EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

Primary Insights Report

September 2021 – September 2024

Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

CSE

Contents

Introduction

The findings within this report are informed by the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) first-hand observations and evidence from a wide range of engagements with primary schools, including monitoring and district visits, development of inspection visits, nine follow-up inspections and six pilot inspections. Evidence has also been drawn from eight evaluations which were undertaken during this period, namely:

- [Pre-school and Foundation Stage: Delivering the Curriculum Outdoors](#)

- [Physical education in primary schools](#)

- [The preventative curriculum in schools and education other than at school (EOTAS) Centres](#)

- [Engage II Programme](#)

- [Teacher professional learning for meeting the special educational needs of learners](#)

- [How effectively are children being prepared for living in, and contributing to, a diverse society? The views of learners and leaders in primary schools](#)

- [Digital Skills in the Curriculum - A Baseline Evaluation of the Digital Skills Provision in Primary and Post-primary Schools](#)

- [Future Ready Digital Learning - The impact of teachers' digital devices on educational provision](#)

Key findings

Schools are using a range of approaches to monitor the outcomes of the children in a challenging educational context.

The serious impact of post-pandemic challenges, industrial action and significant budgetary pressures have impacted adversely on monitoring practices to ensure children's progression in learning. Senior and middle leaders remain committed to identifying and supporting the needs of the children. They have increased their consultation with the children and parents. They are also enhancing the use of a range of digital technology as part of their ongoing work in monitoring and evaluating the progress the children are making within and across key stages.

ETI provided a professional learning programme focused on the use and impact of self-evaluation called 'Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together Programme' to support schools in the development of effective monitoring practices. In May 2022, over 600 middle leaders from 318 primary schools participated in a series of three workshops. They reported unanimously that the programme had supported their professional development by enhancing their understanding and providing them with practical ways to implement a wider range of self-evaluation processes.

In June 2024, the Empowering Improvement 2 programme continued with a series of four workshops attended by over 50 senior and middle leaders from 40 primary schools. Again, there was highly positive feedback from those who attended the sessions. They highlighted the benefits of exploring ETI's new inspection framework, including the five core questions to support self-evaluation.

Schools are listening to and acting on the views of the children about their learning experience.

The culture of valuing children's opinions and consulting with them in broader school matters through, for example, School and Eco Councils, has been enhanced further through staff increasingly seeking the children's views on what they can do better to support them with their learning.

In the most effective practice, school leaders are utilising these insights to ensure the school improvement priorities are informed appropriately by the needs and interests of the children. The children are provided with meaningful opportunities to share their views on their learning experiences and are encouraged to suggest ways in which they can be improved, through participation in focus groups. The opportunities not only enhance the children's educational experience, but also nurtures and develops their critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills. The voices of younger children and those who have additional needs should also be more widely sought and acted upon as school become increasingly sophisticated in accessing and responding to children's views and interests.

ETI's new inspection framework extends and deepens inspectors' engagement with children by confirming that the learner is at the centre of the inspection process. A revised questionnaire for all Year 7 children and increased opportunities for inspectors to meet with and listen to children from a broader range of age groups across all key stages are additions to the process which are being trialled throughout the 2024/2025 academic year. Inspectors hope to gain valuable insights into children's wellbeing, academic achievements, and overall learning experience through this increased emphasis, leading to a more comprehensive evaluation.

Additional Department of Education (DE) funding has been used effectively to address the gaps in children's learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Principals appreciated the autonomy and flexibility given to schools in deciding how to best utilise the Engage and the Outdoor Learning Project funding. These important funding streams enabled schools to provide impactful interventions which were tailored to support the specific needs of the children. In almost all of the primary schools visited as part of the ETI Engage 2 Evaluation in 2021-22, the funding was used to support the development of aspects of literacy and numeracy. A small number of schools focused their supports specifically on emotional health and/or physical development.

Digital technology is changing how children are taught and how schools communicate with parents.

Schools welcomed the rollout of the new digital devices and Wi-Fi upgrade in every school. Teachers' increased competence and confidence in using digital technology is being used to enhance learning and teaching. This includes the use of digital tools and platforms to explain concepts, create digital homework, and provide feedback to the children on their work. More schools are using to good effect online Apps to communicate regularly with parents/carers, including in relation to their child's progress. In addition, many schools are purchasing and using a variety of apps and computer-based programs to complement the teaching of literacy and mathematics. These digital tools can be valuable in reinforcing numeracy and reading skills. However, careful selection and monitoring and evaluation of their efficacy are crucial. They can never be a stand-alone substitute for the expertise and guidance provided by skilled teachers and classroom assistants.

