessment process in a few instances.

Inspectors’ observations on assessment in English suggest that, in general, there is scope for development in the use of portfolios and curriculum profiles. The building of pupil profiles in mathematics and the use of standardised mathematics tests for formative purposes are recommended in relation to a few schools. Testing for diagnostic purposes occurs in fewer than half the schools, and in the majority of those schools it takes place in the context of special education provision.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ systematic approach to standardised testing ■ use of teacher-devised tests and teacher observation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ limited use of portfolios and curriculum profiles ■ insufficient use of standardised mathematics tests for formative purposes

2.6 Special educational needs

It is a function of a school to “ensure that the educational needs of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational needs, are identified and provided for.”

(Education Act 1998)

The identification of and provision for special educational needs are reported as good or very good in the majority of schools. Repeated reference is made to effective whole-school policies, purposeful planning

by those teachers who provide additional teaching support to pupils in mainstream schools, adequate resourcing and use of resources (including ICT), and collaborative work practices. Adherence to the *Learning-Support Guidelines* is repeatedly reported, with early and intensive intervention, monitoring and recording of pupils' progress and the provision of effective individual intervention programmes receiving particular mention. The appropriate inclusion of pupils in suitably differentiated mainstream activities is also commended in many instances. Pupils are withdrawn from the mainstream setting for additional support in the majority of instances, but a few schools are commended for alternative in-class support programmes.

In schools where scope for further development is suggested, inspectors refer to the need to develop or review school policy in relation to special educational needs, to implement the *Learning-Support Guidelines*, and to introduce appropriate individual programmes. A few schools are advised to introduce screening and intervention programmes at infant level and to develop a team approach, involving teachers and parents. In most instances, the teachers who provide additional teaching support to pupils in mainstream schools are commended for their dedication and preparation. In a few instances, however, it is recommended that available additional teaching support be deployed more effectively. The need for better planning and differentiated learning opportunities for individual pupils in mainstream classes is mentioned in a few instances, with the need for class teachers to take primary responsibility for pupils who attend additional support teachers. Other recommendations offered in reports include the need to develop pupil profiles, to address

eligibility for admission to special classes, and to ensure that pupils are withdrawn from mainstream activities at appropriate times. Difficulties regarding pupils' integration are noted in a few instances.

Further issues arising from the review of inspectors' reports include reference to untrained personnel providing tuition for pupils with special needs and the provision of learning-support teaching in mathematics.

It is evident from the reports that make reference to the employment of special needs assistants (SNAs) that comments made in their regard tend to be non-evaluative. In a few instances, the support they provide in the integration of pupils into mainstream settings is commended, as is their inclusion in staff meetings and pupil progress review.

Little or no reference is made in these reports to "the educational needs of exceptionally able students" (Education Act 1998).

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ comprehensive school policy for special needs education ■ development of individual work programmes ■ collaboration in provision of support for special needs pupils ■ differentiated mainstream work programmes where necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ non-implementation of the <i>Learning-Support Guidelines</i> ■ insufficient differentiation of curriculum in mainstream settings ■ lack of early diagnostic testing and intervention ■ untrained personnel tutoring pupils with special needs

3. Curriculum Areas

3.1 Language

“Language is the principal means of human communication. Through it ideas and information are expressed and communicated, aspirations, attitudes and emotions are articulated, and imaginative possibilities are predicted.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

Gaeilge

The overall quality of provision for the teaching of Irish is reported to be good in just over half the schools. The reports show that teachers expend a considerable amount of time and energy on teaching Irish. They use a variety of approaches in order to make learning interesting for their pupils and to develop their language skills. This variety is usually seen as a strength, but it would appear that it can lead to a lack of continuity in methodology in some schools. Inspectors comment favourably on the teaching of reading, poetry and writing, the areas most frequently cited with regard to pupils’ achievement. References to the use of drama, music and rhyme also tend to be positive.

