

Report of a Pre-school Inspection
Cookstown Nursery School

October 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Cookstown Nursery School is a controlled pre-school situated on the outskirts of the town. The nursery school provides two full-time classes catering for 53 children of pre-school age who come from the town and surrounding rural area. Currently, seventeen percent of the children are identified as having special educational needs (SEN), and a small number of children have statements of SEN. There are also a small number of newcomer children. Almost one-third of the children have free school meals entitlement.

The staffing comprises a teaching principal, an assistant teacher, three classroom assistants and one SEN assistant. The board of governors is currently being reconstituted. The school has developed links with the local SureStart provider to support the children's transition from home to nursery school. The school participates in the Education Authority's (EA) 'Pathways into Partnership' programme with other local nursery schools in the Mid-Ulster area and is also a member of an Extended Schools Cluster.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

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

Twenty-six per cent of parents responded to the questionnaires, one-half 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 safe and stimulating environment in which their child learns, and the enjoyable learning experiences provided for their child. All of the parents reported that: they receive helpful information about their child's progress; the staff support their child with any difficulties they have with their learning; and they are happy with their child's learning experiences.

In discussions with a small number of parents, they reported that their child is happy and the staff respond flexibly to the needs of their child.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Cookstown Nursery School to consider how well the 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

- There are thorough processes for the nursery school's development planning, including self-evaluation that includes meaningful consultation with the parents and the children.
- Staff observations and baseline assessments identify accurately the children's needs, abilities and interests and are used effectively to inform future planning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The focus on staff professional learning ensures that they have the skills, knowledge and expertise to identify and address appropriately the children's learning needs.
- The children's interest in, and high standard of mark-making, is well-developed.
- The staff work very effectively as a team, and with parents and outside agencies, to meet the needs of all of the children in their care.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff in Cookstown Nursery School are guided in their strategic planning and in all decision making by their vision for happy, confident children who want to come to school and are motivated to learn. The staff value and are proud of their nursery school provision as the first step in the children's education outside of the home.

Within a supportive and inclusive environment, the staff work hard to build nurturing and purposeful relationships with the children and their families. The views of the parents and children feature strongly in the school development planning process. There are thorough and ongoing procedures in place for self-evaluation and the current priorities for development are appropriate and well-considered. The board of governors are well-informed about the work of the nursery school through regular meetings and the sharing of relevant information. Continuing with arranged professional learning around school development planning will enhance further the well-established processes.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The nursery school has comprehensive long- and medium-term planning in place which takes full account of all areas of the pre-school curriculum. There is a clear and strategic vision and rationale for the current focus on developing what the nursery school is calling short-term 'planning in the moment', that is, planning which is used by staff to respond to each child's interests and needs as they arise. The professional development, and personal research and learning undertaken by the staff has impacted positively on the quality of the learning environment, planning, observations and assessment and, as a consequence, on the outcomes and experiences for the children.

The indoor and outdoor play environments have been thoughtfully designed; very effective use is being made of natural and seasonal resources to promote creative and investigative play. The staff are making the most of the autumnal environmental changes to promote authentic learning experiences across the pre-school curriculum. The 'settling in' baseline assessments completed by the staff are very detailed and are informed by astute observations of the children. These observations support effective planning and teaching which enables successful learning for all of the children.

Staff interactions with the children are calm and gentle and are developing very effectively the children's use and understanding of language across the pre-school curriculum. There are very positive relationships throughout the nursery school which foster a safe and caring learning environment. At this early stage of the year, almost all of the children are very settled in their surroundings. Healthy lifestyles are encouraged on a daily basis, through the well-organised snack and dinnertime routines and daily opportunities for energetic play outdoors.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The nursery school provides an inclusive and welcoming learning environment. The children are forming friendships with one another; they follow the positive example modelled by staff and show care and empathy to one another. The principal and staff have been proactive in seeking out the necessary support and professional learning opportunities that allow them to meet very effectively the needs of all children. The staff's active and consistent use of visual cues and schedules is supporting the children well to understand and manage class routines. Through the staff's skilful use of song and rhyme, the children also enjoy and are supported to transition from one activity to another at key points during the day. At the time of the inspection, almost all of the children cope well with, and respond positively to, the established routines. The children who require additional support with their learning are fully involved in the activities and their daily routine is at a pace that is appropriate to their needs.

The ongoing work and commitment of staff to meet the individual needs of each child drives them in their significant efforts to access timely support from outside agencies. This early intervention enables the staff to meet very effectively the children's needs and supports them to transition successfully at the end of their pre-school education to an appropriate year one placement.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

All staff know the children well, evidenced by their detailed records of each child's starting point and progress. They identify targets for the children and use specific praise as the children make progress in achieving them. The staff celebrate the individuality of each child with 'rainbow moments' where they observe and affirm the child as the learning is happening, and by showcasing their work throughout the two classrooms, shared spaces and through an online communication platform for parental use. A notable aspect of the provision is the children's interest in, and quality of, mark-making; they enjoy experimenting with a wide variety of mark-making tools, and their representational drawings are very well-developed. The children's work is annotated by the staff to reflect the children's thoughts and their developing language skills. Most of the children communicate confidently with adults and one another. They enjoy browsing books, listen attentively to the carefully selected stories and participate enthusiastically in rhymes and songs.

The flexible approach to planning fosters child-led learning, motivates the children and develops their curiosity and imagination. For example, the children use a range of play resources to build a bus to take everyone to the ice castle. The children explore the natural materials, such as leaves, seeds and flowers and can talk about the seasonal changes and their impact on animals, such as hedgehogs. Mathematical language is developed naturally through play as the children count, sort, match, and use timers.

Almost all of the children have settled well into nursery school and are becoming more independent. They can put on their aprons, wash their hands, and select their name label to put on their artwork. They choose where to play and a small number of children are beginning to engage in collaborative play in the role play and construction areas.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The nursery staff value their collaborative and consistent approach to their work, as evidenced by their internal communication, daily reflections on the children's learning and the external links they have made through cluster arrangements. These professional connections enable them to share effective practice and access professional learning opportunities tailored to the children's current needs.

The staff understand and value the importance of close collaboration with parents. The noticeboard at the nursery school entrance provides a wealth of information on support networks and directs parents to essential services. An informative newsletter provides practical suggestions for parents to support their child at home. To meet the needs of the children and parents at this early stage of the school year, the staff offer support, such as toilet-training sessions led by the health visitors, to educate and support parents with this aspect of the child's development. This joint approach with the health visitor is having a positive impact on the development of the children's independence skills. "Stay and Play" sessions and additional workshops delivered as part of the Department of Education's 'Getting Ready to Learn' programme, continue throughout the school year, to support parents in meeting their child's developmental and learning needs. Additionally, staff collaborate well with external providers to improve the children's physical development and emotional wellbeing.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

Cookstown Nursery School's vision for successful learning is evident in both the long-term strategic decision-making process and in the day-to-day running of the nursery school. Through ongoing collaboration, the staff team ensure consistency in their approaches so that all children benefit from an engaging learning environment, where the individual needs of each child are understood and met, and their progress is celebrated.

ETI will continue to work with Cookstown Nursery School, including to share an example of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the staff's use of highly effective, child-led approaches to observe and assess the children's learning as they settle into the nursery school, enabling all of the children to make progress.

Cookstown Nursery School is well placed to take forward the area for consideration detailed in this report.

5. APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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