The landscape of educational technology is expanding beyond traditional apps and online platforms. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are emerging as powerful tools for creating immersive and interactive learning experiences. VR and AR are being used so that children can explore the world around them by participating in virtual field trips and museum visits. VR is also being used to create simulations for children with special educational needs (SEN), allowing them to experience and explore safely, scenarios which might be challenging for them in the real world. The integration of Generative AI in schools is in its nascent stage. A growing number of teachers recognise its potential benefits and are using it to create presentations and develop lesson content that fosters the development of children's critical thinking skills and creativity.

ETI's Digital Skills in the Curriculum report found variability in the extent, prioritisation and impact of school's strategic curricular planning for the development of children's digital skills. This has led to some gaps in the digital skills provision, particularly in the areas of digital art and design and digital audio. This limits the children's opportunities to develop their creative and expressive skills.

Outdoor learning is being used increasingly to deliver the curriculum across all key stages and to support children's health and wellbeing.

Schools recognise the huge benefits that learning outdoors can have on children's wellbeing and engagement in learning. The ETI report on outdoor learning highlighted how the DE funding for the 'Education Restart Wellbeing' programme in 2020 was welcomed and used by staff to improve the quality of the outdoor provision and to stimulate children's interest in learning. Local amenities, such as forests and beaches, are being used well to provide creative and sustainable learning opportunities to boost the children's confidence, communication, social and physical skills. Outdoor learning is particularly effective, when it is well-planned, builds on prior learning, and extends and deepens the children's knowledge, skills and understanding across the curriculum.

Raising children's understanding of anxiety and developing their resilience to support their social, behavioural, and emotional wellbeing (SBEW) needs is a priority.

As reported in the ETI report on the preventative curriculum, mental health and wellbeing is the number one safeguarding issue faced by a majority of schools during this reporting period. An increasing number of schools are using trauma-informed practice* and nurturing* approaches to support those children who are experiencing anxiety and/or have difficulty with social interaction, concentration and attachment.

Inspection evidence shows that these approaches will only be effective as part of significant cultural shift within a school, where the theory is well-understood and there is a whole school commitment to adapt and customise the approaches, supported by robust implementation and review over a sustained period of time. In addition to the 62 Nurture Groups receiving DE funding, over 400 primary schools have engaged with the Nurture in Education Programme (NEP).

 A growing number of children have regulatory and sensory needs. In the best practice, staff make effective and creative use of all their accommodation to provide additional supportive spaces where children learn to manage their own emotions so that they are ready to learn. The DE's 'Wellbeing fund' to support the implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework has been used strategically in these schools to deliver therapeutic activities such as, yoga, play and music therapy sessions. Access to these therapies is helping the children to understand and communicate better their feelings and emotions.

A major concern for schools continues to be keeping children safe online. Principals report that they invest a lot of time in dealing with the fallout from online bullying type behaviours and safeguarding incidents, the vast majority of which take place outside school.

Schools are working in partnership with Education Other Than At School centres to support more effectively the children with complex Social, Behavioural and Emotional Wellbeing needs.

Increasingly children who are at risk of disengaging from their learning are supported in their own school through targeted programmes and interventions provided by the Education Authority's (EA) Primary Behaviour Support and Provisions service. This includes whole-school professional learning for all staff in embedding trauma-informed practice strategies to support children more effectively. It is important that schools evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in meeting the children's needs and for the EA to ensure schools have equitable access to support.

In all primary schools where there was a follow-up inspection improvement was evident in the quality of education provision.

Strong leadership plays a critical role in creating a school environment that promotes the centrality of children's learning and achievement. Leaders who set a clear vision, build a positive school culture and support staff professional learning and development have empowered both children and staff to reach their full potential. All schools involved in the recent follow-up inspections demonstrated improvement, and almost all required no further follow-up inspection.

A unifying factor across all of the inspections undertaken was a comprehensive review and reallocation of staff roles and responsibilities. This restructuring has impacted positively on the quality of education provided. The EA provided support to these schools to develop the role of the co-ordinator and to improve the quality of the children's language and literacy. The active involvement of governors and the benefits of shared education partnerships have also impacted positively on the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the children. Schools have made good progress in their identified priorities of inclusion and children's wellbeing, but numeracy remains an area that requires further focus and development.

