



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on
Darrenlas Primary School

**Kingcraft Street
Darrenlas
Mountain Ash
Rhondda Cynon Taf
CF45 3LT**

Date of inspection: May 2022

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

About Darrenlas Primary School

Name of provider	Darrenlas Primary School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Primary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	238
Pupils of statutory school age	166
Number in nursery classes	44
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in [SECTOR] is [xx]%)	30.5%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in [SECTOR] is [xx]%)	65.7%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	*
Date of headteacher appointment	November 2012
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	05/11/2013
Start date of inspection	23/05/2022

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Overview

Darrenlas Primary School is a safe, nurturing and vibrant learning environment. The school is at the heart of the community it serves and the governing body and leadership team along with all staff and stakeholders work together to effectively ensure that the needs of the pupils and their families are the drive behind everything they do.

The pupils relish the wide range of opportunities provided to them by the school and they are proud to be part of a supportive and inclusive learning community. The pupils feel that they are part of a close family and that they are expected to give their best to all areas of their learning. The behaviour of the pupils and the manner in which they interact is a strength of the school.

Teaching and support staff work effectively as a team to ensure that learning is exciting, varied and relevant. As a result, pupils make very good progress from their individual starting points. However, as a result of school closures, a minority of pupils do not possess the reading skills they need to access the curriculum fully. In addition, a very few pupils do not fully benefit from the high level of support offered due to persistent absence.

The executive headteacher and head of school uphold a strong commitment to ensuring that the well-being of staff and pupils continues to be a strength of the school. They make sure that all staff receive regular professional development, which enables them to carry out their roles effectively.

The governing body works closely with the school and adds real value in its role as a critical friend. The close partnership with Glenboi Primary School and work with other schools in the cluster helps to ensure that the school continues to evolve and amend its provision to meet the needs of pupils. The leadership teams work closely with the pupils to ensure that the learning environment, the classrooms and the play areas provide ample opportunities to play and learn.

Recommendations

R1 Ensure that feedback and instructions are matched well to pupils' stage of development

R2 Reduce the persistent absence of a very few pupils

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to Effective Professional Development for all Staff through Partnership Working for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main evaluation

Learning

Most pupils make good progress across the breadth of the curriculum as they move through the school. They rise to the challenge of starting from a low level of skills on entry to the school. Despite the negative impact of the pandemic, pupils make rapid progress in many important aspects of learning.

From the time they join the school, the youngest pupils make particularly good progress with their reading skills. They quickly learn the sounds and letter blends needed as early readers. Most pupils continue this encouraging progress, becoming more skilled at understanding and appreciating books and authors so that, by the time they are in Year 6, many are accomplished readers. They read fluently with interest and good understanding, ready and able to use their skills to answer questions about the text. However, despite this rapid progress, a minority of pupils still read at levels below that expected for their age. This limits their ability to become more independent in their work and, for a few, hampers their enjoyment of reading. When reading Welsh, most pupils' well-developed skills in sounding out words make them effective at pronouncing words correctly, although their understanding is not always secure.

Most pupils also make rapid progress in developing their skills in speaking both English and Welsh. They listen and respond well to the rich linguistic environment for both languages and, despite often starting with only a limited vocabulary, quickly become enthusiastic and engaging speakers. The quality of listening displayed by almost all pupils is part of the culture of respect that characterises the whole school. Most pupils listen to each other attentively and respond sensibly and sensitively to the thoughts and ideas of others. They comment helpfully on each other's work when asked to by the teacher. By the time they reach Year 6, pupils speak Welsh competently, taking part in conversation and adapting the speech patterns they have learnt to new situations.

With the impact of the pandemic in mind, many pupils make good progress in their development as writers. They are beginning to write in a range of styles for different purposes and audiences. Many pupils use grammar, punctuation and spelling appropriately for their age. They write effectively as an outlet for their creativity, using imaginative language to convey their ideas, for example when writing the opening to a fantasy story that grips the reader and draws them into a captivating and mysterious world. Many pupils throughout the school express their creativity well, particularly in art.