Practice and attainment in the area of oral language are reported to vary significantly. Many recommendations are made with regard to the development of pupils’ communication skills and to the regular use of Irish as a means of communication in schools. Inspectors consider that high standards are achieved by pupils in a few schools. However, where concern is expressed, pupils’ interest and the standards being attained are low and are not commensurate with the time and effort

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- comprehensive planning for implementation of all strands at all class levels
- active involvement of pupils in learning
- regular use of Irish in a variety of contexts

CONCERNS

- lack of progress in planning for the Gaeilge curriculum
- lack of coherence in the implementation of the curriculum from class to class
- insufficient emphasis on the use of Irish as a medium of communication

being expended on teaching the language. Poor planning is seen as a contributory factor to low attainment levels, despite the fact that school staffs have had some in-career development support, including planning time, from the Primary Curriculum Support Programme.

In their reports, inspectors identify examples of good practice. These include the promotion of a positive attitude to Irish, comprehensive planning for the implementation of all strands of the curriculum at all class levels, and the provision of a balanced programme across the strands of the curriculum. Other examples include the skilful use of a variety of pedagogical approaches and strategies to which pupils respond positively, the presentation of interesting and enjoyable lessons, the active involvement of pupils in learning activities, the integration of music and drama into Irish lessons, and the regular use of the language in a variety of settings.

The majority of recommendations relate to the development of Irish as a means of communication. Reports refer to the need to develop pupils’ listening and communication skills, to ensure that lessons are

interesting and enjoyable, to use Irish as a medium of communication, and to employ active methods of teaching and learning. Inspectors also call for greater emphasis on poetry, drama, mime, role-play, language games, working in pairs and small groups, and the more creative aspects of writing. More comprehensive planning, a greater continuity of approach from class to class and the extension of good practice from individual classes to the whole school are also recommended.

English

Inspectors' reports show that schools are responding well to the challenge of implementing the English curriculum. The general quality of provision in most schools is good or very good. The central place of oral language in the curriculum is recognised by the majority of schools. Inspectors refer to the successful use of class novels, "real" books, and class libraries in fewer than half the schools. The drafting-editing-redrafting approach to writing is evident in a few schools.

Inspectors report that there are significant variations in implementation across the strands. The strategies used by teachers to develop oral language skills emerge as a particular strength of the English curriculum in fewer than half the schools reported on. The standard achieved in oracy is praised in almost half the schools, with pupils in such schools variously described as articulate, clear, confident and competent in oral expression. Comments on pupils' reading ability are favourable for the majority of schools. Strategies for the teaching of reading receive positive comment in the majority of instances. In a few cases, it is recommended that the reading programmes be modified or teaching

strategies adapted to reflect the emphases in the English curriculum. In fewer than half the schools, pupils are afforded opportunities to write in a variety of genres, and in a few schools ICT is used effectively in the writing process. Other, more general comments by inspectors on the writing process and on the samples of work produced refer to the fostering of creativity and the standard of presentation of written work. In fewer than half the schools, inspectors' observations on the teaching of poetry are positive. Among the aspects of poetry praised are the pupils' repertoire of poetry, their response to and enjoyment of poetry, and their writing of poetry.

The testing of reading using standardised assessments is a feature of the work of almost all schools. In fewer than half the schools it is reported that other approaches to assessment in English, such as teacher observation, teacher-designed tests and teacher-devised pupil profiles, are used in addition to standardised tests. In general, there is scope for development in the use of portfolios and curriculum profiles in assessment in English.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ effective planning for oral language teaching ■ effective strategies used by teachers to develop oral language skills ■ the successful use of class novels, "real" books and class libraries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ insufficient adaptation of reading programmes to meet individual pupil needs ■ uneven provision in the development of oral language skills ■ limited use of ICT in the writing process ■ limited use of portfolios and curriculum profiles

3.2 Mathematics

“Mathematics enables the child to develop an understanding of particular and important dimensions of the physical world”

(Primary School Curriculum)

The general quality of provision in mathematics is reported to be good or very good in the majority of schools.

Good practice is reported in the majority of schools in relation to the management and organisation of teaching and learning. Inspectors’ reports show that pupils in most schools display good understanding of concepts, and in half the schools pupils’ problem-solving skills are successfully demonstrated. An emphasis on the development of mathematical language, concentration on oral work and careful recording and monitoring of pupils’ written work are reported in the majority of schools. When specific aspects of the mathematics programme are mentioned, number and computation receive most attention, followed by measurement and shape and space. In a few reports, concerns are expressed about a textbook-based approach to mathematics teaching. Reference is made to the administration of standardised tests in fewer than half the reports, and the use of test results for general and individual diagnosis is reported in the case of a few schools.

