

A series of stylized, colorful paper figures holding hands, forming a chain across the top of the page. The figures are in shades of blue, purple, and pink, set against a dark blue background with a subtle bokeh effect.

Report of a Pre-school Inspection

Arellian Nursery School, Belfast

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Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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

1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Arellian Nursery School is situated on Bentham Drive in South Belfast and the children attending come mainly from the surrounding area. It is the longest established nursery school on the island of Ireland, being the first nursery school to open its doors in 1928. The school occupies a one and a half acre of green space, and its building comprises two nursery rooms, a welcoming parents' area, a sensory room and office spaces.

The nursery school has an enrolment of 52 pre-school children and operates two full-time classes. Over 53% of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), a small number of whom have a statement of SEN. Over 19% of the children have newcomer status and approximately 85% of the children have free school meals entitlement.

The staff complement comprises a teaching principal, one teacher and two nursery assistants, a SEN assistant and two additional general assistants who carry out the role in a part-time capacity. The nursery school participates in the Department of Education's (DE) 'Getting Ready to Learn' (GRTL)* programme. They also participate in the DE RAISE* programme with the local primary school and other community groups. In 2023, the nursery school was awarded 'School of Sanctuary'* status.

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.

Over 40% (21) of parents/carers responded to the online confidential questionnaire, and their responses were wholly positive. Eleven percent (6) of the responses included additional written comments in which parents praised the caring and helpful staff and the enabling learning environment which provides their child with positive learning experiences.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire and their responses were also wholly positive. The written comments reflected their enjoyment of working in a warm and caring environment and highlighted the staff's dedication to meeting the needs of all of the children and their families.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

ETI worked alongside the 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 vision for Arellian Nursery School is under review to reflect the changing context and the diversity of the community it serves. The current vision statement: 'We are having lots of fun learning through play, being happy, making friends and achieving our best every day,' is realised in the warm, welcoming, inclusive nursery school environment.
- The passionate staff and dedicated governors engage in regular processes of self-evaluation to inform school improvement. They have used the views of all the nursery school's stakeholders to identify key priorities in the strategic school development plan which includes the review of short-term planning and observations.
- The recent review of curriculum planning has resulted in a comprehensive cycle of planning, observation and assessment which is informed by the staff, children and parents/carers and shows clear progression for each child across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The children's personal, social and emotional development and their engagement in learning is developing well. The staff use very effectively and consistently a wide range of research informed strategies and approaches to support the children in their learning and development.
- The children love and enjoy their learning environment which provides a wide range of authentic and man-made resources. Through high quality exploratory and creative play, their speech, language and communication skills are extended well by the staff and are improving.
- The children engage in active and vigorous play in the extensive, thoughtfully designed outdoor play area. Consequently, they are developing well their gross motor skills through activities like running, climbing, balancing, throwing and catching.
- The voice of the child is highly valued and celebrated in the daily life of the nursery. This is reflected through: consistent child-led conversations, the use of the children's views in the curriculum planning and the opportunity for the children to discuss their unique artwork and inform staff annotations.
- All of the staff know, identify and understand the individual and additional needs of the children. The staff use skilfully individual and group language interventions, and they set realistic targets for the children, enabling them to experience challenge and success in their learning. All of the children who require additional support are making progress with their learning.

- The staff have strong partnerships and collaborative relationships with parents/carers and the broader community, which are significantly enhancing the children's learning experiences.
- 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.

Next steps

Inspectors identified aspects of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the comprehensive, high-quality and robust cycle of planning, observation and assessment which supports the staff to monitor and evaluate the children's progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- the highly effective strategies and approaches used by staff, characterised by skilful interactions with the children that nurture their learning, personal, social and emotional development while encouraging their active engagement in learning; and
- the nursery school's strong partnerships and collaborative relationships with parents/carers, and the broader community which is significantly enhancing the children's learning experiences.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Nestled within a densely populated residential area, Arellian Nursery School serves as a haven of calm and creativity, offering ample space and greenery for the children to play and explore. The extensive outdoor facilities, including a thoughtfully planned play area and an exceptional, well-considered outdoor classroom, accessible in all weathers, provides the children with a wide range of opportunities for exploration and play-based learning experiences. From its establishment, Arellian Nursery School's two central aims were 'child at the centre' and 'forging links with parents,' which continues to inform and enhance the provision. The friendly, highly skilled innovative staff are dedicated to providing a positive and high-quality nursery experience which centres on the holistic development of all of the children.