Overall, pupils make good progress in learning and using numeracy skills to solve problems and when applying the mathematics they have learnt through other subjects. Younger pupils sort minibeasts using a tally chart and describe the properties of a hexagon when creating honeycomb patterns. Older pupils extend these skills when sorting sea creatures according to two criteria on a Carroll diagram and describing the properties of common 3D shapes. By Year 6, pupils can apply formulae to calculate the area of triangles and compound shapes. Pupils make rapid progress in learning basic skills in number. Most pupils are secure with basic number

facts and they apply these with increasing skill as they begin to use larger values, decimals and units of measure.

Most pupils use their digital skills naturally as an integral part of their learning. For instance, they automatically reach for a tablet device when wanting to investigate something or show what they have learnt. Year 2 pupils can convert spreadsheet data into a bar chart through their minibeast topic. In Year 3 and Year 4, they use simple control programmes to move robots around a course and in Year 6, pupils use a design package to create a sustainable dwelling.

The rapid and good progress already described applies equally to pupils with additional learning needs and to those who are more able and talented. A particular strength in pupils' learning is their physical development since the school reopened. Not only do most pupils make rapid progress in the development of their fine motor skills, for example holding a pencil with good control, they also learn to control their body in larger scale activities and games very well. Almost all pupils are active during the day, not just in vigorous exercise, but also in activities that require balance and strength, such as yoga.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Pupils are very proud of their school and nearly all demonstrate high levels of well-being. They are eager to share their successes and work effectively with each other, with teachers and with visitors to the school whom they greet enthusiastically using both English and Welsh. Nearly all pupils feel happy and well cared for and they display extremely positive attitudes to learning. This attitude and culture of giving their best continues to develop as pupils move through the school and is very well embedded and celebrated in older pupils.

Behaviour throughout the school is very good and pupils show mutual respect towards one another. Pupils know where to turn to if they have any concerns or worries and they are confident that staff listen and act on their concerns. Most pupils have a good understanding of how to stay safe online and understand they must not share passwords.

Most pupils develop as ambitious learners and they show an interest and enjoyment in what they learn. They express choices through their use of a 'Curiosity Wall' where they place questions to influence their learning. Most pupils respond with enthusiasm to the range of opportunities provided for them. For example, they enjoy special days such as 'Viva La Fiesta' where they revisit, apply and deepen the term's learning about celebrations.

Nearly all pupils discuss their work confidently and are willing to listen to the views and ideas of others. They are enthusiastic, remaining on task to complete their activities and working well both independently and with their peers. Pupils are proud that teachers celebrate their talents regularly within the learning environment, for example on the 'Gwaith Gwych' board.

Many pupils are involved in decision-making processes at the school and this has a positive impact on all pupils. Pupils take their leadership roles very seriously and talk with enthusiasm about the input they have had in shaping the curriculum. The Criw

Cymraeg rewards pupils for speaking Welsh around the school with 'tocyn iaith' and Welsh mascots. Other groups such as the School Council and Eco Team show resilience and perseverance when pursuing improvements to the school grounds. The pupils were unsuccessful when bidding for resources from local DIY companies to create 'Plantville', the new school allotment. Not to be put off, the pupils lobbied the local authority who were willing to help.

Pupils across the school understand their role within the local and wider community. They are developing well as ethical informed citizens and seek out opportunities to help others. For example, the war in Ukraine prompted older pupils to design, make and sell yellow and blue ribbons to raise funds to support those affected by the war.

Most pupils mature into confident individuals who know how to make healthy choices. Most pupils enjoy a healthy snack and pupils have voted for Watermelon Wednesdays to be an additional offer through the healthy tuck shop. Pupils take part in active sessions including yoga and the daily mile with enthusiasm and older pupils are able to outline the benefits of taking time to reflect for mental well-being. Many pupils participate in the wide range of extra-curricular clubs on offer. Pupils are proud to represent their school in the Urdd Eisteddfod dance competition.

