

Early Years Insights Report

September 2021 – September 2024

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Introduction

The findings within this report are informed by first-hand evidence across the early years settings which include, nursery schools, voluntary and private early years settings and nursery units in primary schools. There were 29 development of inspection visits, 11 interim follow-up visits, 40 follow-up inspections (FUI), 30 prototype/pilot inspections, approximately 47 district visits and ongoing cluster visits. The findings which follow draw upon the evidence gathered from these visits and a small number of thematic evaluations.

Key findings

The children's wellbeing and progress is an important part of curriculum delivery.

When children are happy there is greater potential for learning which speaks to the need to prioritise children's wellbeing, which was evident across all settings inspected across the time period. Many are focused on the development of strategies and resources which encourage children to be aware of and manage their feelings. For example, they engage the children in mindfulness activities, discuss feelings using puppets, provide sensory toys and encourage use of quiet indoor and outdoor spaces which support the children to relax and become calm. The staff monitor and assess regularly the children's readiness for learning, supporting them to manage their feelings and emotions when necessary to enable them to participate in their learning. This focus on the children's wellbeing is enabling the children to develop very good social skills, follow routines and transition with ease and independence. A small number of settings report an increase in the number of children presenting with anxiety and emotionally based school avoidance, with the Education Authority's (EA) Educational Psychology Service supporting the children to re-engage with their learning. Addressing emotionally based school avoidance and providing interventions at the earliest stage is an important priority in mitigating its reoccurrence at a later stage in the child's education.

Staff make good use of rich and stimulating learning environments to stimulate the children's curiosity and creativity.

A rich and stimulating physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, is recognised by staff as being crucial to the development of the children's curiosity and social interaction and enables the children to connect with and explore nature. Most settings provide well designed, attractive and stimulating indoor and outdoor learning environments with learning spaces that are clearly defined, have lots of visual cues and a range of accessible resources. These approaches support staff in developing the children's independence and extending their language and learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Across the settings, there is variability in the use of authentic and natural materials to extend the children's interests, creativity and

learning. In some schools the delivery of the curriculum is also being enriched through Forest and Eco-schools' initiatives, which is increasing the children's curiosity in their natural environment. In the best practice, the staff's ongoing staff review and evaluation of the potential uses of the learning environment is leading to improved collaborative and investigative play experiences for the children.

Staff interact skilfully with the children to extend their learning and are supported by effective planning, observations and assessments.

In almost all of the settings inspected, the staff have very good relationships with the children, know them well and use the children's interests to motivate them to learn. They have good knowledge of the pre-school curriculum which informs skilful engagements in child-led conversations. The staff use open-ended questioning effectively to develop the children's curiosity and creativity, which in turn is impacting positively on their learning, progress and development.

The collegial approach to planning is providing consistency in the delivery of the pre-school curriculum in many settings. The role of the adult is identified within the planning so that all staff are responsive to the children's interests, needs and abilities. The staff have good understanding of the learning potential within activities and can develop and extend the children's learning and development. In the best practice, the observations and assessments are used to monitor the children's learning and progression and the standards they achieve across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum and inform future planning.

Personal, social and emotional development is an area of strength within the pre-school curriculum.

Within the curriculum, the personal, social and emotional development area of the curriculum is a strength in most settings, with staff recognising its importance in giving the "children the best opportunity for success in other Areas of Learning" ([Pre-School Guidance](#)). This is borne out through the children's engagement in collaborative play and their very good perseverance, concentration and resilience which was observed across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. Most of the children articulate their ideas and opinions confidently during play activities and they engage independently in early mark-making activities. They show good interest in books and stories, when provided with the opportunity, which staff use well to reference and scaffold their learning while supporting the development of their observational and investigative skills. Healthy lifestyle messages are reinforced regularly through songs, rhymes and healthy food choices as well as regular outdoor activities and energetic play to develop the children's gross and fine motor skills, along with their spatial awareness.

