

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Armoy Cross Community Playgroup, Ballymoney

February 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Armoyn Cross Community Playgroup is voluntary playgroup located in the rural village of Armoyn, near to the main County Antrim towns of Ballycastle and Ballymoney. The playgroup has its own premises with a separate entrance within a building shared with other community groups. The playgroup has access to an indoor hall area in the building which staff use regularly to promote energetic physical development. The playgroup has established a woodland area that provides the children with a natural environment to develop their creativity, curiosity, and investigative skills. This area has also been used on occasions by the local primary school.

Nineteen children of pre-school age attend a part-time session and they mainly come from the village, with a small number coming from the surrounding rural area. There are a small number of children on the Special Education Needs (SEN) register who are receiving external support for speech, language and communication difficulties. Almost all of the children transfer to the two primary schools in the village.

The leader is supported by a deputy leader and an assistant and a well-established core management committee, with new parents joining the committee annually. The playgroup employs an early years specialist (EYS).

The ethos of the pre-school is to provide the children with a homely learning environment, where the children feel cared for and safe and to work in partnership with the parents and the community.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

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

One-fifth of parents responded to the questionnaire and they were wholly positive. The written comments provided by one-half of these parents indicated that their children enjoy attending the playgroup, and that they appreciate the caring staff and how they promote the children's independence through play.

In discussions with a small number of parents, they also spoke positively about the calm and caring environment provided for the children. They value the development of the outdoor woodland area which provides opportunities for the children to take part in activities outdoors. A number of these parents would like to be provided with more information about their children's play experiences in the playgroup.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire and their responses were also wholly positive.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside the playgroup to consider how well the playgroup:

- 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 well-embedded playgroup vision is at the core of the creative, calm and homely learning environment which supports well the development of the children as resilient and independent learners.
- The collegial staff team are highly reflective in their practice. They have identified appropriate priorities in the development plan which are focused on improving further the children's curiosity and investigative skills.
- All of the children engage in sustained and collaborative play and show a natural curiosity for their learning environment. Planning is effective and informed by the children's interests and ideas.
- The staff skilfully use open-ended questioning, model language and employ a range of highly effective strategies to scaffold and extend the children's learning across the six areas of the curriculum. The SEN policy requires further development to reflect the adaptive practice which staff use to support the children with SEN.
- The high-quality and inclusive learning environment is developed well to promote the children's curiosity through the use of authentic resources similar to the home environment. The woodland area provides the children with effective opportunities to develop their thinking and their investigative and problem-solving skills, as well as promoting their social, emotional and physical development.
- The staff have prioritised appropriately their professional learning and are developing well their skills and knowledge which is impacting positively on the provision for the children.

- The playgroup has fostered good relationships with parents and the two local primary schools.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the playgroup demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- The SEN policy requires further development to reflect the practice and strategies being implemented by staff to support the children with SEN.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

All of the staff and the management are highly committed to the playgroup's vision to develop confident and resilient children who direct and lead their own play in a natural, inclusive and safe environment. From September 2023, 'From tiny acorns mighty oak trees grow' has been introduced as the new playgroup motto by the management and staff team. This aligns well with the priority given to outdoor play and development of the woodland area. The staff are proactively planning for further development of their knowledge and skills in relation to establishing outdoor classroom learning through participation in the forest school initiative.

There is a strong collaborative approach to the playgroup's self-evaluation process. The staff have strategic action plans in place with appropriately identified priorities to develop further the children's learning experiences and development. They have engaged in focused, collective staff professional learning which develops their knowledge, skills and confidence to meet the needs of all of the children through a child-led approach.

The management committee support the staff in addressing the current priorities of the development plan and value the staff's proactive approach to developing their professional learning. The committee actively supports the staff in numerous fundraising activities and initiatives. On occasions, they also join in the playgroup sessions and gain first-hand experience of the delivery of the pre-school curriculum and the staff's interactions with the children.

The EYS provides the staff with good support and reports that the collegial staff team are evaluative in their practice and planning, with a clear focus on delivering quality provision across the pre-school curriculum.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The high-quality indoor and outdoor learning environment provided for the children is dictated by the children's individual needs and interests. The staff provide appropriately creative and challenging learning experiences for the children.