Owing to the Coronavirus pandemic, inspectors will not report pupils' rate of attendance during the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Inspectors will, however, consider the school's provision for monitoring and improving attendance as part of Inspection Area 4 (Care, Support and Guidance).

Teaching and learning experiences

The school staff create an exciting programme of learning activities that enthuse nearly all of the pupils in the school. The great strength of the curriculum is the way the school adapts it to meet the needs and interests of the pupils on a weekly and even lesson by lesson basis. This enables staff to take full advantage of learning opportunities as they happen. For example, a mathematics lesson was stopped so that pupils did not miss the chance to see a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis.

Teachers and support staff understand the needs of the pupils in their classes very well. They share their own strengths and interests to enhance learning and teaching. There are strong and warm relationship between pupils and staff and these relationships help to ensure that all pupils are well supported. Support staff deliver specific learning interventions that have a direct and positive impact on the development of pupils' basic skills across the school.

Staff provide regular opportunities for pupils to influence learning activities. They take pupils' suggestions into account to enhance the broad range of engaging experiences. Staff take particular account of the pupils' emotional needs, bearing in mind the difficulties of the last two years.

Classroom environments are purposeful and well organised, allowing pupils to develop their independence and ability to solve problems well. Teachers ensure that the learning environment supports and celebrates pupils' learning and progress. They use the outdoor environment creatively to provide a rich range of experiences for pupils.

Teachers provide regular feedback to pupils and a consistent approach to marking provides opportunities for dialogue between the pupil and teacher, which helps to move learning forward. They set questions that require pupils to explain or extend their thinking and challenge pupils' misconceptions effectively. Teachers use a range of assessment information to monitor the progress of individual pupils and groups of pupils and they meet with senior leaders on a termly basis to plan next steps and additional support for well-being and progress.

The school takes very good account of the needs of individual pupils in planning activities. However, occasionally, teachers do not always consider the limitations of a few pupils' reading skills when providing written feedback or written instruction. This limits these pupils' ability to act on written feedback or to engage fully in a learning activity.

Care, support and guidance

School staff actively promote the well-being of all pupils as a natural part of the life and ethos of the school. The constructive and friendly working relationship between staff and pupils is a strong feature of the school. Staff know pupils well and create a nurturing environment that helps build pupils' confidence and self-esteem well. This is reflected in nearly all pupils' positive attitudes towards the school's life and work.

There are robust systems in place to identify where pupils require additional support, and support staff draw upon a range of purposeful intervention programmes to ensure that these needs are met. Provision for emotional learning is well-established and has track record of providing effective support for pupils. Leaders track the progress of pupils with additional learning needs well as they work towards bespoke targets within their individual plans. The school nurture room provides high level support for very young pupils with additional learning needs in a calm and purposeful setting. This facility provides a range of multi-sensory activities including 'Bucket Time' activities, which help pupils to self-regulate and settle to learn.

Staff think creatively when planning for individual needs. A weekly celebration assembly Seremoni Oscars Darrenlas, celebrates when pupils have shown resilience and achievements in learning as well as celebrating success.

School staff work effectively with staff from other schools and with outside agencies to provide targeted support for learners with additional learning needs and those who need additional support. Staff support pupils' mental and emotional well-being with a high level of skill and the family engagement officer has been a valuable asset when engaging families and pupils during the recent challenging times.

School staff encourage pupils to celebrate similarities and differences and to understand important issues relating to equality, diversity and sustainability. Pupils learn about the main religions and their festivals such as Diwali and Holi and they develop a growing understanding of renewable energy and sustainable homes. Morals and values are communicated through purposeful displays around the school, and school assemblies provide good opportunity for further moral and spiritual development.