The children use naturally a wide range of early mathematical language, such as those associated with capacity, measurement, time, colour, shape and number and are encouraged by the staff to problem-solve and integrate mathematical language into everyday activities. In addition, the children understand and know how to use digital devices to take photos of each other, record their voices and discuss and

celebrate their achievements. A small number of staff reported that they are yet to be convinced about the benefits of using digital technology in the pre-school setting ([Future Ready Digital Learning: The impact of teachers' digital devices on education provision](#)). Nevertheless, the children have appropriate opportunities to use a range of digital tools both indoors and outdoors to enhance their play such as interactive whiteboards, digital cameras and cash registers.

Staff are adapting and responding well to children with special educational needs (SEN).

The increase in the number of pre-school children presenting with a range of SEN and developmental delays is commonly reported across settings, particularly for children with speech and language needs. Many settings are responding flexibly to the diverse needs of the children and have implemented a number of strategies to enable the children to make progress from their individual starting points. Effective strategies include the use of small group intervention such as language support; and strategies which are shared with parents/carers and tailored to the individual needs of the child to provide continuity of learning for the children between home and school. The need for cross-departmental support for children is a recurring theme with staff eager to develop their links with the [Health and Social Care Trust's Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland](#) (RISE NI) and allied health professionals to inform the support the children receive. Settings which have prioritised staff professional learning, have a good understanding of the children's needs and barriers to inform the nature and implementation of appropriate support.

Improved partnerships and communication with all stakeholders is supporting the growth of communities of learning.

Parents/carers are crucial partners in their children's education, and this point is affirmed by staff across all settings. The parents are appreciative of the regular communication from the staff prior to their child attending the setting, and the ongoing support and advice they provide, through for example, stay and play sessions. They also emphasise that the staff consistently celebrate and affirm the children's learning and development throughout their pre-school year and this information is communicated to them via a range of digital applications.

Acknowledging that 'it takes a village to raise a child', the settings value greatly their community's participation in living out their vision, and the shared responsibility which this engagement fosters in supporting children and their parents. Through the settings' engagement with the wider community such as Sure Start, local primary schools, care homes, support groups and Irish language events they are building and growing communities of learning which support children to develop and thrive.

In addition, almost all of the settings are part of a pre-school cluster which is supporting staff professional learning, strengthening learning networks and improving collaboration.

Management committees and boards of governors are key in supporting the realisation of the setting's vision.

The professional expertise of boards of governors and management committees alongside their unwavering commitment contributes greatly to realising the shared vision of the setting. In the best practice, they draw on the strengths of individual committee members and governors to be strategic and proactive in their support for the staff and monitor regularly the setting's progress against identified priorities. They know their role and use appropriately their support and challenge function to make well-informed decisions that support the improvement process. Crucially, when boards of governors and management committees work well, they understand the specific context of the setting, the needs of the children and how these relate to the setting's improvement agenda.

Effective self-evaluation underpins improvement and informs well staff professional learning.

In most of the settings, their processes for self-evaluation link closely to their vision and priorities identified within the setting's development plan. There are appropriate consultations with all stakeholders to create and embed a shared vision, and a collaborative approach to self-evaluation is in place. This information is used well to plan professional learning opportunities which develop further staff confidence, knowledge and skills to improve the children's outcomes and provide an inclusive and flexible approach to meet all of the children's needs.

There has been significant improvement demonstrated in settings involved in follow-up inspections.

Supportive relationships and collaborative teamwork, combined with reflective and evaluative practice, provided a solid foundation which underpinned many of the setting's improvement work. Leaders working alongside their boards of governors/management committees prioritised the development of robust self-evaluation and improvements to the provision for children with special educational needs. The settings developed communities of learning to share effective practice between staff, aligned to identified areas for development; this has been a key and highly successful action in supporting the professional learning of staff and its application in the settings for the benefit of the children. Staff who participated in the ETI Empowering Improvement programmes, which focused on building capacity for self-evaluation, were able to use and apply this learning to support improvement within their unique contexts.

