

Report of a Pre-school Inspection
Panda Cross Community Playgroup

February 2025



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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk * denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Panda Cross Community Playgroup is a voluntary playgroup located in the Killymaddy Centre in the rural townland of Killeeshill between Dungannon and Ballygawley. The children attending come from the wider catchment area of Dungannon and Ballygawley. The playgroup has an enrolment of 39 pre-school children and operates a part-time morning and afternoon session which provides places for 25 children and 14 children respectively. Twenty-eight percent of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). The staff complement comprises a leader, a deputy leader and two assistants. The playgroup's Management Committee has 22 active community members.

The playgroup participates in the Department of Education's (DE) 'Getting Ready to Learn' (GRTL)* programme.

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.

One hundred per cent (39) of the parents responded to the questionnaire, all of whom reported that they are aware of the playgroup's vision and that the staff take into account their views. All of the parents reported that their child is happy at the playgroup, and they receive helpful information about the learning experiences and their child's progress.

There were 11 additional parental written comments in which they affirmed the work of the professional and approachable staff. Parents commented that the staff go "above and beyond" to meet the needs of all of the children and that their proactive efforts in providing frequent communication is keeping them well informed of all playgroup events. The staff's positive relationships with the children and their parents/carers were also highlighted as a key strength. A small number of parents detailed their appreciation of the playgroup's provision of a speech and language programme delivered by a speech therapist, which is contributing well to the development of their child's speech, language and communication skills.

A summary of the questionnaire responses was shared with the leader and the chairperson of the management committee.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

ETI worked alongside the **playgroup** to consider how well the **playgroup**:

- 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

- Panda Cross Community Playgroup has a clear and shared vision, “to provide the highest quality care and education for all children in partnership with parents/carers, enabling each child to develop to their full potential through a child-centred play-based preschool curriculum”. The vision is realised through the playgroup’s warm, caring, inclusive and nurturing atmosphere where all of the children are placed at the centre of the learning process.
- The management committee, leader and all of the staff have a clear understanding of the purpose of self-evaluation for improvement. Through their engagement in robust self-evaluation processes which take account of the voice of the child, they have identified key priorities for development such as music, sensory and outdoor play experiences. They have also created strategic action plans which they monitor regularly to review progress.
- The provision of a broad and balanced pre-school curriculum for all of the children is evident in the curriculum planning. The planning and observation cycle is undertaken collegially by the staff and is developing well their evaluations on how effectively they plan for challenge and progression for each child.
- The children engage in collaborative play with sustained levels of concentration. Their confidence and resilience to persevere with tasks, problem solve and deal with mistakes is supporting well their personal, social and emotional development, modelled by the staff’s consistent and skilful interactions with them.
- The children’s language is developing well. They demonstrate very good attention and listening skills at story time and they have a clear love for stories and books. They share independently relevant books, magazines, and thematic scrapbooks with adults and their peers which is extending their learning and interests.
- The early identification of children who have additional needs is met through effective staff observation and assessment of the children’s response to all of the playgroup activities. The staff also consult regularly with parents/carers and outside agencies.

- The playgroup’s strong working relationships at all levels and proactive efforts to involve the whole school community in the life of the playgroup has resulted in a rich, child-centred and inclusive community of learning. The members of the management committee, which includes a very large number of active parents, use and share their expertise very well with the playgroup. This is impacting positively on the playgroup’s provision and the children’s learning.
- 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.

Area for action:

- to review the planning processes for the children who require individual education plans. Specific targets are necessary to monitor sufficiently the children’s progress and to better inform individual planning.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The vision for Panda Cross Community Playgroup has recently been revised by the staff in consultation with the playgroup’s management committee and key stakeholders. The playgroup’s new vision is, “to provide the highest quality care and education for all children in partnership with parents/carers, enabling each child to develop to their full potential through a child-centred play-based preschool curriculum”. The vision is realised through the playgroup’s warm, caring, inclusive and nurturing atmosphere where all of the children are placed at the centre of the learning process.

The strategic and proactive management committee, leader and all of the staff have a clear understanding of the purpose of self-evaluation and its link to improvement. Through their engagement in robust self-evaluation processes, they have identified appropriate key priorities for development which includes increased music, sensory and outdoor play experiences for the children. The strategic three-year development plan and associated action plans guide the staff well in their work and are aligned to the pre-school’s vision. Appropriate staff professional learning and training from the Northern Ireland Forest Schools Association (NIFSA)* has been prioritised appropriately to assist the staff in achieving the playgroup’s priority of developing outdoor play.

The collegial staff team monitor and review the key priorities regularly to ascertain progress and improvement. They incorporate and value the voice of the child through, for example, playing the children’s choice of music to signal the playgroup’s daily “tidy-up” routines. The children lead each other effectively in all of the “tidy up” routines and transitions in the playgroup. Almost all of the staff evaluations show clearly how the ongoing improvements are impacting positively on the children’s learning and development. For example, the staff evaluations detail that the reorganisation of the outdoor area into well defined play spaces has led to improved curriculum provision for the children across all areas of learning of the pre-school curriculum.

