

Report of Pre-school Inspection  
Steeple Nursery School, Antrim

November 2024



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

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Steeple Nursery School is a controlled cross-community nursery school situated in purpose-built accommodation, located on the same site as two post-primary schools in Antrim. Most of the children come from the town of Antrim and the wider surrounding towns and rural areas. The nursery school provides morning and afternoon part-time provision across six separate classes for 159 children, of which 114 (72%) are of pre-school age.

Twelve percent of the children in the nursery school have been identified as having special education needs (SEN), with a small number of children receiving 1-to-1 support from an assistant; 9% of the children are newcomers. The teaching principal has been in post for nine years; there are five part-time teachers, eight assistants (including four SEN assistants), and four additional support staff. The nursery has recently re-qualified for Extended Schools\* funding from the Department of Education.

Steeple Nursery School is a Rights Respecting' nursery school\*. There is an emphasis on learning outdoors and looking after the local environment, and the nursery school has been awarded five Eco-school 'Green Flags'\*. The nursery school participates in the Shared Education project with a maintained nursery school and a special school.

## **B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF**

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

Sixteen percent (25) of parents/carers responded to the online confidential questionnaire, forty percent (10) of whom provided written comments. The responses were very affirming about almost all aspects of the provision in the nursery school. In the written comments, the parents/carers praised: the kind approachable staff; the excellent communication from the nursery school; and the wide range of activities and opportunities provided for the children. The small number of parents/carers who met with an inspector reported that their child is very happy and thriving in their learning. They spoke positively about: how well the staff know and value their child; the benefits of the weekly lending library of books; and the opportunities for children to celebrate different cultures.

All teaching and non-teaching staff responded to the questionnaire, and just under one-half (6) provided written comments praising: the welcoming stimulating learning environment; the good teamwork between staff; and their nurturing caring approach towards the children.

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

The ETI worked alongside Steeple 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 nursery school's vision to empower children to become happy and confident learners is achieved fully through the nurturing and stimulating provision that values the views and interests of the children and aligns with their status as a 'Rights Respecting' nursery school.
- The high-quality interactions of the skilful staff are impacting positively on the children's learning and on their health and wellbeing.
- The staff know the children well and make insightful observations of the children's learning to effectively inform planning and to ensure progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The children use naturally early mathematical language during play and are developing well their independence, confidence and resilience as they explore the extensive outdoor learning environment.
- The children who have been identified as having special educational needs are fully involved in the life of the nursery school and are making good progress.
- The staff have established very effective respectful relationships with parents/carers and value them as an integral part of the nursery school community.
- 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**

Steeple Nursery School has a well-established vision that is reviewed annually through effective consultation processes with staff members, governors and parents/carers. This regular review helps to ensure that the vision remains relevant and appropriate for the changing needs of the children in each new cohort. Positive and collaborative engagement at all levels is valued and encouraged. The staff and governors are committed to achieving the vision to provide a 'warm, inviting, nurturing and stimulating environment' that offers a wide range of learning opportunities and experiences to support the children's development across all six areas of the pre-school curriculum to help the children to become 'happy, confident learners'.

All of the staff are valued members of the team who collaborate very effectively with one another. Their ideas are encouraged and valued and there is regular self-evaluation by all of the staff which is supporting well continuous improvement across the provision. The one-year interim nursery school development plan (SDP) is a working document, with appropriate priorities, such as the development of the children's digital skills, which aligns well to the child-centred vision.

The governors have a good understanding of the vision, are well-informed and use effectively their wide skillset and professional expertise to provide advice and to support the nursery school staff. They are proud of the nursery school's very good reputation within the local community.

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

All of the children are supported effectively by the staff and are making good progress across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. In particular, the children's early mathematical language is developing very well as a result of the staff modelling skilfully and integrating naturally mathematical language through incidental play experiences, such as rhymes, stories and investigative play. The children have a positive attitude towards their learning and are growing in confidence. The development of digital skills is incorporated well into the children's exploratory play, for example, through the use of calculators, digital devices and mobile phones.