The majority of recommendations refer to the need for an increased use of materials and resources in teaching and learning, and an emphasis on the language of mathematics and on oral work in mathematics. Other recommendations include the development of pupils’ problem-solving skills, the use of the environment in teaching mathematics, and the application of skills and concepts to practical situations. Ability grouping, early screening, the building of pupil profiles and the use of results of standardised tests for formative purposes are also recommended.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ effective use of teaching and learning materials in mathematics ■ emphasis on language and oral work ■ practical, activity-based learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ insufficient application of mathematical skills and concepts to practical situations ■ limited use of standardised tests and results for formative purposes

3.3 Social, environmental and scientific education (SESE)

“Social, environmental and scientific education contributes to the development of the child’s awareness and appreciation of the natural, human, social, cultural and historical dimensions of life.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

Apart from those involved in a developmental project in science, teachers have not received formal support in the implementation of the SESE curriculum.

The majority of reports show that the quality of SESE provision in history, geography and science is good or very good. Schools are commended for breadth and balance in programme provision, and in this, living things (plant life, human and animal life) and environmental awareness and care (local habitats, recycling, school gardens) receive most favourable mention. Good use of project work, resources, nature tables, investigation tables, the local environment and ICT is reported in such schools. The successful use of thematic approaches, integration with other subjects, discussion, activity-based learning, and varied teaching methodologies, in particular case studies and project work, are mentioned repeatedly.

Reports suggest that schools are beginning to provide opportunities for pupils to develop skills through working scientifically. In acknowledging good practice in this area inspectors recommend that schools should build towards the development of whole-school programmes to support curriculum implementation. In schools where there is scope

for development, inspectors advocate better use of ICT, the local environment, nature tables, investigation tables, and activity-based learning.

The teaching and learning of history and geography is mentioned mainly in relation to middle and senior classes and receives favourable comment in the majority of reports. The provision of opportunities for skill development, the use of project work, integration with other curriculum areas and local studies receive favourable mention. Pupils’ ability to discuss topics, recall facts and express opinions is commended in most schools. Pupils’ appropriate use of simple equipment and well-developed graphical skills are noted. Inspectors report that in a few schools there is a predominance of textbook use in the teaching of history and geography. Recommendations include the need to study the local environment, to employ active learning methods, to involve pupils in more project and research work, to acquire additional equipment or resources, and to develop pupils’ skills as historians and geographers.

Inspectors’ reports suggest that schools do not have formal procedures for the assessment of pupils’ progress in SESE.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ whole-school planning and provision for SESE ■ provision of opportunities for skill development in SESE ■ good use of the local environment in teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ insufficient activity based learning ■ need for more involvement of pupils in project or research work ■ lack of formal procedures for assessment of pupils’ progress in SESE

3.4 Arts education

“Arts education enables children to use a range of communicative expression through which they can explore their experience of, and interaction with, the world.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

Visual arts

Inspectors’ reports show that pupils in the majority of schools are being given opportunities to experience a wide variety of art media and to develop a range of skills and techniques during their visual arts lessons. General provision in these schools is regarded as being good or very good. The delivery of PCSP support has had a positive impact on the work of the schools reported on, and greater use is being made of materials such as clay and fabric and fibre. A greater amount of teaching time is being devoted to the construction strand and to looking and responding activities. Much of this positive development is underpinned by improved planning at whole-school and class level. However, not all schools are seen to be advancing along the implementation continuum at the same pace, and the quality of provision is affected accordingly.

Many examples of good practice are cited by inspectors in their reports. These include good planning, effective classroom management, the display of pupils’ work, and out-of-school activities. Reference is also made to visits to schools by artists and craftspeople. Good planning is seen to embrace the provision of access to a wide range of experiences for all pupils to ensure their aesthetic and artistic development.

