

Andrew



Photo J.1: Andrew

Andrew (Photo J.1) lives with his mother, father and three sisters, two older and one younger, on the outskirts of a town in Munster. He attends the junior infant class in a small rural school two miles from the town. His Mum describes him as *a very lively and bright little boy*. He loves learning new things, especially in maths and science, and he likes to learn new words, especially in Irish. He is very creative and enjoys using his hands. He likes to take his time and finish whatever he has started. His favourite outing is when all the family take their bicycles to the forest park. This portrait was compiled near the end of his first year at school, when Andrew was almost six years old.

Rathbeg National School - Background and context

Andrew started in the junior infant class in Rathbeg National School last September, and he has now almost completed his first year in school. Rathbeg is a rural school, catering for 90 children in total. The original school building dates from the 1930s, when it was a two-teacher school, and prefab units have been added as the number of children grew. There are now four class teachers, each teaching a mixed group of two classes. The school also has a resource teacher, a part-time special needs assistant and a school secretary. A new school building has been approved but building has not yet commenced. Andrew's junior infant class shares a prefabricated classroom with the senior infant class with twenty-three children in all. The school is located on a narrow country road, about two miles from the nearest town, surrounded by fields and rolling hills.

Andrews' teacher, Mrs O'Neill, originally trained as a post-primary teacher and has recently completed a post-graduate diploma in primary teaching. The special needs assistant shares her time between this class and the first and second class in the adjoining classroom.

Curriculum and assessment

The curriculum used in Rathbeg NS is the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). The curriculum for the infant classes emphasises active learning experiences, guided activity and discovery, the development of language skills and numeracy, integration between the different curriculum areas and the importance of the environment.

The timetable is a busy one, and it changes over the course of the year. As the class approaches the end of their first year in school, there is more structured work, more writing, because as Mrs O'Neill noted, *they are ready for it*. While Mrs O'Neill plans learning activities for the class as a whole, she is also conscious of individual learning needs. Her interactions with the children help her to be aware of how they are progressing. Mrs O'Neill teaches two class groups responding to the wide range of abilities within the classes. The children's workbooks which are marked and dated each day, help Mrs O'Neill to keep a record of their progress. Andrew is usually one

of the last to finish written work or colouring because he is so careful and likes to take his time. Mrs O'Neill shares information like this about the children with the parents, both informally and at parent-teacher meetings and in the end-of year report.

The school identifies and caters for any additional needs the children may have as early as possible. The school has a resource teacher who not only works with the children who need it in her own classroom but who also helps the class teachers to adapt the curriculum and teaching materials to meet individual needs. Andrew's friend Stephen has learning difficulties. As he is very interested in tractors and machinery, the teachers have developed special reading and mathematics workbooks for him with lots of pictures of these machines. The principal and the teachers also act as a resource for one another. As they each take a turn on playground duty and are involved in whole-school activities, they quickly come to know all of the children and the children build up a relationship with them.

Parents are invited for an open day before the children start school where they meet the principal and the infant teacher. They are given a Parents' Handbook compiled by the teachers, telling them what to expect when their child starts school. Parents are made aware of the school's policies and procedures- on healthy eating, for example. There is a very active Parents' Association, and parents are always ready to help when needed, for example, organising the school Sports Day.

Both teachers and parents spoke to me about a sense of ownership of the school by the local community, which supported the teachers in their work. There are also close links with the life of the parish, as the children, the majority of whom are Roman Catholic, are prepared to receive the sacraments. The school year ends with a Mass celebrated in the school yard to which parents are invited.

Andrew's experiences in junior infants at Rathbeg NS

Well-being

Andrew's school is on a narrow country road well outside the town where he lives, so in common with most of the other children, he is driven to school by his mother, who then goes on to take his little sister to her playgroup. His older sisters attend a school

in the town. Andrew's mother has a lot of informal contact with Mrs O'Neill, Andrew's teacher, since the infant classes are escorted to the school gate by their teacher, and any parents who are delayed come into the classroom to collect their children.

Andrew's classroom is in a prefabricated building, across the yard from the main school. While there are only 23 children in the combined junior and senior infant classes, the size of the room means that there is not much scope for flexibility in arranging the furniture. The tables and chairs for the sixteen junior infants are arranged in a U shape, with more tables in the centre where the seven senior infant children sit. Andrew's chair is towards the back of the room. He shares a table with his friend Robert.