Through daily evaluations, the staff capture the children's voice which is used to monitor and evaluate effectively their learning and progression across all areas of the curriculum, and to inform future planning. They scaffold well the learning and use open-ended questioning skilfully to develop the children's confidence, self-esteem and thinking skills.

The well-organised, stimulating indoor learning environment uses a wide range of furniture and resources that replicate the home environment. This learning environment is used to develop well the children's curiosity and thinking skills, as well as to provide them with very good opportunities to investigate and experiment through self-directed play.

The staff have identified that information and communication technology is an area of focus to be developed further in the playgroup. The children are beginning to use the iPad to take pictures of their constructions and each other. When the pictures are printed, the staff share these with the children during circle time to promote language and discussion; they encourage the children to take the pictures home to share with their parents/carers.

Health and wellbeing is a priority for the playgroup and the staff promote well the children's physical, emotional and social development through: the children's healthy snack; their positive, caring and skilful interactions with the children; and the regular use of the well-developed woodland area. The children are aware how to keep themselves safe while engaging in more challenging outdoor activities. The staff consistently remind the children to have respect for each other and their environment and encourage the children to be mindful of each other's feelings.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff provide the children with a caring and inclusive approach to learning. Through their rigorous evaluations they are identifying and supporting effectively the needs of all the children. They employ a range of highly effective strategies during the play experiences to scaffold and progress the children's confidence and learning.

The staff now need to develop further the SEN policy to reflect the practice and strategies that they implement to support the children with SEN.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The children's behaviour is consistently excellent. All of the children engage in sustained, purposeful play. They are making very good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. They demonstrate high levels of concentration and collaborate well with their peers and the adults. The children show respect for each other, the adults and their learning environment.

During the story session the children are very attentive and engaged, asking questions and independently retelling the story. They use the wide range of authentic materials, simple real-life items and resources confidently, independently and with maturity to extend their learning.

A majority of children actively engaged in early mark making. They are beginning to use appropriate stimulus to guide and develop their creativity during activities. For example, the children referenced a range of artistic photographs while using a range of natural resources such as hair rollers during painting activities. All the children observed are developing very good fine motor skills through a range of activities such as sewing, using tongs at snack and the use of various writing tools.

The children are developing very well their gross motor skills through indoor physical activity and challenging physical play in the woodland area. For example, they confidently use wheelbarrows to move logs and leaves. They show a good knowledge, curiosity, love and respect for their natural environment by planting their own trees and investigating how to make perfume with petals in the mud kitchen.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff have established good relationships with parents, local primary schools and the wider community to improve the learning environment and experiences for the children.

Through the monthly newsletters, weekly lending library, social media and a digital application, the staff share the children's learning and progression with parents. The parents participate in activities with the children such as making a teddy bear at Christmas, followed by the children showcasing their work to their parents in a gallery walk.

The local community and businesses have supported the playgroup's development of the woodland area through various fundraising events. The playgroup has also fostered good links with the two local primary schools; the Year 1 children of the primary schools participate in play activities with the playgroup children. The parents who inspectors met with spoke about how this helps the children to develop early friendships and supports their readiness to transition from the playgroup to primary school.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

Armo Cross Community Playgroup's well-established strategic vision underpins its provision of a homely learning environment where the children feel safe and cared for. The staff know the children very well. They listen to and value their interests. As a result, they provide an inclusive and child-centred pre-school curriculum which promotes and develops well the children's curiosity and learning through stimulating learning experiences using authentic and real-life resources.

ETI will continue to work with Armoy Cross Community Playgroup, 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 planning for the children's learning and progression across all areas of the curriculum, including the promotion of the children's curiosity and the development of their investigative and problem-solving skills; and
- how the staff effectively use the stimulating and well-developed outdoor woodland area to provide the children with many opportunities to engage in challenging play experiences and direct their own learning.

Armoy Cross Community Playgroup is well placed to take forward the area for further consideration detailed in this report.

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