

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Railway Street Nursery School, Armagh

June 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Railway Street Nursery School is a cross-community nursery located in a listed building in the centre of Armagh City. In recent years, the outdoor learning environment has been developed to include an attractive partially covered outdoor play area.

The nursery provides full-time provision for 29 pre-school children who come from the town and surrounding rural area. Almost one-fifth of the children are on the special education needs (SEN) register, and a small number of children have statements of SEN. There are a small number of newcomer children. Over two-fifths of the children have free school meals entitlement; the meals are prepared by the onsite school cook.

The teaching principal was appointed approximately three years ago; she is supported by a classroom assistant and four SEN assistants. The board of governors are very supportive of the principal and the nursery school community, and almost all of them have held roles in education.

The nursery school participates in the Department of Education's 'Getting Ready to Learn' (GRTL) programme which aims to promote a greater understanding of the pre-school curriculum for parents. It is involved in an Extended Schools cluster group, has links with the local SureStart to support the children's transition to nursery school and participates in the Education Authority's (EA) 'Pathways to Partnership' programme with other local nursery schools. It has been awarded recently the 'Eco-Schools Green Flag' award for the third time.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, CARERS AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents and staff in advance of the pilot inspection.

Sixty-two per cent of parents responded to the online confidential questionnaires, forty percent of whom included written comments which were wholly positive about the provision in the nursery school. In the written comments, the parents expressed their appreciation of: the support given by the staff; the caring and stimulating environment; and the additional learning opportunities provided for their children. Almost all of the parents reported that their child's learning has significantly improved they would highly recommend the nursery school to other parents.

In discussions with almost one-half of the parents who have children attending the setting, they reported that: their child is happy; the staff have established excellent relationships with them; and the staff are committed to meeting the needs of their child.

All teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire; their responses were also wholly positive, with over one-half of the staff providing written comments. They reported that they are well-supported by the principal, work well as a team and undertake professional learning and development to improve the outcomes for all the children.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the school to consider how well the nursery school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The shared nursery school vision is underpinned by the highly effective provision of a safe, caring and stimulating environment.
- The staff work conscientiously and monitor regularly all aspects of their work to provide high quality learning experiences and outcomes for all the children.
- The staff support all of the children to explore, investigate and celebrate success in their learning.
- The staff demonstrate a clear commitment to the development of their professional knowledge, skills and understanding so they are enabled to support effectively all of the children in their learning and development.
- The indoor and outdoor environments are accessible for all children and are used very creatively and purposefully to promote and develop the children's imagination, sense of adventure, curiosity and problem-solving skills.
- The cycle of planning, observation and assessment is highly effective and informs the detailed evaluations which are focussed on the progression of each child across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- In collaboration with external services, the nursery school staff set meaningful targets aligned to the children's needs. They support skilfully the children and extend their learning using a range of strategies and resources to ensure the children have full access to the curriculum.

- All of the children are making excellent progress across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum, developing personal, social and emotional skills and engaging in independent, collaborative and sustained play activities.
- Through well-established partnerships with a number of nursery schools and pre-school settings the staff enhance their own professional development, share effective practice and improve the outcomes for all of the children. In addition, the staff develop strong links with parents and the wider community to create a community of learning which is enabling each child to develop skills and dispositions for school and life.
- The arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff, governors and parents are highly committed to the shared vision of the nursery school to “provide a safe, caring and stimulating environment to meet the needs of each child, help them prepare for life and school and make their year in Railway Street Nursery School memorable”. This shared vision is embedded in a child-centred ethos within the nursery school where the collegial staff team are proactive in continually adapting their strategies, approaches and routines to ensure that all children benefit from an inclusive learning experience.

The nursery school is engaging actively in a highly effective and well-embedded process of self-evaluation which is being used to inform the well-considered priorities identified in the detailed school development plan. These priorities are linked closely to the vision and the ongoing school improvement work impacts positively on the provision for the children and extends their learning experiences.

Through a collaborative approach, the staff: develop the children’s social skills; promote independence; model respectful relationships; and develop the children’s decision-making across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

The board of governors use their professional knowledge and educational experience to support the nursery school staff in implementing highly effective processes for self-evaluation and achieve their vision. They work effectively alongside the staff and value their commitment to provide high quality learning experiences for all of the children.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff are very motivated, work diligently and have high expectations and aspirations for every child and a detailed understanding of the pre-school curriculum. They are highly skilful in their interactions with the children; they use well open-ended questioning to extend the children’s vocabulary and understanding of language; and facilitate children in expressing their ideas and opinions during activities. All daily routines are embedded well and promote a safe and predictable learning environment. The children demonstrate very good social skills and independence throughout the day.

The outdoor environment has a wide variety of resources which are used well to develop the children's learning across the six areas of the curriculum. Outdoor play is effective in promoting resilience and challenge for the children through their engagement in balancing activities, obstacle courses and climbing experiences. The staff have developed the children's respect for the environment through a range of activities such as planting flowers, vegetables, fruit trees and herbs, and they encourage the children to tend to the plants.

The staff have engaged in a range of appropriate professional learning which includes nurture training, the Health and Social Care Trust's Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE) training associated with early intervention for health-related needs, and training from the charity, the Field Studies Ireland, on outdoor play. These professional learning opportunities are developing further the staff's knowledge of, and skills in, the implementation of additional strategies to support the children which is impacting positively on the provision for the children.