The walls are covered with colourful posters and displays of the children's work. Below these are open shelves where books, games, art and craft material and other resources are stored. On top of the shelves to one side is an altar with a picture and a statue of Our Lady—the children bring flowers to put on the altar and all turn to face this several times a day when saying their prayers (Photo J.2).



Photo J.2: The May altar

The windows on one side look out on the tarmaced school yard, and those at the back of the room look out over the lower yard to a landscape of rolling hills and green fields. On the table in front of the window is the bowl where Nemo the goldfish lives, sitting on an undersea landscape with seaweed, crabs and fish painted by the

children (Photo J.3). Andrew sits beside Nemo. When Andrew's teacher announced that Nemo was getting a new bowl, Andrew turned round to Nemo and said, *did you hear that? You're getting a new bowl!*



Photo J.3: Nemo the goldfish and his undersea world

Andrew has almost completed his first year in the school. He took a while to adjust to primary school. He was very happy at the pre-school he had attended for the previous two years. As a toddler, he experienced difficulties with his hearing due to continuous ear infections and this affected his speech and his ability to concentrate. His mother noticed that he was missing certain sounds, and his pre-school teacher confirmed this and suggested getting his hearing tested. As a result, he had an operation to have grommets fitted in both ears and this made a big difference once he had recovered from the operation. According to Andrew's Mum,

The experience of sound again was difficult for him. He was constantly covering his ears with his hands, as he had been deaf for a quite a long time. After the operation, he was like a different child, he was happy, was calmer (after he got over the initial trauma of the operation), he could sing in tune, his school work took off. I always knew that a lot of the hyperactivity was related to his hearing, he was getting frustrated and wasn't able to participate because he wasn't hearing things right. Now as long as he likes the setting, as long as there's lots of interesting information coming into him, he will sit as quiet as a lamb.

The class he is in now has a very different gender balance to Andrew's home or his pre-school. There are only two girls in the junior infant class along with fourteen boys.

They are quite a boisterous class and I think he found the playing in the yard difficult to begin with, according to his teacher. The organisation of the class is different also. There is more whole-class activity and less freedom to move around the room or to choose an activity than in pre-school. He found the social aspect of finding his place in a new group quite difficult, but at the same time, he was ready to move on from pre-school and was anxious to learn new things. His Mum commented,

He just loved his pre-school teacher, and he was the boss in there, and when he came in here, he wasn't and he found it very hard to find his place in the class and adjust. Also, as the first child from his family to attend this particular school, he had to find his way, and as the third child, he's not used to doing that at home.

Both his mother and his teacher noted, *the class has gelled as a group* and Andrew is really enjoying school. Mrs O'Neill said that Andrew was well prepared for school:

He had all the basic self-care skills, it makes a big difference if they are comfortable and independent and able to do things like taking off coats and taking out his books and his lunchbox. There is so much else that's new for them to take in.

Now Andrew knows all the other children in his class and the one above it, and he has friends to play with at break times.

Andrew's Mum can empathise with him in this process of adjustment. She said that she herself had to adjust her parenting style to suit the needs of an active little boy when Andrew came along, and that it was very different to the way she parented her two older girls. She tries to find time to spend with each of her children on a one-to-one basis each day, and she thinks that this is particularly important when they are young.

Identity and Belonging

The children in Andrew's classroom are very aware of their group and class identity. They are organised into four groups, Blue Sharks, Yellow Tigers, Red Racers and Green Dragons (Photo J.4), and the groups vie with one another to be the first to put away their books for example, and gain a star for their group. His teacher, Mrs O'Neill, has noticed that *Andrew is very competitive, and likes to be a winner.* She

often uses games to teach Irish vocabulary. *Andrew's exceptionally good at Irish, and if he didn't win, he would be very upset, but he's learning that he can't win every time.*

The children are also very aware of their identity as members of either the junior or senior infant class. Some activities are done as a whole group, with all the children participating. Others begin as a whole group activity, and then one of the classes is given some work to do quietly while Mrs. O'Neill works directly with the other class.



