

Primary schools

In primary schools, inspectors found that staff generally used a good range of learning and teaching approaches which enabled children to be more actively involved in their learning. As a result, children showed high levels of motivation and engagement. Inspectors noted that schools have taken many positive steps to develop and improve the curriculum. In particular the development of interdisciplinary approaches to learning have improved. Schools should build on this and ensure they continually review and refresh the curriculum to meet the needs of all children.

Evidence gathered from inspection shows that schools now need to put in place better arrangements for assessing and tracking children's progress, including having a shared understanding of standards within Curriculum for Excellence levels. As a priority, they should identify and address any gaps in attainment and achievement between their least and most disadvantaged children and take steps to raise attainment and achievement ensuring equity for all learners.

How well do children learn and achieve?

Overall, children were motivated and enthusiastic about their learning. Inspectors observed children who were becoming more actively engaged in their learning and, as a consequence, increasingly aware of themselves as learners. More children were using approaches such as personal learning logs to set targets for their next steps in learning. Over the period of this report, we increasingly saw children talk about their strengths and development needs. In the most effective practice, children were developing an understanding of what they needed to learn. To help them reflect on their own learning children benefited from well-judged feedback from staff and each other.

Increasingly, we have observed children deepen their learning through collaborating with each other. Inspectors found that where this worked well children discussed and explained ideas, solutions and information and, as a result, developed their confidence. Staff now need to ensure they provide consistently high-quality learning experiences which are challenging, enjoyable and support all children to be leaders in their own learning.

Many schools were using rights-based learning approaches very effectively to provide an increased focus on equalities issues. Staff have become more aware of the importance of children's rights and most children reported that they felt positive about the ways in which they have a say in improving their school³, including through pupil councils.

While there have been improvements in children's progress in literacy and numeracy, it is still too variable.

With regard to literacy inspectors found that children listen and talk with confidence in a range of contexts. Where schools ensured listening and talking was developed in a progressive way, children made better progress. Almost all primary schools had structured programmes to support progression in reading skills. Where this worked best children developed skills through reading texts with an appropriate level of challenge. To improve children's attainment in reading staff need to focus on developing children's higher-order reading skills and supporting children to be more analytical when engaging with texts. We noted that most children were writing

³ Based on the responses to Education Scotland's pre-inspection questionnaires over the period 1 January 2012 to 30 June 2016

regularly and for a variety of purposes. It is important that schools continue to provide children with regular opportunities for extended writing across other areas of the curriculum and give a high priority to technical accuracy.

We have seen improvements in the quality of children's learning experiences in numeracy and mathematics. Increasingly we have observed children develop their understanding of key mathematical concepts through applying them in relevant contexts. They have become more confident in explaining the strategies they used to solve mental and written calculations. However, more needs to be done to improve children's attainment. This includes identifying aspects of numeracy and mathematics where children's skills are not developed well enough and taking appropriate action. Although children develop a range of problem solving skills, inspectors highlighted there is room to improve children's skills in solving more complex problems. Staff need to ensure they provide a balanced range of experiences in numeracy and mathematics which enable children to both revisit concepts to consolidate learning over time, and build on prior learning to ensure sufficient progress.

How well do primary schools support children to develop and learn?

We found that primary schools have generally worked hard to develop and improve their curriculum over the period of this report. As a result, inspectors noted that the quality of learning experiences for children are improving. Increasingly, schools were working with stakeholders and partners. In the most effective examples observed; they involved stakeholders in designing and shaping the curriculum. Most were beginning to take account of the need to develop children's employability skills when reviewing their curriculum. However, for some schools approaches to re-designing the curriculum to help children experience a challenging and motivating broad general education are not yet effective or in some instances, aligned with expectations. In these schools there has been too much emphasis on 'covering' experiences and outcomes at the expense of depth and challenge. As a result, children do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their higher-order thinking skills well enough or apply skills and knowledge in new and unfamiliar contexts. While inspectors saw examples of schools providing appropriate opportunities for personalisation and choice to support progression in children's learning this varied too much within and across schools.

