

Report of a Pre-School Inspection
Downpatrick Nursery School

October 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Downpatrick Nursery School is a controlled school located in a building which is shared with Down Sure Start in Mount Crescent, Downpatrick. The single-classroom nursery provides full-time provision for 26 pre-school children who come from the town of Downpatrick and surrounding rural area. Almost one-third of the children have free school meals entitlement. A small number of newcomer children attend the nursery.

The staff comprises a teaching principal, one full-time and one part-time classroom assistant, and a volunteer. The nursery employs a part-time speech and language therapist through the Department of Education's Extended Schools funding. A strong emphasis is placed on outdoor learning. Downpatrick Nursery School was the first school in the world to be awarded the 'Eco-Schools Green Flag'; the school has subsequently been awarded eleven flags.

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.

Seventy-five percent of parents responded to the online confidential questionnaire, forty-two percent of whom included written comments. The responses were wholly positive about all aspects of the provision in the nursery school. In the written comments, the parents praised: the highly experienced and dedicated staff; the individualised support that their children receive, particularly with regard to speech and language development; the excellent communication; and the outdoor learning environment. All of the parents reported that their child is thriving and loves attending the nursery school. In discussions with a small number of the parents, they reported that their children are happy, well-settled and are making good progress. Parents of children who previously attended the nursery expressed their appreciation of the 'Stay and Play' sessions and individualised support that enabled their children to be well-prepared for primary school.

All teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, and all provided written comments. Their responses were also wholly positive. They reported that there is a positive working environment, they are well-supported by the principal and governors and are a valued member of the team. In addition, the staff share their knowledge and professional learning with one another to provide a creative, caring, and fun learning environment for all of the children.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Downpatrick 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

- The nursery school has a clear, well-understood and child-centred vision which is reflected in the comprehensive curriculum provided and the progression of the children.
- The staff interact skilfully with the children in the thoughtfully designed learning environment to foster their curiosity, develop their creativity, and celebrate their individuality.
- The comprehensive planning is informed by detailed observations of the children's learning, enabling the staff to tailor the learning experience to each individual child.
- A key feature of the provision is the highly effective approaches used to promote the children's language development.
- All of the children are aware of their progress and show pride and a sense of accomplishment when they achieve their learning milestones.
- The staff value and prioritise building strong relationships with the parents and provide regular opportunities for them to participate in their children's learning experience.
- 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.

Areas for consideration:

- to review and update the behaviour and special educational needs policies to ensure they reflect the practice of the nursery school; and
- to reduce and refine the targets in the one-year action plan to enable the staff to monitor and evaluate better the impact of the improvement work undertaken.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Downpatrick Nursery School has a clear and well understood, child-centred vision that has been shaped through extensive consultation. The school community is committed to achieving this vision, which is “to develop happy, secure, confident and independent children in a rich and varied environment that stimulates their curiosity, individuality and imagination through purposeful play.”

The collegial staff engage regularly in self-evaluation, using a variety of tools to assess current practices; in doing so they have identified several relevant priorities for development. To enhance the effectiveness of school development planning, they have commenced training with the Education Authority on school development planning. A reduction and refinement of the targets within the current action plans will enable the staff to monitor and evaluate better the impact of the improvement work undertaken on the provision and outcomes for the children.

The longstanding and proactive board of governors draws on the professional expertise and educational experience of each governor to guide and support the nursery school staff. Recently, they conducted a thorough audit of the school ethos to gain a deeper understanding of its culture which confirmed that a positive and supportive ethos permeates the school at all levels. The governors have a clear understanding of the school’s current priorities, the impact of professional development on the provision and the areas for future development.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff provide a comprehensive pre-school curriculum that ensures all children have access to a wide variety of learning experiences. The learning environment is well-planned and designed to stimulate the children’s curiosity and promote their active engagement. The staff have adapted the learning environment in recent years, drawing valuable lessons from the pandemic, which include changing the snack routine, introducing an outdoor handwashing station and extending the outdoor provision. These enhancements provide the children with more choice and opportunities to develop their independence. The thoughtful presentation of the children’s work in shared spaces encourages conversations and fosters a sense of community. Additionally, the use of “Chatter Mats” during lunchtime and “Chatter Books” provides opportunities for children to engage in conversations with their peers and the staff.