Photo J4: Group star chart

It was Andrew's sixth birthday on the week following my last visit to his class, and this was a major topic of discussion with all the children in the class. All the junior infants had been invited to his party, plus Kevin from the senior infant class. *He's a senior, but he's going because he lives near Andrew,* the children told me. Andrew's Mum was surprised to hear that the children were so aware of who had been invited and why. Andrew was very proud that his oldest sister was going to make a cake for his birthday. *She's an excellent cooker,* he told me.

Andrew's best friend Robert sits beside him in class and his other particular friends are Megan, Keith, Connor and Jamie. He usually chooses to play with this group at break times. They have a repertoire of games that they like to play. A favourite spot is the narrow gap between the classroom and the boundary wall. The entrance to this is easily blocked by one child. On one day it might be a cinema, and everyone who wants to go in has to give Megan a ticket. Later on, it might become a jail or whatever the current game demands.

Some playground games have elaborate rules. In the summer term, Andrew and his friends often played “Dip”, a chasing game. First, the children played a counting game to select the person who is to be *It*. They crouched in a circle, with one shoe of each child touching (Photo J.5). Then Andrew touched each shoe in turn, reciting *Dipidipidation, My operation, How many trains are at the station?* Then he picked a number, *Five*, and counted it out, *one, two, three, four, five, and you are it!* The child on whose shoe the final number fell was ‘It’ and has to chase and catch the others. On one occasion during my visits, Keith was ‘It’. The low ledge beside the wall was the den; anyone who reached it was safe from capture. Andrew and the others ran for the den, and then darted forward while Keith was chasing someone else (Photo J.6). The sorties became increasingly daring until Robert was caught, then Robert became ‘It’ for a while.



Photo J.5: Andrew and friends playing a counting game

Photo J.6: A chasing game in the school yard

Andrew's Mum told me that in general *he doesn't tend to like the rough and tumble of games like football*, although he will kick a football around at home. Mrs O'Neill has noticed this also, but said that, *now he has the skills to find someone else to play with, if the boys are playing something and he's not interested in it*. At home, he likes to play on the trampoline in the garden. He loves riding his bike and his Mum has always tried to encourage this. He likes to go to the nearby forest park with his Dad. She told me that

His dad works long hours and doesn't have much time during the week to play with him then but they all go to the Park and take the bikes out and that's a time they all have together. Andrew likes all the family to be together, that's when he is happiest.

Communicating

In class, whenever Mrs O'Neill asked a question, I noticed that Andrew's hand was invariably one of the first to go up. He liked to be called on to answer but when someone else was chosen, he listened to hear if they got it right. It was obvious also that he loves stories and reading. His parents have done a lot of reading with him at home, and he loves getting a new book to read or to have read to him. When Mrs O'Neill brought out a new Big Book, he craned forward in his seat to see and followed the story intently. *He loves Irish, he soaks it up like a sponge, he has a good ear,* said Mrs O'Neill.

Andrew also loves performing, especially singing. The January before he started school, his parents decided to send him to a speech and drama class. He met some of the boys that would be going to school with him, which his parents felt would ease the transition for him. He loved the games, the nursery rhymes, singing and acting. His Mum told me, *that's his thing, and we found it early. He picks up the words very, very quickly, loves performing,* especially since his hearing has improved. Mrs O'Neill is also conscious that Andrew likes to perform and tries to give him opportunities to do so. On the morning after the speech and drama class had given a concert, Mrs O'Neill invited Andrew and three of his friends to sing one of their songs, *If all the raindrops were lemon drops and gumdrops* for the class. Andrew seemed to enjoy being the centre of attention, as the four boys sang and did the actions. The other children joined in the chorus.

When his Mum collects him from school, Andrew wants to share everything he has done today, and it is often ten or fifteen minutes later before they set off for home. On the way home, he tells her the new Irish words he has learned today and the other things he has done. He likes learning new things and she thinks this is why one of his favourite subjects is Irish.

Exploring and Thinking

An important part of the school morning is News Time, when the children share news from home. They take turns to bring in an item for Show and Tell. On one of my visits, Megan brought in her favourite toy, a spotted dog, to show to the other children. Andrew and his friend Robert volunteered to be the reporter and camera man interviewing her. Andrew obviously enjoyed being the reporter, relaying the

other children's questions and asking questions of his own. Andrew asked Megan, *where did you get your toy dog?* Megan replied, *in Wales*. No-one, including Megan, was quite sure where Wales was or how you got there! *It was dark*, said Megan, so the teacher took down the globe and showed them. This led to an extended discussion, bringing in science and geography as well as language. The teacher recorded the news headlines on the board, and during the day the children often looked to see their own names there and to read what it said about them.