Settings engaged well with the development of a new framework for inspection and staff views have informed the new framework for inspection.

A significant number of pre-school settings have contributed extensively to the development of a new framework for inspection reflecting ETI's mission of "empowering improvement for all learners". The co-design of a new model of inspection for early years settings was trialled during the 2022-23 year, informed by

a series of consultation events with education officials, early years specialists, practitioners, parents and carers. Following on from this, seven organisations self nominated and participated in prototype inspections between April 2023 and June 2023 with a further 23 organisations participating in pilot inspections between September 2023 and June 2024.

Almost all of the feedback from the leaders and staff who participated in the prototype and pilot inspections was wholly positive. They reported that the opportunity to engage in the joint planning session to co-design the inspection was empowering and provided a shared understanding and ownership of the inspection. They also emphasised that the changes to the inspection model recognised the unique context of the settings and provided them with an opportunity to participate more meaningfully in professional dialogue with the inspection team.

Key challenges

Recruitment is an ongoing challenge.

A highly qualified and well-experienced staff is necessary for the growth of any organisation, the realisation of their vision and mission and the development of leaders. Leaders, in the sector despite employing new staff, report ongoing recruitment challenges, particularly with additional classroom assistants but also in filling roles in management committees in the voluntary and private settings. In addition, due to funding constraints, a small number of staff in the voluntary and private sector, are also fulfilling the role of the Early Years Specialist within their own setting. Consequently, they may not have the appropriate level of objectivity, support and challenge that an external Early Years Specialist could provide. Management Committees with this arrangement should consider if this arrangement is optimal for effecting improvement, and how their community of learning can support them, through for example, providing opportunities for the dissemination of practice.

Responding to the children's diversity of need requires access to ongoing staff professional learning and greater integration of children's services.

There have been notable efforts in developing the capacity of staff to respond flexibly and individually to the children's needs, but ongoing work is required, particularly in collaboration with health professionals, to inform the interventions provided. The goal, as set out in the Independent Review of Education, is to provide greater integration of children's services. Therefore, further collaborative work is required to support the holistic growth and development of children, as well as early intervention. Settings are becoming more diverse, with children who have severe learning difficulties being placed with a small number of non-statutory providers. This reinforces the need for qualified and experienced staff who can provide an invaluable level of support to meet the children's wide range of needs. The staff within these

settings recognise that ongoing professional learning is required, particularly with improving the quality and precision of the children's individual education plans. There is variation in quality across the system and further capacity-building on writing specific and measurable targets will support staff in ascertaining the progress children are making and the standards they are achieving.

Further improvement in the process of self-evaluation is needed and will support continuous quality improvement.

The settings are engaging in processes of self-evaluation but staff in a significant minority of settings need to improve their understanding and capacity to use self-evaluative processes to effect improvement in the quality of the provision. Action planning, monitoring and evaluation all require development to ensure improvement targets are concise and focused on enhancing the quality of the provision and outcomes for the children. The process of self-evaluation and the cycle of planning, observation and assessment remain areas for development for those settings which remain in the follow up process. This requires a more strategic approach by staff to ensure that the identified priorities are precise and focused, to improve the pre-school curricular learning experiences and meet the individual needs of the children.


Conclusion

There are many strengths which have been detailed in this report and which have been rightly celebrated in the settings. There have been challenges over the last number of years and undoubtedly new challenges will emerge. However, this report outlines that collaboration at all levels not only enables challenges to be overcome, but also empowers staff to try new ways of working which are important to ongoing evaluation and improvement. We are appreciative of the support of the pre-school sector for their participation and feedback in our new framework for inspection and hope that the inspection process will fulfil its purpose and to empower staff to be ever more confident and successful in meeting the needs of the children in their care as they work within their unique contexts.

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