Most schools inspected now have a framework in place for interdisciplinary learning which supports the development of knowledge, understanding and skills for children as they progress through the primary stages. For example, where science was taught using a planned and progressive programme, which included both discrete as well as interdisciplinary learning topics, children's knowledge, understanding and skills were well developed. When delivering science solely through interdisciplinary learning staff should ensure that there is sufficient depth of learning.

There is an ongoing need to develop staff confidence in making professional judgements about when children achieve Curriculum for Excellence levels. Although we saw examples of effective practice in assessing and moderating standards, overall it was clear that more work of this nature is required.

Across the sector, we found that staff were developing a better knowledge and understanding of Getting it Right for Every Child and were increasingly using the wellbeing indicators to assess, plan and provide appropriate support. They were better at identifying children who need additional support, and how much support they required. In the most effective practice, children and parents were fully involved in setting and reviewing appropriate targets for learning to help ensure that personalised support was effective. This helped children make good levels of progress.

While we saw staff provide lessons and activities which met the learning needs of most children, there were also too many occasions when activities were not at the right level of difficulty to ensure children had appropriate challenge in their learning. At times, inspectors observed whole-class approaches to learning which were not implemented well enough to take account of the range of learning needs.

Overall, schools provided children with effective pastoral support as they moved from early learning to P1 and from P7 to S1. However, they still need to improve their approaches to building on children's prior learning when moving to another stage within the primary school and to secondary school.

How well do primary schools improve the quality of their work?

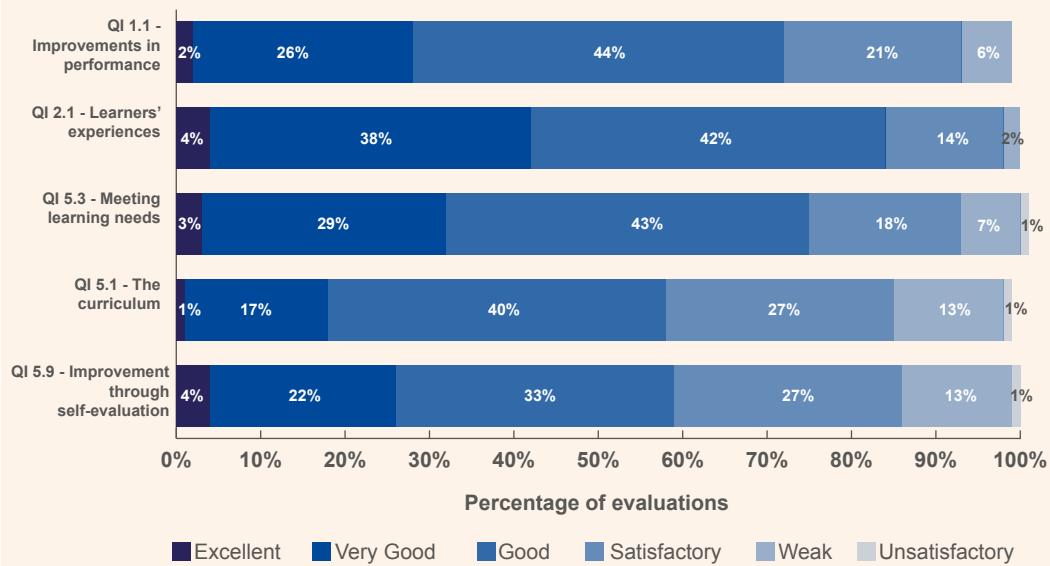
Inspectors identified aspects of leadership as a key strength in many schools. Where schools had highly-effective leadership, the headteacher and senior managers were very well respected by the school community and provided clear and strong direction to support school improvement. They had high aspirations for children and expectations of staff.

