

Report of a Pilot Inspection
Our Lady's Nursery School, Belfast

May 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Our Lady's Nursery School is situated in North Belfast. The nursery school has a double unit and there are 52 children attending the setting, of which 49 are pre-school age and 50% are eligible for free nursery school meals. The children attending the nursery school come from the local community and they transition to several primary schools in the local and wider geographical area. There are 16 children who have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), with a small number of children receiving support from Allied Health Professionals (AHP). The nursery school is spacious with a welcoming foyer, two classrooms and a sensory room. In addition, there is an extensive outdoor learning area to the rear of the nursery school where the children take part in energetic and explorative play.

The teaching principal is supported by a longstanding staff team of one full-time teacher and four classroom assistants. The well-established board of governors is highly supportive of the nursery school in the community.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

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

Thirty-eight percent (20) of the parents responded positively to the questionnaire. Fifteen of these parents provided written comments which indicated that their child was happy, fulfilling their potential and was well prepared to transition to Year 1 as a result of the experiences provided by this nurturing nursery school.

Several parents who met with inspectors spoke of the importance of the nursery school within the local community and of how dedicated the staff are to meeting the needs of their child. They spoke about how happy their child is, the progress they have made since starting the nursery school and how they are well supported as parents to help their child at home through, for example, the section on "Tips for learning at home" in the monthly newsletter.

All teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire and their positive responses highlight they are happy in their work and are supported professionally by the leadership in the nursery school.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the nursery 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 inclusive vision of a **“Child centred, family focused”** school is shared and nurtured by all staff. This vision is fundamental in leading and supporting effectively all aspects of the life and work of the nursery school.
- The well-embedded process of self-evaluation is informed by extensive and relevant consultation with all stakeholders, including the children.
- The staff team are highly reflective in their practice. Their interactions with the children are consistently skilful and the team work seamlessly to support and promote progression in learning for all of the children.
- All of the children are making very good progress in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. They engage in sustained, independent and collaborative play with their peers.
- The highly effective planning guides the staff in their delivery of the pre-nursery school curriculum. The staff have plans in place to develop further their approach to observations of learning.
- The outdoor learning environment is landscaped creatively and is well-resourced with a wide range of authentic and natural materials. This environment promotes successfully the children’s imagination, curiosity, gross and fine motor skills and their love of learning through play.
- Staff professional learning opportunities are aligned strategically to the areas of priority identified by the nursery school and to the needs of the current and future groups of children.
- Staff are very proactive in their early identification of the barriers faced by all of their children, particularly those with SEN.
- There is a highly effective community of learning and the partnerships established with parents, outside agencies and community bodies are all contributing effectively to the holistic development of every child and the vision of the nursery school.

Area for consideration:

- to develop further the process of observations to monitor more effectively the progress of each child across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The children and community are at the heart of the vision of Our Lady's Nursery School to be ***“Child centred, family focused”***. The social demographics and the context of the local community are fundamental to the vision, which is central in the strategic planning for improvement within the nursery school. Progress in addressing the appropriate areas for development, identified through the extensive consultative processes, is impacting positively on the needs of all the children.

The board of governors offers sustained and valuable professional support to the staff of the nursery school in support of achieving the vision. They are well informed and are key contributors to the well-embedded culture of self-evaluation within the nursery school. They value and respect the staff and their work and see the nursery school as being at the heart of the community.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

There is a very detailed process of self-evaluation within the nursery school which involves purposeful consultation with governors, staff, parents and children. This process supports the staff in their identification of appropriate priorities within their development plan which they align effectively to their vision.

The staff team is well-established and provides a strong pastoral and nurturing approach. The staff interact skilfully with the children and all staff consistently use open questioning to extend the children's learning. They model positive language which is used by the children in their interactions with each other. The children are respected, valued and welcomed.

The cycle of planning is highly effective and guides well the staff in their delivery of the pre-nursery school curriculum. Through their process of monitoring and evaluation, the staff have identified appropriately that the process of observation and assessment to inform future planning requires further consideration. This will enable the staff to monitor more effectively the progress of each child across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum.