Piloting ETI's new primary inspection models.

ETI's Empowering Improvement – New Framework for Inspection was published in May 2024. The new, co-designed inspection process is underpinned by ETI's revised vision and mission. A central focus of the new inspection model is on ongoing school improvement, emphasising the complementary nature of internal self-evaluation supported by external independent evaluation in creating a more comprehensive pathway to improvement. Key changes to the inspection process include: an enhanced focus on the context, ethos and culture of the school or organisation and its vision and values; five questions as the core of all inspections; a renewed focus on the centrality of the learner; an increased emphasis on professional dialogue during inspections; the use of a school's or organisation's existing documentation as evidence; and a stronger emphasis on the identification, reporting and sharing of highly effective practice.

During May and June of 2024, six primary schools across Northern Ireland opted-in to take part in a pilot inspection. All schools reported being empowered by the approach and the increased opportunities for professional dialogue and reflection.

Key challenges

The legacy of Covid and industrial action necessitates a bold leap forward in school improvement, not just a return to the status quo.

Industrial action, budgetary pressures and the changing demographics of the school population have impacted on school improvement at all levels. Since the cessation of industrial action in April 2024, school leaders are now engaged in the formal process of re-setting and re-establishing their full range of monitoring and evaluation

practices to assess the impact on school improvement initiatives and to provide timely and supportive professional learning opportunities for all staff. The extended period of disruption limited opportunities for middle leaders to observe the learning and teaching, review children's work across the school, and lead staff professional development.

School leaders are responding to these unprecedented challenges with creativity and innovation. Emerging evidence points to a strategic shift in responsibility within middle leadership, with schools moving away from the previous model of individual learning co-ordinators to collaborative learning/curriculum teams. Empowered by this new structure, curriculum teams are pioneering a more holistic approach to learning. This innovation extends to the development of action plans that integrate multiple areas of learning, focusing on the well-rounded needs of the children. This shift is enabling teams to forge stronger connections between subject areas, ultimately driving school improvement that prioritises a holistic curriculum. It also ensures a move away from the heavy reliance on worksheets and templates that emerged during periods of remote learning and fosters a vibrant community of learning where teachers can share knowledge, expertise, and best practice, benefiting both the staff and learners.

Many school leaders have taken this opportunity to re-visit and refresh their school vision. This "reset" is to ensure that the school vision aligns with the evolving needs of the children and the wider community. Recognising the pandemic's impact, DE previously increased the flexibility around the requirements for school development planning allowing schools to operate on a one-year plan rather than a three-year plan. DE's end-to-end review of school improvement is now underway, and almost all schools have continued to implement one-year transitional plans. The work of the end to end review team aims to make the school development planning process less bureaucratic and more impactful, to guide the work of a school in the best interests of the children.

Timely interventions and a highly skilled workforce are key to unlocking the full potential of all children, including the rising number of children with complex special educational needs (SEN).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted adversely on the social and emotional development of many children, as reported by the University of Ulster as early as 2020. Schools report that particularly in the foundation stage, an increased number of children present with delays in their speech and language development, have difficulties regulating their emotions, and require significant adult support. There has been an increase in thresholds to access support for children, across education, health, and social care services, due primarily to significant funding cuts. While this practice is intended to manage limited resources and prioritise those with the most urgent needs, it has led to an increased number of children who are not getting access to the support that they need. The number of children with SEN in mainstream education is also increasing. There has been a significant rise in the number of Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS) classes in the reporting period.

The growing number of schools with SPiMS classes and the increase in the numbers of children with SEN, including those with increasingly complex SEN, means that teachers and classroom assistants require now, more than ever, equitable access to and engagement in regular, high-quality professional learning in this key area of their work. While principals welcome the delivery of whole-school training by outreach service providers as part of the pupil support package, they report that access to more staff professional development and specialist support is needed to meet the complex needs of these children. The recent ETI report on teacher professional learning (TPL) for SEN highlighted the need for more TPL in meeting the needs of learners with dyscalculia and those requiring numeracy support.

The pandemic's disruption on initial teacher education has left many new teachers with limited in-school experience to hone their classroom management and teaching skills. Pairing newly qualified teachers with experienced mentors is critical to provide the essential support they need to refine their classroom practice. The impact of industrial action has highlighted the importance of collaboration. Schools are re-establishing opportunities to identify and share innovative teaching approaches from within the school and embed research-based practice. Schools are equipped to drive forward ongoing school improvement when they take ownership and invest in support and professional learning and development opportunities for school leaders at all levels.