Commenting on good classroom practice, inspectors frequently refer to the provision of a broad and balanced programme encompassing the six strands of the curriculum. They emphasise the use of the visual arts in the integration of curriculum areas and comment favourably on the quality of pupils’ work displayed throughout schools. Reference is also made to the development of pupils’ creative skills, to the building of portfolios, and to opportunities for pupils to respond to the work of others.

A small number of recommendations is made in the inspectors’ reports. In some instances, schools are urged to develop plans for the implementation of all six strands of the visual arts curriculum and for the progressive development of pupils’ skills on a whole-school basis. Specific recommendations are made with regard to the provision of sufficient materials to facilitate a wider range of activities, to the inclusion of looking and responding activities in programmes of work, to wider use of clay and construction, to a fuller display of pupils’ work, to the building portfolios of work, and to assessment in the visual arts.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provision of a broad and balanced programme in visual arts ■ planned development of pupils’ creative skills ■ display of work and opportunities provided for pupils to respond to the work of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ insufficient planning for full implementation of all strands of the visual arts curriculum ■ limited range of materials available ■ lack of continuity and progression in the development of skills and concepts

Music

So far, teachers have not received formal support in the implementation of the music curriculum. The teaching of music generally tends to be organised in accordance with the 1971 curriculum, although evidence from inspectors' reports suggests that some schools are employing elements of the new programme.

In just over half the schools reported on, the general quality of provision in music is either good or very good. Where specific elements of the music programme are commented on, singing, instrumental music and listening and responding to music are most frequently mentioned. There is some evidence of teachers engaging in the newer element of composing music.

The majority of inspectors' comments on singing are positive with regard to the range of material taught. In fewer than half the schools, the quality of pupils' singing is praised with regard to other factors such as the pupils' control of pitch, dynamics, and rhythm. Other aspects of music education that receive favourable comment are interval work, the involvement of pupils in concerts and carol services, and the integration of music with other curriculum areas. Inspectors' report very little evidence of effective planning and no evidence of formal procedures for the assessment of pupils' progress in music.

Inspectors identify the need for the expansion of the music programme to include the listening and responding and composing strands of the curriculum, the teaching of instrumental music, and the adoption of a whole-school approach to planning.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- a broad and balanced curriculum which includes performing, listening and responding, and composing
- integration of music with other curriculum areas
- appropriate range of songs taught

CONCERNS

- insufficient planning for music
- lack of attention to assessment of pupil progress in music
- difficulties in implementation of the music curriculum in some schools

Drama

In the 1971 curriculum, *dramatic activity* was included as part of the English curriculum and was promoted as a general methodology throughout all curriculum areas. Drama as a discrete curriculum area is not yet due for implementation. Therefore, the teaching of drama tends to reflect its place in the 1971 curriculum. Mention of drama is made in fewer than half of the reports. Where drama is referred to, it is frequently described as a methodology in the teaching of Irish, referring to the communicative approach to language learning inherent in the Gaeilge curriculum. Occasionally the performance aspect of drama is mentioned in relation to concerts and nativity plays. The use of drama as a learning medium within an integrated curriculum and in the development of oral language skills receives comment in a few instances. Structured drama or mime classes and the involvement of pupils in the composition and performance of their own scripts is also mentioned.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- use of drama as a learning medium in an integrated curriculum

CONCERNS

- lack of attention to the teaching of drama in schools generally

3.5 Physical education

“The physical education curriculum provides opportunities for children to learn through the medium of movement.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

All schools provide pupils with some experience of physical education. Features of good provision include a broad, balanced, planned programme, clear and precise teaching instruction, and the setting of challenging and active tasks for pupils. Reports show that good use is made of equipment, with attention being paid to safety, organisation, and appropriate clothing. In a few instances, opportunities are taken to integrate subjects such as Gaelige, music and mathematics into teaching and learning. Several instances of inter-school and intra-school competition are reported as is the participation of teachers and parents in the provision of extracurricular opportunities for pupils in sporting activity.