The management committee comprised of 22 local community members work very effectively together to support the playgroup to live out its shared vision. The use of a hybrid model of face-to-face and online meetings enables all members to contribute to meetings and make informed decisions on how they can use their specific expertise to assist the development of the playgroup provision.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The curriculum is a key part of the playgroup's vision and clear long- medium- and short- term curriculum plans guide the staff well in the provision of a broad and balanced pre-school curriculum. The staff use these plans effectively to assess the children's progress in learning and to build appropriately on the children's achievements and interests.

The indoor learning environment and the recently developed outdoor learning environment are used very well by the staff to provide interesting and creative learning experiences. All of the play areas are well defined with a wide range of accessible resources which is developing and extending the children's independence skills. The inclusion of a wide variety of authentic materials such as dried food, pebbles and real vegetables engages the children very effectively in sustained levels of exploratory and sensory play, which is developing the children's investigative skills. Relevant books, magazines and scrapbooks of topic related photos are displayed appropriately in all play areas and are developing very well the children's interests in books and a love for learning. The staff interactions with the children are consistently of high quality and they encourage child-led conversations, questioning and prompting the children to extend their interests and speech, language and communication skills.

Digital technologies such as telephones, cameras and electronic play drills provide the children with meaningful play experiences. The use of Bluetooth speakers and iPads by the staff for whole group music activities is increasing the children's awareness of the use of information communication technology (ICT) in their world around them.

The staff teach the children about healthy lifestyles through the provision of a range of healthy and nutritious foods and drinks at their snack, and through a wide range of physical and energetic activities both indoors and outdoors. Staff skilfully build on the children's resilience to persevere, make mistakes, problem solve and enjoy challenge through their use of positive praise and encouraging conversations with the children. The staff's careful and well-structured playgroup routines are enabling the children to enjoy all aspects of the playgroup in a safe, secure and inclusive learning environment.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The playgroup is committed to creating an inclusive atmosphere where every child and family feels a sense of belonging. The staff engage in meaningful conversation with parents about their children's experiences at home and in the playgroup during the flexible drop-off and pick-up times. This is fostering respectful relationships among staff, children, and parents and is contributing well to the creation of a warm and supportive, community playgroup in which the children thrive.

All of the staff have an excellent understanding of the children's unique strengths and interests, and they promote a nurturing environment where each child can flourish at their own pace. Through use of their in-depth observations and assessments of the children's responses to the well-structured daily routines and play activities, the playgroup's curriculum provision for each child is well informed. All of the children integrate seamlessly into daily activities. The enhancement of the outdoor play area has resulted in increased opportunities for all of the children to actively participate in a range of appropriate outdoor play activities which challenge and extend their learning.

The staff have established effective processes to identify and support children with special educational needs (SEN). The provision of small group work with tailored resources and activities in the newly created sensory area is developing very well the children's early speech, language and communication skills and their personal, social and emotional development. In addition, the management committee proactively fund speech and language therapy sessions for those children who need additional support with their speech development. During these sessions, the leader prioritises staff capacity building by facilitating the staff to accompany the children and observe the work of the speech therapist. This "hands-on" approach empowers staff to implement the strategies consistently and better support the children.

For those identified as having (SEN), individual educational plans (IEPs)* set out appropriate strategies to best support the children's progress. The staff need to review their approach to setting IEP targets, to focus more specifically on the individual learning goals of each child in order to monitor and review their progress.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The playgroup's happy, positive and child centred ethos is underpinned by strong working relationships at all levels. Partnerships with parents and the local Sure Start* support the well-planned induction processes and the children's transitions into the playgroup. The very detailed "All About Me" book which is completed by the child's parent/carer, enables the staff to plan effectively for each child, taking into account their individual starting points.

Staff use a wide range of assessment methods during the pre-school year which shows clearly that all of the children are making progress in line with their abilities. All of the children's individual achievements are recognised, celebrated and shared with parents/carers through various communication applications and at termly parent-teacher meetings where they also receive a detailed written report of their child's progress.

High staff expectations for all of the children is evident in the staff's optimal use of every opportunity to encourage the children to succeed. The staff incorporate the use of consistent positive language with the children, Makaton* signs and positive songs such as "I am the best that I can be" into their daily practice with the children. As a result, the increase in the children's self-esteem, self-awareness and engagement in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum is visible. The children receive appropriate awards, certificates and stickers to acknowledge, encourage and further embed their individual success in all areas of learning.

The staff provide a stimulating learning environment throughout the playgroup where the individuality of each child's work is recognised and valued. The recent introduction of a "Wow Wall" to display and recognise the children's achievements and talents across all areas of the curriculum, either in photograph form or the children's unique work samples, is motivating the children to learn.

