

Report of a Pre-school Inspection  
Monkstown Nursery School

November 2024

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Monkstown Nursery School is a controlled cross-community nursery school located in Monkstown in Newtownabbey. There are 78 children attending the nursery school, comprising a full-time class of 26 children and two part-time classes of 26 children in each class. There is a full-time teacher, two part-time teachers, five assistants, including two special educational needs (SEN) assistants, and two additional support staff. The children come from the local area and surrounding towns. Six percent of the children have free school meals entitlement and there are a small number of newcomer children who attend the nursery school. A small number of children are identified as having SEN.

The nursery school is a member of 'Thrive', Barnardo's early years cluster for pre-schools in the Monkstown and Rathcoole areas. The staff have developed positive links with other schools through the 'Newtownabbey Empowering Schools Together' (NEST) principals' group and cluster sessions for learning support coordinators, funded by Community Relations in School (CRIS).

## **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 (16) of parents responded to the online confidential questionnaire, of which one-half (8) 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 child-centred focus at the heart of the nursery school; the caring, welcoming staff; and the individualised support that their children receive, particularly those who have additional needs. In discussions with a small number of the parents, they reported that their child: loves attending the nursery school; is developing friendships; and is making very good progress in all aspects of their learning.

Eighty percent (8) of the teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, with thirty percent (3) providing additional written comments. Their responses were mostly positive and highlighted that there are positive relationships between the children, staff and parents, and the creative learning environment enables the children to 'blossom and thrive'.

A summary of the questionnaire responses, including the issues raised, was shared with the principal and the chair of the board of governors.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside the Monkstown 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 well-established child-centred vision is at the heart of the nursery school where the children are valued, respected and nurtured, and are making very good progress in their learning.
- The collaborative approach to self-evaluation and planning is supporting effectively the development of the nursery school's priorities, informing strategic planning and leading to improvement.
- The children's learning is extended across all areas of the pre-school curriculum through consistent and skilful staff interactions.
- All of the children are happy learners and demonstrate high levels of resilience, confidence and awareness of their own emotions, which is supported well by the whole school focus on emotional health and wellbeing.
- Inclusion is central to the vision to meet the needs of every child. The detailed planning, support and provision of well-chosen interventions is enabling every child to make progress.
- There are consistent opportunities for professional learning for all staff, which are aligned strategically to the needs of the children and empowers the staff to respond to their needs.
- 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.

## **3. MAIN REPORT**

### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

Monkstown Nursery School's well-established vision has been shaped through extensive consultation with staff, parents and governors. The vision statement 'Together we SHINE' is exemplified through the 'Supportive, Happy, Inclusive, Nurturing and Empowering' environment where all children, staff and parents are valued. The staff and governors are fully committed to achieving the vision which is impacting positively on the children's self-esteem and confidence. The board of governors is very supportive of the nursery school staff and use their professional expertise, combined skillset and educational knowledge effectively to guide the work of the school. They have a good understanding of the current priorities and have identified further areas for development to inform strategic planning and to support the nursery school's improvement journey.

The staff work collegially to engage in regular self-evaluation resulting in a shared understanding and greater collective ownership of the process. The interim school development plan and the associated action plans contain appropriate priorities for improvement based on effective self-evaluation and consultation with parents and governors. Current priorities include a review of the outcomes for children identified as having SEN and developing outdoor learning with a focus on more collaborative practice. The proactive staff are consistently seeking out ways to improve the provision and provide high quality learning experiences for all of the children. They are developing further the processes for monitoring and evaluating to ascertain more comprehensively the impact of the actions on the provision.

## **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

All of the staff interactions with the children are of a consistently high quality. They respond very skilfully to the children's natural curiosity, help to develop their ideas and use the planned and incidental opportunities to extend their thinking. The staff have provided books and writing materials which are readily available throughout the nursery school and are impacting positively on the children's interest in stories and early mark making. Due to skilful and consistent staff modelling, the children use mathematical language naturally during their play and most are developing their ability to problem-solve when investigating capacity through water play.

Personal, social and emotional development (PSE) is a strength of the nursery school provision. The daily routines are used very effectively to develop the children's independence. All of the children have very positive attitudes and dispositions towards their learning. They are making excellent progress in developing their social skills and make choices confidently to extend their play and engage in purposeful and sustained play.

All of the available space is used very effectively to create a stimulating, child-centred indoor learning environment, which supports well the children's learning across all areas of the curriculum. The staff have prioritised the development and use of the outdoor environment, which the children enjoy exploring. They have good opportunities to investigate their natural surroundings, develop their gross motor skills, plant bulbs, and observe how flowers grow.

The staff have strategically reviewed their approach to planning over the last few years which has supported the development of detailed long-, medium- and short-term planning across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. The planning provides for progression in the children's learning and is of a high quality, and the collaborative approach enables all of the staff to have a shared understanding of the pre-school curriculum. The targeted and incidental observations are used effectively by the staff to inform future learning and to meet each child's individual needs.