In schools where there is scope for development it is found that provision is not planned on a whole-school basis, and pupils do not have access to a balanced physical education programme, with the teaching of gymnastics, athletics and outdoor pursuits receiving little attention. In a few instances, the imbalance in provision is attributed

to a paucity of accommodation or resources. Inspectors note that opportunities to develop a sense of fair play, co-operative skills and the acceptance of success and failure might be exploited advantageously through the physical education programme.

The involvement of external tutors in the provision of aspects of the PE curriculum is noted in several reports. No reference is made in any report to assessment approaches for physical education.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ a comprehensive, balanced programme in physical education ■ clear, precise instruction with due attention to pupil involvement, safety and organisation ■ effective use of available resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of whole-school planning for physical education ■ imbalance in provision and experiences afforded to pupils ■ lack of facilities impacting on scope of provision

3.6 Social, personal and health education (SPHE)

“... social, personal and health education provides specific opportunities to enable the child to understand himself or herself, to develop healthy relationships and to establish and maintain healthy patterns of behaviour.”

(Primary School Curriculum)

Until the publication of the *Primary School Curriculum*, SPHE was not considered in curriculum documents as a discrete curriculum area, and it is not treated as such in all reports. Schools are at present drawing from a range of programmes and resources in providing for SPHE.

A majority of schools implement aspects of these programmes. RSE policies are reported to have been developed or implemented effectively in fewer than half the schools whose reports were analysed. Of the programmes that receive favourable comment, the most frequently mentioned are *Walk Tall* and *Stay Safe*. Other programmes referred to in reports include *Be Safe*, *Action for Life*, and *Bí Folláin*, and programmes related to health. The provision of a broad and balanced curriculum, judicious use of programmes, and appropriate methodologies, including circle work, an emphasis on oral discussion, reinforcement activities and the integration of themes throughout the curriculum are identified as effective practice. The skills and knowledge being developed by pupils and the benefit accruing to teachers from PCSP and other support are affirmed in a few reports.

A positive school climate and atmosphere, the building of respect between teachers and pupils and concern for the full development of the child receive favourable mention in most reports. In the case of a few schools, inspectors praise the high level of concern for pupils' general welfare, the cultivation of a sense of self-worth in pupils, and the development of team skills and “buddy systems”.

Specific recommendations are made in relation to planning, to the linking of existing programmes and resources to curriculum objectives, and to the use of discrete time for SPHE.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provision of a broad and balanced curriculum for SPHE ■ judicious use of specific programmes within the broader curriculum context of SPHE ■ the cultivation of a sense of self-worth in pupils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ lack of planning to support the implementation of the SPHE curriculum ■ insufficient provision of discrete time for SPHE

Conclusion

Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say is a first step in the collation of evaluation information on the quality of educational provision in Irish primary schools. Notwithstanding its limitations, this report yields information on several aspects of the management and organisation of schools, including accommodation and resource issues, and presents a number of significant findings in relation to teaching and learning in the selected schools. It elucidates the extent to which a broad and balanced curriculum is presented in those schools and it identifies key issues relating to educational provision which impact on the quality of the educational experience of pupils in primary schools.

The crucial significance of planning in two major areas is highlighted: in ensuring that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, and in the effective organisation and management of the work of the school as a whole. More specifically, the importance of planning and co-ordination of support for pupils who require additional assistance is recognised. The report also draws attention to the critical importance of schools engaging in a process of self-review and development in order to achieve improvements in the quality of educational provision. Particular challenges facing schools in the implementation of the *Primary School Curriculum* are identified and the significance of the continuing support for teachers in this regard is recognised. The importance of support services such as the Primary Curriculum Support Programme and the School Development Planning Support initiative in the context of school and system improvement is underlined. The necessity for assessment in teaching and learning in all curriculum areas is a consistent theme in the report.

It is hoped that this report will assist boards of management and school staffs in the processes of planning, co-ordination, review, and development across the range of school management, organisational and curricular activities. Specifically, it is hoped that the concerns reported by inspectors and the features of good practice identified will be useful to schools in establishing their own school development priorities.

It is intended that this initial exercise in the synthesis of evaluation findings will assist the Department of Education and Science itself in identifying areas for development at a system level, thus informing policy development, improving the services and supports provided for schools, and ultimately promoting quality in the education system for the benefit of all pupils.

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