Andrew is especially interested in geography. He has posters and charts of the different countries and their flags on his bedroom wall at home. His Mum told me that he was thirsty for information:

He's into dinosaurs, he's into geography, the planets, he has studied the charts and he knows the flags of different countries, he reads them all from the charts, it's in his room, he looks at it when he's going to sleep and takes it all in.

She thinks that this is why he likes television--he sees it as a source of information, though she tries to limit the amount of television that he watches.

Andrew himself says that his favourite subjects are maths and *doing experiments*. The class was learning about floating and sinking during one of my visits. Mrs O'Neill brought in a new goldfish bowl for Nemo (Photo J.3), but said that before the fish was installed, they would use the bowl for an experiment. This announcement was greeted with much excitement. Andrew clapped his hands and smiled. The children were shown a variety of objects—a pencil, a feather, keys, scissors, a leaf. Mrs O'Neill invited them to predict which of them would float and which would sink in the bowl of water. Almost everyone got the keys, the scissors and the feather right. There was a difference of opinion about the pencil. Some of the children thought it would sink because it was heavier than the feather or the leaf. Then the children tested the different objects. The pencil floated, and Andrew expressed his satisfaction, *Yes! That's what I predicted!*

When it was Andrew's turn, he chose a leaf, and predicted that it would float. Mrs O'Neill told him to try it; the leaf floated and Andrew went back to his place with a smile on his face. The children took out their work-books and opened a page showing pictures of the different objects they had just tested. They recorded their

findings by circling the objects that floated. Andrew carefully circled the pencil, the leaf and the feather.

Andrew also likes to work with his hands. The class had been talking about different kinds of fruit on another of my visits. Their teacher read them a story from a big book called *Handa's Surprise* about a little girl called Handa who lived in Africa and tried to carry a basket of fruit to give to her friend. Along the way, a series of animals helped themselves to the different fruits. Mrs O'Neill brought in a selection of the exotic fruit from the story for the children to see, smell, handle, taste and talk about. Then they each made their own basket of fruit from modelling clay. Andrew took great care to be as accurate as he could with the colour and shape of each fruit—yellow banana, green avocado, pink mango (Photo J.7). He looked up occasionally at the basket of fruit to check the details. *He has the shapes and the proportions right, he's very observant*, commented Mrs O'Neill.



Photo J.7: Andrew's art work: a bowl of fruit

During the modelling activity, Connor was having problems and asked Andrew for help. Robert looked at Connor's finished basket and said indignantly, *Andrew helped you with that! You must do it all by yourself!* Robert knew that Andrew was good at making things and thought that it was unfair of Connor to ask him for help.

Andrew also loves doing art at home, and his parents have always encouraged Andrew and his sisters to paint and draw. His Mum reflected

He would happily spend all day on that. He seems to have a very good eye for drawing in particular, it's only started to come out in the last three or four months, but I always encouraged him, it was something I found it easy to get him interested in, to paint, to colour, while I was doing bits and pieces, to put all the stuff out on the table, and they'd paint and colour, I didn't care, it kept them happy and it was good for them to experience mixing colours, making new colours.

Andrew is often the last to finish a piece of work. *He's very methodical, very meticulous*, noted his teacher, and he sometimes finds that *at school he cannot spend as long as he would like on an activity*. At the beginning of the year, this would sometimes upset him. Now he can cope better with this, and his teacher sometimes suggests that he take his work home to finish it.

Conclusion

School is an important part of Andrews' life, especially at the moment. He has made a successful transition from home and pre-school and learned to cope with the larger numbers and the different setting and expectations. He is enjoying learning about new things every day. He likes his teacher and has made new friends. He has a wide range of learning experiences outside of school also: at home, at his speech and drama class, with his family and his friends. His teacher finds him very responsive and rewarding to teach. *He seems very contented and well able in class, he's a good reader and will be very ready for senior infants. I enjoy teaching him*, she said. Andrew's Mum sums him up as *a very interesting little chap. He's well beyond his years*.