The indoor and outdoor learning environments are very well-organised and resourced. They are designed thoughtfully to encourage the children to participate in a wide range of open-ended play opportunities. Almost all of the children have very well-developed fine and gross motor skills. They play enthusiastically in a wide variety of suitable activities, including climbing and balancing on one foot and on narrow edges, and using tongs when gently placing minibeasts into their natural habitat. The children are active participants in their own learning and almost all speak confidently and with excitement and pride about their play and learning.

The health and wellbeing of the children is promoted effectively through a wide range of physical experiences, with a relevant focus on healthy habits and positive mindsets. All staff prioritise consistently the children's safety within the learning environment; this is reinforced with parents through the parental support programmes that are well attended. There are suitable policies in place to safeguard children and these are shared annually with parents. The children are encouraged to advocate for themselves and use appropriately particular phrases to express when they are unhappy with, for example, peer interactions.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The provision for all children in the nursery school is highly inclusive. The well-planned and accessible indoor and outdoor learning environments enable all of the children to engage successfully in purposeful learning experiences. The staff are very proactive in their early identification of SEN and use effectively methods of observation and assessment to monitor and review the progress of the children through the use of personal learning plans.

Staff professional learning aligns well to the needs of the children. Staff learn by observing the AHP staff working with small groups of children identified with SEN, and then transfer these effective teaching and learning strategies into their daily practice with the children. The staff of the nursery school support effectively the parents of children with SEN. In discussions with inspectors, the parents reported that the support given to their child in nursery school, and the strategies suggested for them to use at home, have been highly successful in helping their child make very good progress.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The routines within the nursery school are very well established and the children have developed high levels of confidence and independence. They have formed good friendships and show respect for themselves and each other and the staff. The children seek out each other and plan independently their play together.

There is a language-rich environment. The children engage well in a range of mark making activities, particularly in the outdoor environment, for example, annotating their drawings, writing lists and drawing plans. The staff praise the work produced by the children and encourage them to discuss their thinking processes and reasoning behind their work and play. The staff use well the appropriately selected fiction and non-fiction books and texts, relating to the current planning, to support and extend the children's language.

All the areas of the pre-school curriculum are very well developed. The digital skills of the children are promoted appropriately, and the children use digital technology to capture their learning.

The children's successes are celebrated consistently through the affirming approaches used by staff in their one-to-one interactions, classroom displays, the monthly newsletters and nursery school digital communication with parents. The achievements of the children are celebrated further through the compilation of a scrapbook of their drawings and photographs, evidencing the children's progression in learning.

Professional learning opportunities that staff undertake independently, which ultimately benefit the children in the nursery school, are also celebrated by the staff and leadership.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff place high value on their partnerships with parents and the community; this aligns well to the nursery school's vision. The open-door policy and the opportunity to communicate directly with staff is welcomed, as reported by parents. The home learning packs provided support further the parents in developing their child's skills at home.

The nursery school participates in a wide range of activities provided by external agencies to enhance their provision for, and improve the outcomes of, the children. Throughout this year, staff professional learning focused on the potential impact of premature birth on development and learning has supported well the staff in their work to ensure every child in the nursery school makes progress, with full consideration of their starting point.

Excellent relationships are established with local primary schools which support fully the children's transitions from nursery school to Year 1, and the nursery school has close links with the local Sure Start and day nurseries. The staff report that the strong relationships established with sporting clubs in the community and with Belfast City Council have had a very positive impact on the outcomes for all children and their families. With funding from Belfast City Council in April 2024, the nursery school funded meals for the children not in receipt of free nursery school meals for a three-week period. The parents reported to the nursery school staff how welcome this additional support was and how it helped to ease some financial pressure for that time.

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.

The ETI will monitor the progress of the nursery school in addressing an administrative element of the child protection arrangements.

4. GOING FORWARD

The vision of Our Lady's Nursery School to be "***Child centred, family focused***" is achieved successfully through the dedication of all of the highly skilled staff and their commitment to the holistic development of every child. The staff are meeting effectively the needs of all of the children in a child centred, happy and inclusive environment, as set out in the vision.

ETI will continue to work with Our Lady's Nursery School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the process of consultation with all stakeholders to inform self-evaluation;

Our Lady's Nursery School is well placed to take forward the area for consideration detailed in this report.

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