

Report of a Pilot Inspection
St Bernard's Pre-school, Belfast

November 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Bernard's Pre-school is a voluntary pre-school located in a purpose-built facility adjacent to St Bernadette's Parish Centre. The pre-school utilises the parish hall and shared garden area to provide the children with opportunities to engage in energetic and physical exercise. The children attending the pre-school come from the local area and almost all transfer to the adjacent primary school.

There are currently twenty-six children attending the part-time session, a small number of whom have special educational needs (SEN). There are four members of staff employed in the setting, three of whom are on permanent contracts of employment. Within the last three years, the management status of the pre-school has changed and is now an employee-run setting. The manager is also the independent early years specialist. The pre-school participates in a well-established Shared Education partnership, together with two local primary schools and a nursery school.

The staff have established a nurturing environment which supports the children on their learning journey and provide a wide range of opportunities to welcome and encourage the engagement of parents in their child's development. They are committed to meeting the needs of families in the local area and to the sustainability of the pre-school.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF

Thirty-eight percent of the parents (10) responded to the confidential online questionnaire. The responses from the parents were very positive; reporting their child has settled well in the pre-school, is happy and is making progress in their learning. All the parents reported that they are content with the pastoral care and support given by the pre-school staff. A small number of parents responded with additional written comments highlighting: the commitment of the staff and their knowledge of early years teaching; the very helpful home learning materials provided by the staff; and how the staff go over and above to help children achieve their best.

All permanent members of staff completed the confidential questionnaire which outlined their commitment to providing meaningful learning experiences across the pre-school curriculum for all children.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the pre-school to consider how well the pre-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

- Leadership and management have a shared vision to build a strong foundation for learning which supports effectively the children's progression and development.
- Almost all of the children are making very good progress in their learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The staff have a collegial approach to the development planning process and engage in regular self-evaluation that informs the priorities identified in the action plans, including a focus on the children's physical development and wellbeing.
- The staff have developed a very effective partnership with parents/carers to enhance parental knowledge of the pre-school curriculum and provide resources to support their child's learning at home.
- The long-, medium- and short-term planning support well the learning intentions across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The outdoor area encourages the children to make independent choices for their learning and extends and progresses their creativity, and their investigative and exploratory skills; however, time in the indoor area needs to be reviewed to support more effectively child-led learning.
- The staff understand well the needs of all of the children and use a range of approaches, including planned activities, to develop further the children's learning.
- The staff are using a digital system to record and analyse observations of the children's learning and continually review the approaches adopted to evidence effectively and efficiently the progress in the children's learning.
- The arrangements for child protection take account of current child protection guidance.

Areas for further consideration:

- to ensure that the indoor environment promotes more fully the child-led learning experiences and supports further the children's creativity, investigative and exploratory skills; and
- to update a small number of safeguarding policies in line with guidance from the Department of Education (DE).

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The staff have a shared vision to build a foundation for learning which will provide the children with the necessary skills for the future, promoted through a wide range of learning opportunities. This vision permeates the daily work of the pre-school and supports effectively the children's holistic development.

The collegial approach to the development planning process and ongoing self-evaluation guides well the improvement work of the pre-school. The key priorities, including the current focus on the children's physical development and wellbeing, have been informed appropriately by the individual needs and interests of the children. The staff are afforded a wide range of appropriate training opportunities to support the key priorities in the development plan which enhance their professional learning and develop further their knowledge of the pre-school curriculum.

The setting's own early years specialist supports well the staff who value the timely guidance and advice. Parents are kept well informed of the pre-school's key priorities and areas of development and their contribution to the life of the pre-school is highly valued.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Short-term planning supports well the learning intentions and identifies the role of the adult across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The staff use their regular evaluations to inform their planning and develop further the children's learning and skills.

Priority is given to the children's health and wellbeing, which is reflected in the weekly planned programme of physical development and exercise delivered in the parish hall and garden area. The staff have established successfully an attractive outdoor learning environment. This space provides the children with a wide range of natural and creative areas to develop their investigative and problem-solving skills in child-led activities. The wide range of commercial resources in the indoor learning environment help the staff guide effectively the learning of the children. Better use of the time available during the indoor session will help support more effectively child-led learning.

Staff interactions with the children are very good which impact positively on the children's progress and development. The staff are effective role models during play and promote and encourage the development of social, and language and communication, skills through the use of puppets and digital talking books. The staff give priority to keeping the children safe and there is an appropriate range of safeguarding policies in place. Based on the evidence made available at the time of the inspection, the pre-school needs to update a small number of safeguarding policies in line with DE guidance.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff understand well the needs of all of the children and use a range of approaches, including planned activities, to develop further the children's learning. The parents are well informed of their child's progress through regular informal updates and formal reports. The personal learning plans identify appropriately the support for the children with additional needs.

The staff have developed a very caring environment in which all children are encouraged and supported pastorally.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The behaviour of the children is exemplary. They demonstrate sustained periods of concentration during focused planned activities. The children: have high levels of independence; make appropriate choices in their play; self-serve during snack-time; and, attend to their personal needs. Most of the children's language and communication skills are developing well, and their attention and listening skills are very good.

Early mathematical language is used well by a small number of children during play. They are beginning to show a good understanding of mathematical concepts including number recognition and counting, as well as using positional language appropriately. All of the children engage enthusiastically in the opportunities for creative, problem solving and investigative play in the outdoor area.

Fine motor skills are promoted very well; the children use confidently hammers and tools, squeeze pipettes, manipulate keys in locks and turn the taps at the water butt with ease. Physical movement has been a key focus and the staff deliver a movement programme twice weekly. This has supported successfully the children's development of a range of physical skills including balancing, throwing, catching, spatial awareness and co-ordination.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The leadership and staff have developed strong links with all parents through the "Getting Ready to Learn" programme. The pre-school also provides parents with a wide range of learning packs which include early mathematical, language and creative activities to enhance parental knowledge of the pre-school curriculum and extend the children's learning at home. Through use of a digital application, the parents are encouraged to share their children's learning experiences at home and provide feedback on activities shared by staff.

The pre-school has also developed good links with other settings through their participation in the well-established Shared Education programme which has provided staff with the opportunity to reflect on practice and enhance their professional development impacting positively on the children's holistic development.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the pre-school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection take account of DE's current child protection guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

The staff of St Bernard's Pre-school, guided by their shared vision, have created a stimulating and well-resourced environment through which the children are developing a firm foundation for their learning. The successful collaborative approach of staff and the solid parental partnership support effectively the children's learning journey, as set out in the pre-school's vision.

The ETI will monitor the progress of the pre-school in addressing the areas for further consideration as laid out in this report.

The aspects of effective practice in this pre-school which should be shared more widely include:

- the strong partnership between the pre-school and parents to support the continuity and progression of learning for the children.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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