

Report of a Pre-school Inspection
St Malachy's Nursery School, Newry

October 2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St. Malachy's Nursery School is situated in the Carnagat area of Newry and provides full-time provision for 54 children. Almost all of the children are of pre-school age and most children transfer to Year 1 in the primary school on the adjacent site. Almost one-fifth of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), and a small number have statements of SEN. Two-fifths of the children have free school meals entitlement and almost one-quarter of the children are newcomers.

A teaching principal was appointed approximately three years ago and is supported by a full-time teacher, a part-time teacher, three classroom assistants and two SEN assistants. The governors have a range of skills, are very supportive of the principal and the whole nursery school community and play an active role in the life of the nursery school.

The nursery school is part of an extended school cluster with other local early years settings, through which there are links with a local special school and community groups. It has very close links with the nearby primary school and regularly use their facilities for the weekly delivery of the Healthy Kids programme and hosting their own events such as the end of year graduation.

The nursery school accommodation is attractive and inviting and has benefited from transformational improvements to both its indoor and outdoor area in very recent years; work is currently underway to provide a hygiene room, caretaker store and a new kitchen.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Twenty-eight percent of the parents responded to the questionnaire. The responses were wholly positive, with all the parents reporting that their child is happy at nursery school. A small number of parents provided additional written comments which highlighted: the caring staff, the welcoming atmosphere and the excellent reputation of the nursery school within the community. Inspectors also met with a small group of parents. They spoke very highly of the support the staff provide to their child; their child's happiness attending the school; and the development of their child's confidence and independence. They praised the homely, welcoming atmosphere created by the staff and the helpful communication and advice they receive, such as supporting their child's learning at home.

All staff responded to the questionnaire; a small number included additional written comments. Their responses were all positive. They reported that they enjoy working at the nursery school and that their professional skills, understanding and knowledge are valued. In their written responses, they reported that they enjoy being part of a dedicated team, that the job is fulfilling, and they are privileged to work in the nursery school.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside St Malachy's 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

- All staff and governors at St Malachy's Nursery School are wholly committed to their motto 'nurture the seed and it will grow'. They work collaboratively, in line with their vision, to provide every child with opportunities to make progress from their individual starting points.
- As a result of a strategic and robust self-evaluation process, planning for learning and teaching has improved and is aligned to the pre-school curriculum. Reviewing the focus on the intended learning and the development of the children's skills within the planning would help embed the practice that exists within the nursery school.
- The breadth and quality of the children's learning experiences have been enriched greatly as a result of the significant transformation of both the indoor and outdoor learning environments.
- There is a happy and inclusive ethos in the nursery. The nurturing and skilled staff respond sensitively and insightfully to the needs of individual children. They use a range of bespoke resources and strategies to support the children to understand and manage their own emotions and play alongside their peers.
- Almost all of the children are very well settled and are developing their independence, problem-solving and social skills. They follow with ease the well-embedded routines and transitions and engage in the range of interesting learning opportunities available to them.
- Excellent and purposeful partnerships with parents, the nearby primary school, a range of health and educational professionals, and the wider community, support the staff in achieving successfully their vision.

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

Area for consideration:

- to review the focus on the intended learning and the development of the children's skills within the planning, so that the practice that exists in the nursery can be embedded.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The school's motto, "Nurture the seed and it will grow", permeates every aspect of the life and work of the nursery. The staff and governors of St Malachy's Nursery School are committed to creating a caring, warm and stimulating environment where every child feels safe, valued, supported and inspired to learn and grow. Their shared vision to ensure that every child is provided with the opportunities to make progress from their individual starting points is being realised. The vision informs strategic development planning and reflects appropriately the social demographics and context of the local community.

The collaborative process of self-evaluation is thorough, and the identified key priorities are well considered. The staff are flexible and responsive to the learning needs and interests of the children and use adaptive learning strategies well, to meet the children's varied learning and developmental needs.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

In recent years, the staff have focused on enhancing the learning environment. Indoors, they have established well-organised, thoughtfully resourced, and calm play areas which includes a sensory circuit area. The indoor learning environment is supporting and enhancing well the children's emotional health and wellbeing, independence, confidence and enjoyment of learning. The outdoor area has been transformed and now provides a range of rich learning opportunities for the children across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

Observations and evaluations of children's learning are thorough and insightful and are used well to inform personalised planning for each child. The staff consistently engage naturally with the children, model play effectively and use open-ended questions to extend the children's thinking, understanding, and communication skills. They are skilful at seizing the moment to turn spontaneous play into valuable learning opportunities. The staff also implement a range of strategies from speech and language therapy programmes to enhance the children's language development and encourage the children to share ideas and opinions during play. The experience of the children is also enriched by parental involvement in programmes to support their child's early learning experiences, such as the 'Getting Ready to Learn' and 'Toybox' programmes funded by the Department of Education.