Staff at the school promote the Welsh language well through high quality modelling and a wide range of learning activities. They engender pupils' pride in their identity, heritage, and culture through regular visits to historical locations such as Cardiff Castle. The school promotes pride in cultural identity and recently celebrated 100 years of the Urdd and Dydd Miwsig Cymraeg along with providing opportunities to perform in the school Eisteddfod.

Pupils have access to the healthy tuck shop and to water fountains and regular well-being days further support pupil understanding of how to be happy and healthy. There are a range of effective initiatives in place to ensure that pupils know how to stay safe online.

The school takes a proactive approach to promoting and supporting good attendance. The family engagement officer provides effective and bespoke support to individual families and this has a positive impact on attendance rates. However, despite the robust procedures in place to promote and support good attendance, there are a very few pupils who miss school regularly to the detriment of their progress.

The school ensures that all stakeholders are aware of the need to safeguard children and they take every opportunity to reflect on their practices and procedures to provide a safe and secure environment for children to learn. Safeguarding arrangements meet requirements well and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management

The executive headteacher and head of school include all stakeholders to create a clear vision that is shared and widely understood by the whole school community. They work effectively together to model and promote high expectations and they place the well-being of the whole school community as their top priority. Leaders value the contribution of all staff and seek to support their work through a range of well-being activities that include mindfulness and yoga.

School improvement planning is strategic and informed by a wide range of stakeholders including the pupils, who play a key role in shaping priorities. They ask pupils, parents and carers, staff and governors to express on an annual basis what they 'need' from the school. Senior leaders meet with the governing body to prioritise and action these needs.

School leaders are fully committed to ensuring that the school building and grounds meet the needs of all pupils. There have been significant changes to the layout of the learning environment for the youngest pupils to support the integration of vulnerable pupils into school. Leaders problem solve effectively to ensure that limitations to the physical space do not limit outdoor and playtime provision.

The school utilises a wide range of evidence when evaluating the effectiveness of provision, and all stakeholders play a part in this process. Senior leaders and middle leaders are provided with regular opportunities to monitor the quality of learning and teaching and this has a positive impact on standards. The school has a robust tracking system that enables provision to be tailored to suit the needs of individuals, groups and the whole school. However, whilst identifying many important areas for

development, school leaders have not noted where teachers continue to present information that a minority of pupils cannot access in written form.

Spending decisions and financial planning link appropriately to identified school improvement priorities and there is a clear and proven track record of improvement across several years. The quality of the building and grounds is a celebration of a continued commitment to providing a high quality learning environment.

Senior leaders utilise the pupil development grant effectively to raise the achievement of vulnerable pupils. An example of this is the subsidy allocated to providing families with free transport for school visits to support low income families. The school has allocated COVID recovery grants well to employ additional support staff in the early years and this has had a positive impact on closing the attainment gap caused by school closure.

The governing body are well established and well informed. They carry out their role as critical friends well, adding real value to the development of the school and they maintain a close partnership with pupils. The school council receives an annual budget of £400 from the governors and pupils report back how they used this money and the impact made. The development of playground equipment is a common use of this funding. Governors make appropriate arrangements to promote healthy eating and drinking.

The three-year partnership between Darrenlas and Glenboi Primary School has been highly effective in ensuring that staff at both schools remain fully up to date with key priorities and pedagogy. Both senior leadership teams work closely together, comparing standards and teaching across the two schools through working triads which have also involved support staff. This has further strengthened consistency in approaches to teaching, learning, monitoring and evaluation.

Area of learning and experience leads from both schools have been able to co-construct topic plans, which has helped to broaden the experiences offered to pupils. The broad range of learning experiences on offer at the school are largely a result of this work. The governing bodies and senior staff from both schools continue to embed this relationship and joint initiatives enhance learning experiences for the pupils of Darrenlas. Both schools have shared a digital collaboration project and pupils at Darrenlas make regular visits to use the Forest School facility at the partner school.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carers and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work, to listen to them read and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit a broad sample of classes, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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