The quality of the staff interactions with the children is consistently of a high standard. They are very good role models and engage readily with the children in their play, prompting and encouraging them to develop their thinking.

Long-term and medium-term planning for learning is informed effectively by the pre-school curriculum and outlines clearly the development and progression of the children across each of the six areas of learning. The short-term planning is comprehensive and informed by the children's interests and individual needs. The staff use very effectively the children's observations to monitor and evaluate the children's progression and learning. The staff report that they have adapted their

teaching to meet the needs of the children (45) who have not yet reached pre-school age, which has increased significantly within this year's cohort. The proactive approach that the staff are taking is helping them to meet the additional challenges, such as toileting and modelling how to play and share toys. Consequently, these children are integrated very well into the session.

The promotion of health and wellbeing is a priority area within the SDP, and there is a designated 'Wellbeing Champion' within the staff. The staff are participating in the Education Authority's (EA) 'Being Well, Doing Well'\* programme and have recently introduced the Take 5'\* strategies to promote the children's wellbeing. As a result, the children are taught by the staff to be kind and caring towards each other, and to express their feelings and emotions respectfully. This focus is helping the children to: develop strategies to manage their emotions; share toys; and play safely during indoor and outdoor play. The staff make good use of strategies and resources to support the children with turn-taking.

The buffet snack offers healthy eating options and the children are encouraged to try a variety of food. It would be beneficial for the staff to review and improve the snack routine to maximise more fully the learning potential and develop further the children's independence. The medical register is very comprehensive and there are detailed risk assessments to guide the staff. There is a need to review a small number of safeguarding policies, in particular, the addressing bullying and intimate care policies to ensure they reflect more accurately the positive practice in the nursery school.

Both the indoor and outdoor learning environments are safe, attractive and stimulating and provide good opportunities for learning across all areas of the curriculum. The accessibility of resources supports the children to develop their independence, creativity, and fine and gross motor skills. Through use of the play resources, the children are encouraged to take responsibility during the tidy-up routine and show respect for each other, the resources and their natural surroundings.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

There is an intentional and palpable inclusive ethos which permeates all aspects of the life and work of this vibrant and diverse nursery school. This is characterised by the respectful and supportive relationships at all levels, a well-embedded culture where children's voices are heard and valued, and the children's well-developed self-esteem and their growing understanding of their own and others' emotions and rights.

A range of effective partnerships, relevant staff professional learning and bespoke strategies and resources support the staff in creating a safe, stimulating and equitable learning environment in which the needs of all children are met effectively. There are effective working relationships with the EA's Sensory Service and the creation of a sensory space in each classroom. The staff use skilfully and creatively a media programme to prompt and support the children to talk about their feelings, celebrate each child's unique qualities and to accept differences, through the characters observed in cartoons. The staff also provide meaningful opportunities, across the curriculum, for the children to understand and to exercise their right to an opinion.

The staff know the children very well. The children who have been identified as having SEN are included in all aspects of the nursery school's provision and are making good progress from their individual starting points. The effective partnerships with parents, speech therapists and health visitors enable the early identification of individual needs and support the staff to plan for and effectively meet the children's needs. Specific targets and associated strategies within the children's individual educational plans (IEPs) are realistic and measurable and guide well the provision for individual children.

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

Almost all of the children settle very quickly to their chosen play activities, and move confidently and freely throughout the learning areas, both indoors and outdoors. They engage in purposeful play, both independently and collaboratively, with sustained concentration and resilience.

Nearly all of the children are developing a good understanding of early mathematical concepts through sorting and matching by colour and shape, sequencing and making patterns with confidence. They are acquiring early mathematical language and can make comparisons of height, weight, size and capacity during their investigative play.

Most of the children are developing a keen interest in books and enjoy listening to stories. A significant minority can retell confidently the stories to their friends and to the staff. The children are developing their imagination and creativity very well to extend their investigative play, such as making 'cement' in the construction area. They take great pride in having attained the Eco-school's 'Green Flag' award and participate regularly in recycling and litter picking. The children are learning to turn off the lights and water taps to conserve energy.