The staff promote the children's health and wellbeing at every opportunity. Detailed risk assessments have been produced which are used well by the staff to keep the children safe during 'risky play'. The children are benefitting from sensory activities and energetic play to support their physical core development. Healthy eating during

the buffet snack and dinner routines are used well by the staff to encourage the children to try new foods, eat healthily and develop the children's social skills. The staff use a number of strategies to support the children's wellbeing, such as yoga, and have recently enrolled in the Education Authority's (EA) 'Being Well, Doing Well' programme.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

Positive relationships and open communication between the parents and staff are central to the supportive and inclusive culture and ethos in the nursery school. From an early stage, and prior to the children attending the nursery school, the staff engage in consultation with parents to build trust, gain in-depth knowledge of their child's interests and strengths, and identify aspects of learning and development where the child may require additional support. Through regular professional learning, the staff are responsive to the needs of the children. They also have a flexible approach to induction which supports the children and their parents to develop relationships with the staff, through for example, 'stay and play' sessions for parents and home visits by the staff.

The nursery school's provision and support for children identified with SEN is outlined clearly in their planning and supports the staff to identify at an early stage the children who are experiencing difficulty in their learning. The children's personal education plans (PLPs) are detailed, have appropriate strategies and are monitored closely. The staff work in partnership with external support agencies, for example speech therapists, to enable the children to receive the support they need, and they share appropriately the strategies with parents so that they can be implemented consistently in the nursery school and at home. Access to the curriculum for children with additional needs is planned for sensitively, carefully and professionally by the staff, and every child is valued and treated with care and respect, in line with the vision of the nursery school.

### **D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The children are very proud of their achievements and respond very well to praise and encouragement. They are keen to talk about their play and enjoy showing their model rockets, spaceships and playdough hedgehogs to their peers and to the adults. Stickers are used consistently to praise and extend opportunities for the children to talk about their learning and achievements. The prompt stickers, 'Ask me about' are impacting very positively on the quality of the children's conversations with staff and with their parents.

All of the staff model language very well which is extending the children's vocabulary. As a result, the children speak confidently when asking and answering questions, explaining their thinking, and developing their imaginative play through role play in the café and castle.

The children's work is celebrated in attractive displays around the nursery school and there are good examples of early representational paintings and chalk drawings. The children's fine motor skills and hand-to-eye co-ordination are developing very well as they use very precisely small equipment and tools to create playdough cakes, search for worms in soil and complete sequencing patterns.

The staff model effectively respect and kindness which impacts positively on the children's self-esteem and confidence. The consistent use of the 'Sunshine Rules' in promoting positive behaviour and the staff's skilful implementation of a wide range of nurturing strategies is exemplified in the children's excellent behaviour. The 'Sunshine Rules' are age appropriate and align well with the school's focus on emotional health and wellbeing. Almost all of the children have high levels of independence and are happy, inquisitive learners.

The child-centred focus ensures that the children's achievements and success outside of the nursery school, for example sporting and dancing accomplishments, are celebrated and shared by all of the staff and children. The staff and parents report that the annual 'Superhero Day' builds each child's resilience, their sense of achievement and leads to further success by developing their confidence to try new things.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

There are excellent relationships in the nursery school between the staff, children and parents. Regular formal and informal communication through a digital application, website and newsletter, keeps parents well informed about the life of the nursery school, their child's success and achievements and the progress that their child is making.

All of the staff participate in well considered professional learning. The whole team approach to learning empowers all staff members to feel valued and respond to the children's needs through the consistent use of new strategies. The staff value the emphasis on continuous learning, research informed practice and the dissemination of any new learning to the whole team.

The staff foster a love of reading and language development through their participation in the Department of Education's (DE) 'Getting Ready to Learn' programme. Parents and staff have great pride and commitment to their school and they work together to improve the accommodation and resources for the benefit of the children, for example by spending weekends planting in, and maintaining and developing, the garden area.

The nursery school staff benefit from participating in the 'Thrive' Barnardo's early years cluster for pre-schools in the Monkstown and Rathcoole areas and in the sharing of effective practice. They have developed very good links with many local nursery and primary schools through the NEST cluster programme which is beneficial in providing financial support for activities such as music sessions, resources and training in programmes such as 'PATHS'\* and 'Early Talk Boost'\*.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION (Adult Safeguarding in organisations such as work-based learning, further education etc)**

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

Monkstown Nursery School is effectively achieving its vision of 'Together we SHINE' and has successfully created a 'Supportive, Happy, Inclusive, Nurturing and Empowering' environment where all of the children are thriving and progressing in their learning.

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

- the consistent and purposeful staff interactions to support and extend the children's learning across all areas of the curriculum.

The ETI will continue to work with Monkstown Nursery School, including to share the example of highly effective practice set out above from which others may learn.



## 5. APPENDICES

### 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%

## APPENDIX 2: NOTES

**Page 5**                      **Barnardo's 'PATHS' programme** is designed to help children to develop self-control and social and emotional learning skills.

**Page 5**                      **'Early Talk Boost'** is a programme for 3 and 4 year olds who have difficulties with speech, language and communication.

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