Staff commitment and teamwork to ensure children have positive learning experiences was also found to be a strength in most schools. Increasingly, distributed leadership, where all staff take ownership for leading improvements in the school, was found to be having a positive impact on improving learning and teaching.

We have seen notable improvements in approaches and staff engagement with professional learning. The General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standard for Career-long Professional Learning is being used more to support the development of teacher professional learning. In the most effective schools, approaches such as collaborative professional learning and enquiry within and between schools and the use of research now feature more prominently as part of professional learning activities.

Evidence from inspection shows that the majority of schools had a good range of processes in place for evaluating their work and making necessary improvements. In schools where this was most effective staff involved a range of stakeholders and partners from the school community, including children and parents, in establishing priorities for improvement, driving them forward and evaluating their impact on improving learning and teaching. However, inspectors found that too many primary schools do not yet have robust information about children's attainment and achievement. This has a bearing on the quality and impact of self-evaluation. In these schools, approaches to tracking and monitoring children's progress were not effective and, as a result, did not support staff to improve children's attainment and achievement. We also found that, in some schools, difficulties in recruiting replacement headteachers and staff were having an impact on the ability of schools to improve the quality of their work.

Quality indicator evaluations of primary schools - 1 January 2012 to 30 June 2016



From 1 January 2012 to 30 June 2016 we inspected 514 primary schools across Scotland. Most primary schools received a positive inspection⁴.



⁴ Satisfactory or better in each of the following quality indicators: improvements in performance, learners' experiences and meeting learning needs in primary schools inspected between January 2012 and June 2016

Assessing, tracking and monitoring children's attainment and achievement



The headteacher and staff at St. Kenneth's Primary School, South Lanarkshire Council, have an in-depth knowledge of children's progress. They meet regularly to discuss how well children are learning. The school has robust tracking and monitoring of children's progress and achievement. It is used to plan future learning, interventions and secure the best possible

outcomes for all learners. All staff have a clear picture of how individuals, groups of learners and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are progressing across their learning.

They use an extensive range of formative assessment techniques as well as active and collaborative learning strategies to assess, track and monitor children's attainment and achievement. Staff working at the same stage and across levels regularly work together to share standards and engage in moderation activities. The senior management team monitor all aspects of classroom practice, sample children's work, carry out focused discussions with children, track children's progress, and interrogate assessment information robustly. This allows them to have in-depth discussions with staff about children's progress and set targets for attainment. As a result of these approaches, attainment across the school is very strong.

Developing the curriculum to ensure high-quality learning

Staff at Middleton Park School, Aberdeen City Council, have focused on improving the curriculum to ensure consistency of approach and progression from nursery through to P7. Staff developed curriculum frameworks and worked closely with stage partners when planning learning experiences. This helped provide consistency across year groups and worthwhile opportunities for children to learn alongside peers in different classes.

The school's community and stakeholders helped to identify priorities to contribute to the contexts for learning for example, one area identified was the use of the outdoor environment. As a result of this focus staff used the local community very well to enhance the curriculum and provide children with opportunities to learn using real-life contexts.

Staff have worked well with other schools in their cluster of schools to develop a shared understanding of standards across areas of the curriculum and approaches to assessment and moderation. This has helped raise expectations of standards within Curriculum for Excellence levels.

Tracking children's achievements



St Michael's Primary School, Dumfries and Galloway Council, took forward a priority to improve how they tracked children's progress in wider achievement, taking into account learning both in and out of school. The school created their SKILL Awards Scheme (Successful, Kind, Individual, Lovers of Learning) which provides support for independent and motivated learning through a challenging and varied framework.

Children from primary one to seven focus on each of the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence under a bronze, silver and gold structure. This approach to recording and accrediting children's skills and achievements throughout the primary stages has impacted positively, encouraging children to engage in high-quality learning experiences which increase engagement and improve motivation. In addition, parents felt more involved and better able to contribute to their children's learning. Staff reflected that this was an effective and straightforward way to record important learning in areas that were often more difficult to capture.