The staff are implementing a very effective cycle of planning, observation and assessment. Long-term and medium-term planning clearly promotes progression, allows for extension across the six areas of learning of the pre-school curriculum and informs well the short-term planning. Short-term planning is very effective and includes learning intentions as well as key language for each monthly plan. There are detailed observations which are used very well by the staff to monitor the individual progress of each child. Evaluations are insightful, identify the impact on learning and guide well the curriculum planning.

The nursery school support very effectively the health and wellbeing of the children and staff. The staff and parents report that the range of healthy meals provided onsite encourages the children to try new foods and broaden their diet. The use of fundamental movements such as jumping, catching and balancing alongside well-planned opportunities for energetic outdoor play develops very effectively the children's gross motor skills. The children are able to engage in challenging play experiences and know how to keep themselves safe, for example, when somersaulting on the mats and climbing at height. The children are encouraged to be aware of and manage their feelings and emotional wellbeing through the meet-and-greet in the morning, use of a visual emotions chart and story time. The children observed were able to use a range of strategies and quiet spaces to manage their emotions when required.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Railway Street Nursery School provides an inclusive and caring environment for all of the children. The staff know the children very well and understand their diverse needs and individual starting points. The provision is reinforced by highly inclusive classroom practice. For example, the children with SEN receive support from a skilled team of classroom assistants who use a range of strategies to promote the development of the children's social and emotional wellbeing and their progress across all six areas of the pre-school curriculum.

Staff collaborate very effectively with parents and allied health professionals, and use the information gathered through their engagements to plan for the successful inclusion and progression of each child. The targets for children with SEN are based on a deep understanding of the child's needs, interests and abilities and they are regularly monitored and reviewed to ensure progression for each child. The staff use appropriately musical instruments and sensory resources to support and encourage children to manage their emotions.

The nursery has been proactive in promoting the children's regular attendance, for example, through stay and play sessions and monthly newsletters which outline the learning and skills being developed so that parents can support their child's learning at home. The staff report this has impacted positively on overall outcomes for each child.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Almost all of the children are developing very well their skills, knowledge, attitudes and understanding across all areas of the preschool curriculum, which reflects their readiness for transition to Year 1. The children's personal, social and emotional development is a key strength; they persevere at activities; their attention and concentration skills are well-developed; and they demonstrate very good independence throughout the nursery day. The children are highly motivated and enthusiastic during play, enjoy learning and engage confidently with their peers and staff.

The children listen attentively during story time and express and share confidently their thoughts and ideas. They look at books during play activities and use naturally a range of mark-making opportunities to express their ideas; they are beginning to write independently their names and other letters of the alphabet. The children's work and achievements are celebrated through attractive displays in the nursery and are shared digitally with parents. The children participate eagerly in singing, dancing and rhymes and often play instruments during their play experiences. They use appropriately a range of digital resources for example, digital cameras, whiteboards, light boxes and iPads to extend their learning and knowledge.

Almost all of the children have a natural curiosity for their learning environment and engage well in collaborative and investigative play with their peers and adults. In their discussions, most of the children were able to articulate their understanding and learning. For example, they can: recount how they plant and grow flowers and vegetables; sequence the life cycle of a butterfly and frog; and discuss seasonal weather. The children have the opportunity to share their individual 'likes' of nursery life through videos on their website and pictures with staff who annotate their comments and views.

The individual child's record celebrating their year in nursery is shared with the child's family as they transition to primary school and provides each with a collection of memories reflecting their learning experiences, progression and enjoyment during their pre-school year.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The child-centred and inclusive ethos of Railway Street Nursery is lived out in its day-to-day running by the dedicated staff team who show a real commitment to collaboration and continuous learning. The nursery is characterised by very effective working relationships at all levels. In discussions with parents, they report that they are regularly informed of the progress of their child through monthly newsletters, and use of a digital application and the school website. They also spoke positively about the provision of book packs and learning packs to use at home to develop further their children's learning and language. The involvement of parents and local community groups in maintaining and developing the outdoor area has been beneficial in supporting the staff to deliver a high-quality learning environment for the children.

In line with their vision, staff provide learning opportunities which enable the children to "play, learn and grow together". The staff complete home visits in the first term to establish a relationship between the home and school and alleviate anxiety for both the parent and child for transition to nursery. In addition, they organise stay and play sessions for parents to gain a better understanding of their child's learning and development within the pre-school curriculum. Staff also organise regularly educational trips and visits to local landmarks and areas of interest. They use external service providers within the nursery setting to promote further the children's physical development and communication and language skills. The staff fundraise for nominated charities which have a personal connection to the children and their families. Through this work the nursery school is developing well a community of learning which enhances and extends further the children's learning experiences.

The nursery school has established strong links with the local Sure Start provider and local primary schools to help alleviate anxiety for the children transitioning to and from the nursery. The principal visits the children when they are in year 1 to ensure they have settled into their new school and to strengthen their relationships with the local schools and staff, which is valued by parents and staff in the local schools.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the nursery school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Railway Street Nursery School's vision is core to the work of the school and the provision of a safe, caring, stimulating and inclusive learning environment in which the children are prepared well for transition to year 1. The nursery school is realising its vision through the dedication and commitment of a highly reflective staff team who use well their professional knowledge and skills to support the children very effectively with their learning.

ETI will continue to work with Railway Street Nursery School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the highly effective approaches to whole school planning and processes for self-evaluation; and
- the focused staff professional learning to ensure the best outcomes for all children, in particular those children with SEN and other needs.

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