The children engage independently in collaborative play with sustained levels of attention and resilience. Their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination are very well developed. Almost all of the children competently use a wide range of tools safely through, for example, hammers and nails to make models and hand food mixers to mix citrus fruits in the water tray. The children's knowledge of the "World Around Us (WAU)" is well developed through for example: exploration of materials with magnets to identify objects that are "magnetic" and "not magnetic"; problem solving to construct large and steady channels of flowing water with guttering; planting and watering Spring plants; and construction of models from a range of natural materials at the woodwork table.

The playgroup staff have well-established relationships with the local feeder primary schools. The teachers from the primary schools make visits to the playgroup to meet and get to know the children. The teachers liaise closely with the playgroup staff and receive detailed transition records for all of the children. This enables smooth transitions for the playgroup children into primary school. These proactive approaches by the playgroup staff are particularly beneficial for children with special educational needs, whose individual needs are communicated effectively to the relevant staff to ensure appropriate support is planned for them as they move to their next stage of learning.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The staff dedicate a lot of their time to growing a whole school community of learning. They value the role of parents/carers in their children's learning and use detailed newsletters and digital platforms to inform them regularly of all learning and playgroup events as well as inviting them to participate in the GRTL parenting courses and stay and play sessions. Playgroup/parent evaluation forms show that they are developing their knowledge and understanding on how to support their child's learning at home. The parents are supportive of one another with a few coming into the nursery to share their skills, complementing the work of the staff. This is developing a consistent approach between the staff and parents in supporting their child's learning and development and is enriching the children's educational experiences.

Through the staff's connections with representatives from local businesses and community organisations, they receive charitable resources, for example, building and construction materials for "loose parts"* play. The representatives also visit the playgroup and provide the children with information about jobs such as, the role of the vet. Events like the playgroup's Christmas play and graduation ceremonies are held in the local community hall where the children's unique talents are recognised and celebrated. As a result, these partnerships are contributing positively to the children's sense of belonging and connection to their community.

The solid partnership with the management committee is integral to the playgroup's overall success. The committee supports staff wellbeing through a range of appropriate strategies while also providing a learning environment which remains nurturing and focused on the needs of all of the children. This holistic approach creates the right conditions for a thriving community of learning where the child is placed at the centre of every learning opportunity.

Appropriate continuous professional development aligned with the playgroup's development plan supports the staff to participate in relevant training programmes from the Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISENI)* and the Education Authority's Special Education Needs Early Years Inclusion Service (SENEYIS)* which is impacting positively on all of the children's learning. The leader is carrying out the role of the Independent Early Years Specialist and has identified the need to explore the use of an external Early Years Specialist to enable a suitable level of objectivity, support and challenge for the whole staff team.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

Panda Cross Community Playgroup proactive management committee, staff and parents are highly committed to the playgroup's vision, "to provide the highest quality care and education for all children in partnership with parents/carers, enabling each child to develop to their full potential through a child-centred play-based preschool curriculum". They work very well together to create a warm, caring, inclusive and nurturing atmosphere where all of the children are placed at the centre of the learning process.

ETI will continue to work with Panda Cross Community Playgroup, 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 stimulating learning environment with clearly defined play spaces and a range of accessible and authentic resources which is enabling the children's progress in their learning and development across all areas of the preschool curriculum.

Panda Cross Community Playgroup is well placed to take forward the area for action.

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

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Getting Ready to Learn (GRTL)

The Department of Education's Getting Ready to Learn project is focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.

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Northern Ireland Forest Schools Association (NIFSA)

Northern Ireland Forest School Association provides training and accreditation to a range of educational establishments such as schools, nursery schools and universities.

"Forest School" is based on a Scandinavian idea that considers children's contact with nature to be extremely important from an early age.

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Individual Education Planners (IEPs)

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a document that outlines a child's learning goals and the support they need to achieve them. They are used to plan, teach, and review progress. IEPs are created by the staff to support children identified with special educational needs.

Sure Start

Sure Start is a targeted programme offering a broad range of services focusing on family health, early years care and education and improved well-being programmes to children aged 0-4. Sure Start programmes are designed to reflect and respond to local needs and are located in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.

Makaton

Makaton is a language programme that combines signs, symbols and speech to support children and/or adults with learning or communication difficulties.

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Loose Parts

Loose parts is a term used in early childhood learning to include such objects and materials that children can move, control and change in numerous ways to develop their creativity.

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Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISENI)

Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISENI) is a regional early intervention service which supports children in pre-school educational and mainstream primary school settings by working closely with parents and education staff to help children develop the foundation skills for learning such as speech, language, communication, sensory-motor, visual perception, social, emotional and behaviour skills.

Special Educational Needs and Early Years Inclusion Service (SENEYIS)

The Special Educational Needs and Early Years Inclusion Service (SENEYIS) provides support for pre-school children who have special educational needs and disability (SEND).

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