The children have extensive opportunities to explore the nursery grounds and are developing very well their gross motor skills through physical energetic play. Through the use of appropriate risk assessments, all of the children enjoy participating in energetic risky play. They are developing well their awareness of space and balance through climbing, swinging on apparatus, running and jumping as they explore the extensive outdoor environment. The children participate enthusiastically in music and rhyme sessions and enjoy singing and playing a wide range of instruments. They have a keen interest in early mark making and are learning to use a wide variety of materials and textures.

The staff seek regular opportunities to praise the children and to celebrate their success. Their artwork is celebrated, valued and displayed on each room's wall entitled 'Our Gallery' and 'Every child is an artist', with the children's work acting as an effective stimulus for discussion. The children's work and achievements are shared and celebrated with parents through the nursery school's website, a digital communication application, and during both planned meetings and incidental conversations.

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

The nursery school has established a collegial approach to continuous staff professional learning. The staff have engaged in a range of appropriate opportunities for professional learning which are linked to the priorities in the SDP, for example, training in autism and emotional wellbeing. The training is empowering the staff to implement additional effective strategies to support the increasing number of children with additional needs.

The staff have established very effective communication and partnerships with parents/carers. Through a range of workshops linked to the 'Getting Ready to Learn' programme and meetings about the pre-school curriculum, the parents/carers are developing a deeper understanding of their child's learning, so they are able to support them more fully at home. The parents/carers have opportunities to visit the setting to discuss their jobs with the children which is broadening the children's knowledge and understanding of occupations. The children and parents/carers benefit from choosing books together to read at home from the lending library.

The nursery school welcomes input from the emergency services and external providers which is enhancing the children's learning experiences across the curriculum. Participation in a well-established shared education partnership with a maintained nursery school and a special school has led to the creation of a 'music and movement' programme which is impacting positively on the children's interest in music. A creative literacy programme is also helping the staff to develop the children's attention, listening, language and creativity.

Purposeful links with a range of primary schools support the children to transition on to year 1. The staff are benefitting from the 'Moving Forward Together' cross-phase schools' partnership, which provides opportunities for professional learning and to share effective practice. The nursery school welcomes students from local post primary schools and the local university for work experience and initial teaching placements respectively. The students provide additional supervised support during indoor and outdoor activities and support the children to develop further their problem-solving and investigative play.

The children participate in seasonal celebrations with local care homes which is fostering respectful relationships with the older generation. As an Eco-School, the children have effective learning opportunities to work in close partnership with the local council to develop their understanding of environmental issues and initiatives such as 'recycle, reuse and reduce'. The parents/carers spoke positively of their child's enthusiasm for recycling at home.

## **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

Steeple Nursery School is achieving successfully its child-centred and inclusive vision. The children are happy, confident learners who are benefitting from investigative and exploratory play in a highly stimulating learning environment.

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the staff's high-quality role modelling and effective interactions which encourages the children to problem-solve, develop their thinking skills and extend their learning.

The ETI will continue to work with Steeple 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 1**                    **Extended Schools\*** funding is available to schools serving the most disadvantaged areas to offer a range of services or activities outside of the normal school day to help meet the learning and development needs of the children, their families and the local community.
- Page 1**                    **A ‘Rights Respecting’ nursery school\*** is a school that has achieved the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Award that promotes and practices children’s rights within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- Page 1**                    **The Eco-schools ‘Green flag’\*** is achieved through a nursery school’s environmental actions and is assessed annually by an external assessor.
- Page 4**                    **The EA ‘Being Well Doing Well’\*** programme is part of ‘The Children and Young People’s Emotional Health in Education Framework’ (DE) in nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools to develop a whole-school approach to emotional health and wellbeing,
- Page 4**                    **The ‘Take 5’\*** strategies to wellbeing are simple ways for people to maintain and improve their emotional wellbeing. 1. Connect with others. 2. Be physically active. 3. Take notice. 4. Keep learning. 5. Give to others.

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