There has been an increase in the use of online platforms for the delivery of professional learning and development as a response to necessary cost-saving measures. There is a place for online learning and teachers have welcomed the flexibility that online learning offers, for example, the well-received EA 'TPL Thursdays' programme. Nevertheless, opportunities for staff to meet with other colleagues in-person in order to network and learn from each other are crucial. The success of DE's Learning Leaders is dependent on teachers engaging in collaborative working and sharing best practice through professional learning communities and networks. Online platforms can supplement, but not replace, these in-person interactions.

A growing number of school leaders are expressing concerns about their own emotional health and wellbeing and that of their staff.

Promoting good mental health and wellbeing is crucial for maintaining a healthy workforce. Many principals and staff report that stresses relating to their role have increased in recent years, such as: dealing with instability of staffing due to teacher absence; a lack of available supply teachers and a lack of qualified, experienced classroom assistants (particularly in the Irish Medium sector); meeting the increasingly complex needs of children; and the challenges associated with growing budget deficits.

There is an increasing number of principals and staff taking phased or early retirement across the primary sector, which is leading to a growing number of acting leadership role and an increasing number of new principals who have limited prior experience of senior leadership. In recognition of the challenges associated with maintaining good emotional health and wellbeing, and to support schools leaders

and staff, the EA developed a [Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) and the [Health Well Hub](#). An increasing number of schools also participate in the [Being Well Doing Well programme](#) which provides a framework and support to cultivate a whole-school approach to emotional health and wellbeing for both the children and staff. These initiatives are making a difference, it will be important to assess their positive impact and effectiveness in supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of the school community.

Schools are working proactively to address low attendance which is a legacy of the COVID-19.

The number of children who are not able to attend school for the full school day and who are regularly absent from school due to anxiety and attachment issues has increased. School leadership is tasked with a significant challenge of addressing low attendance. Accessing support and progressing attendance referrals through the Education Welfare Service* has been impacted negatively by the recent industrial action taken by Education Welfare Officers (EWO) and the challenges in recruiting and retaining EWOs. The development and implementation of a comprehensive policy for addressing children who are currently not attending school would contribute to improving overall attendance and is needed to provide these children with the important opportunities that schools provide to develop the wide range of skills needed for life and work.

Conclusion

The period covered by this report has undoubtedly been a testing time in education. However, schools continue to rise to meet significant challenges, as outlined in this report. We are grateful for the engagement of primary schools in our district work, evaluations, the two Empowering Improvement programmes, and the Development of Inspection and pilot inspections. We are confident that we have developed a new inspection process, informed by extensive consultation, that focuses on the vision and values of the school, and which reflects our mission and vision: to empower improvement, and to be the voice for equity and excellence for all learners.

Appendix 1: Terms

Page 5 **trauma-informed Practice***

Trauma-informed practice is a universal framework, widely used within the health and education sectors. It aims to meet the needs of those children who have experienced trauma by building safety in the classroom through consistency, structure, compassion, and understanding.

Page 5 **nurture***

Nurture is a tried and tested way of relating to children that helps them develop vital social skills, confidence and self-esteem, and become ready to learn.

The nurture approach to learning focuses on emotional needs and development as well as the academic learning of all children. Nurturing approaches: are based on an understanding of how children learn and develop and what they need to help them form positive relationships, build resilience and improve their social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

The DE currently provides funding for 62 Nurture Groups in primary schools in Northern Ireland. In addition, a 'Nurture in Education Programme' is available to all primary, special, post-primary schools and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings. This allows those schools without a funded Nurture Group to avail of training and support in nurture approaches. A Nurture Advisory & Support Service (NASS) has been established within the Education Authority to take forward this work.

Page 9 **Education Welfare Service***

The Education Welfare Service works in partnership with schools, parents, EA Services and other professionals to reduce pupil absence and to raise achievement, enabling young people to maximise their educational opportunities and potential.

Education Welfare Officers can offer advice to parents and schools on attendance related matters such as bullying, suspensions and expulsions and school transfer procedures.

Appendix 2: Helpful links

Further information on **nurture** can be found at:

Education Authority Nurture Advisory and Support Service

Further information on **social, behavioural, and emotional wellbeing (SBEW)** can be found at:

Education Authority Behaviour Support and Provision-Primary
Education Authority High Five Newsletter
Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Schools

Further information on **teacher professional learning** can be found at:

Education Authority Courses and Events