The children's health and wellbeing are nurtured in a child-centred learning environment that promotes healthy eating, physical activity, and safety. Through the use of visual emotion charts, the children are encouraged to: express their feelings; show empathy; and manage and understand their emotions. Incorporating physical movements, along with thoughtfully planned activities for energetic play, enhances greatly the development of the children's gross motor skills. Physical skills are developed further through the 'Daily Mile' initiative and the involvement of external service providers. The staff of the nursery are dedicated to safeguarding children. Designated staff are involved with 'Operation Encompass', in conjunction with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, a partnership aimed at 'safeguarding and promoting the welfare of local children, including identifying and responding to their needs.'

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff and governors embrace diversity and work to include children from all backgrounds in the school community and ensure all families feel welcome and valued. They have developed a newcomer booklet to help meet the needs of children and their families, and staff willingly provide additional support as needed. Parents are invited to visit the nursery and share their skills and cultural backgrounds with the children.

The staff are meeting skilfully the needs of all of the children and provide the support that they require. The nurturing staff respond sensitively to the needs of each child and use bespoke resources and strategies to help the children understand and manage their emotions. The skilful use of sensory circuits and calm areas are enhancing the children's accessibility to a broad, balanced and holistic curriculum. In addition, these inclusive strategies are enriching the overall learning environment and are increasing the children's engagement in learning.

The nursery's inclusive practices are reinforced through excellent partnerships with parents, community groups, various professionals and through cluster meetings with the staff from other early years settings. These collaborations provide additional support and resources, particularly for children with additional needs, enabling the children to participate fully in and benefit from the nursery school's provision.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Almost all of the children are beginning to understand the importance of good listening and turn-taking, and they show respect and care for their peers. At their chosen area of play they demonstrate a good level of concentration and focus and can play for a sustained period of time. The children are familiar with routines and transitions and display very good behaviour. The staff are skilful at noticing, acknowledging and praising this behaviour and take time to celebrate the achievements of the children through various affirming approaches, such as the use of various class reward systems.

The success of the children is celebrated regularly. One-to-one interactions, newsletters, and digital communications with parents highlight and celebrate various milestones and achievements. All children enjoy being 'crowned', sit on the birthday throne and receive a birthday gift on their special day. The children are encouraged to leave their 'dummies' with the fairies in the fairy garden. The children's achievements are further recognised during a brief weekly assembly where both classes gather to review their week and celebrate their achievements. Additionally, their progress in learning is showcased through the creation of individual portfolios entitled 'My Journey through St. Malachy's Nursery School'.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The nursery has developed a strong community of learning, supported by purposeful partnerships with parents and carers, the adjacent primary school, and various health and educational professionals. Partnerships with a range of organisations including Newry and Mourne Extended Schools, Carnagat Community Group and Martin's Lane Community Group have enriched the learning experiences of the children. External service providers are used to promote further the children's physical development and communication and language skills.

The staff demonstrate consistently a commitment to their professional learning, engaging in regular training and reflective practice sessions. Through regular communication and the use of progress meetings, 'stay and play' sessions, parenting and healthy eating workshops, the staff facilitate a sense of shared responsibility to encourage and empower parental participation in their children's education. There are awareness raising days for Autism, Down's Syndrome and Makaton, for example. This community-focused approach ensures that every child can enjoy a holistic and enriching educational experience.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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.

4. GOING FORWARD

The vision of St Malachy's Nursery School to foster a nurturing and stimulating environment is successfully realised through: the dedication of its highly skilled staff; the commitment of the staff to the holistic development of each child; and the staff's support for the communities from which the children come. The staff are meeting effectively the needs of the children in a child-centred, happy and inclusive environment.

ETI will continue to work with St Malachy's Nursery School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the bespoke, inclusive strategies which support the children to understand and manage their own emotions and promotes their participation and inclusion.

St Malachy's Nursery School is well placed to take forward the area for consideration within the 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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