The staff interactions with the children are skilful. Through working closely with a speech and language therapist, the staff have become very adept at promoting children’s language skills. The staff capitalise well on spontaneous learning opportunities, such as a missing wellington boot and a spider on the climbing frame, to enhance the children’s language development, encourage problem-solving, promote resilience, and expand their understanding of the world around them.

Over the past two years, the staff have collaborated to develop and implement comprehensive long- and medium-term planning that outlines clearly progression across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. The staff have participated in training and adopted an agreed method for recording observations of the children's learning. During weekly meetings, the staff team discuss and use these detailed and insightful observations to tailor the planning and ensure that the learning experience is relevant and personalised for each child.

The staff prioritise the health and wellbeing of the children which is exemplified in the well-planned outdoor physical development opportunities. These activities encourage the children to engage in energetic play, develop their climbing and balancing skills, and explore safely 'risky' play. The parents who met with inspectors report that the school dinners offered have encouraged their child to be a more adventurous eater and to try a wider variety of foods.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Inclusion and equity are at the heart of the nursery school, where all members of the nursery community feel valued, respected, and heard. The dedicated staff are highly responsive to each child's unique needs.

A feature of the provision is the specialised support for children who have been identified with speech, language and communication needs. The part-time speech and language therapist and highly skilled staff work collaboratively through, for example, small group sessions and tailored story times, to support the children. The staff have developed and use a "Sandcastle of Language" approach, which is a language programme aligned with the school's thematic planning, to ensure a consistent language-learning experience across the provision. This cohesive approach is impacting positively on the children's language development.

Children identified as having special educational needs (SEN) have personal learning plans (previously referred to as individual education plans) in place which are developed through collaboration with the child, parents, and staff. The staff also work closely with allied health professionals and Sure Start staff to ensure the children have a smooth transition to nursery. The staff have identified appropriately the need to review the SEN Policy to ensure it reflects current practice.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff recognise and celebrate each child's progress. They share openly with the children their observations of the children's learning and use this as a form of praise. As a consequence, the children are aware of the learning milestones they are achieving.

Almost all of the children have adjusted well to nursery school. They settle quickly and are forming new friendships. They have a good understanding of the daily routines, even at this early stage of the year, and explore eagerly new learning opportunities.

Almost all of the children interact confidently with adults. They enjoy sharing stories about their families and experiences with the staff and visitors and are beginning to engage in conversations with their peers during snack, lunch and play time. The children express their ideas creatively through painting, music-making and role-play. A small number of the children's representational drawings are well-developed for the time of year.

A strength of the nursery provision is its emphasis on fostering the children's connection to the natural world through exploration. The children show care for living things and use their senses to investigate and describe the environment around them. They use mathematical language naturally during play as they talk about shape, size and colour.

The staff promote positive behaviour in the nursery and use a variety of successful strategies to encourage positive behaviour in the children. The children's behaviour is excellent.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff are discerning in the professional development opportunities they access to ensure they are impactful and meet the needs of the nursery school community. They have well-established links with local nursery and primary schools and visit regularly other pre-school provisions to learn from and share their effective practice.

The staff value their partnership with parents, as demonstrated by the regular 'Stay and Play' sessions, parent forum videos, informative monthly newsletters, and frequent meetings. The 'lending library' is used well by the children, and parents are encouraged to regularly read to their children.

The children also benefit from visitors to the setting and visits to local places of interest, such as the historic sites of the Mound of Down and Down Cathedral. Vouchers, provided by the local Sure Start centre, are used to purchase fruit for the nursery school, supporting both the children's health and a local business.

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

Downpatrick Nursery School is achieving its vision of nurturing happy, confident and independent children in a child-centred and inclusive learning environment that fosters their language, curiosity and individuality.

The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the highly effective approaches used to promote the children's language development.

The ETI, through the District Inspector, will continue to work with the school to take forward the areas for consideration in this report and to share the example of highly effective practice from which others may learn.

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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