The nursery school's vision statement, 'We are having lots of fun learning through play, being happy, making friends and achieving our best every day,' is under review to reflect the changing context and the diversity of the community it serves. The comprehensive school development plan outlines clear goals, focusing on manageable and time-bound objectives to achieve their priorities which include a review of the vision and meeting better the complex and diverse needs of the children, particularly those requiring additional support. The staff consult with governors, parents and the wider pre-school community regularly during school development planning in order to take account of their views.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff have high expectations for the achievement of all of the children across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. They have compiled effective long- and medium-term planners with curriculum learning intentions which provide the children with a broad and balanced pre-school curriculum. They have agreed collectively on a new approach to short-term planning which is curriculum-focused rather than activity-led and includes the role of the adult. As a result, the plans are guiding better all of the staff in their work and assisting them to assess the children's learning and development across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. During their regular curriculum planning meetings, the reflective staff team evaluate the plans which take account of the views of the children and their parents. Their evaluations are succinct and high quality and inform future planning so that each child makes progress.

The promotion of the children's skills in language, exploration, and problem-solving is planned meticulously by the staff and is evident in their creation of a rich, stimulating and enabling learning environment which embraces inclusivity and fosters a sense of belonging. The well-defined play spaces, equipped with accessible resources tailored to the diverse needs and interests of the children, empower them to explore and learn independently. This approach is not only enhancing the quality of their play but is also motivating the children to actively participate in meaningful, high quality learning experiences, ultimately building confidence and a love of learning. A range of suitable digital technology is provided in most play areas such as digital cameras, tills, telephones, old mobile phones, and calculators and is enhancing the children's learning across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

The children's emotional health and well-being is central to all learning experiences in the nursery school. All of the staff use consistently highly effective strategies to support the children's self-awareness of managing their own emotions and readiness to learn. For example, all of the staff wear lanyards with positive behaviour visuals which they use promptly and appropriately to engage children in their play. As a result, the children are developing high levels of respect for their friends, adults and the pre-school environment. The provision of many quiet spaces of interest with sensory resources and books for the children to discover is also adding to the development of the children's self-regulation skills and joy for learning. The children's participation in educational workshops such as 'Mindfulness Mondays' and 'Art with an artist' is impacting positively on their overall wellbeing. Various visits from for example, the fire service and the community police are developing the children's awareness of keeping safe.

The extensive outdoor space within the nursery grounds is the only large green space within a one-mile radius of the pre-school and the staff maximise this space through well planned outdoor learning experiences for the children across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. The various sensory surfaces and the wide range of challenging climbing equipment are promoting the children's engagement in high levels of energetic play, developing their gross motor skills and contributing well to their emotional health and wellbeing.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The staff create a joyful, warm, and inviting learning environment where children thrive due to well-established routines, thoughtfully planned learning activities and strong community relationships. Staff are committed to celebrating each child and reinforcing their sense of belonging through for example, individual greetings during arrival and departure, home school links and responding to the needs and interests of each child.

The staff use appropriate assessment methods to identify children as having additional needs. They use this information well to provide an inclusive and nurturing learning environment that allows each child to develop and make progress. For the children identified with SEN, detailed Personal Learning Plans (PLPs)* have clear targets, informed by parents/carers and appropriate strategies to support each child. The staff have identified the need to focus on improving further the children's attention and listening skills and their speech and language development. Through advice and support from a speech and language therapist, they use of a range of effective language interventions, including small group sessions which is impacting positively on the children's attention and listening skills.

As a 'School of Sanctuary,' the nursery embraces a culturally diverse environment where the individual cultures and views of all members are respected and valued. This inclusive approach not only enhances the social fabric of the school community but also enables every child and parent to feel a sense of belonging. The nursery's commitment to inclusivity is further exemplified by initiatives such as 'Get to know me', and 'Stay and Play' sessions, which encourage participation and collaboration among families.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The staff compile comprehensive profiles and scrapbooks of the children's learning and achievements which clearly show their progression across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. During curriculum planning and evaluations, the children's views are 'listened to' and celebrated with opportunities for them to work together to express their interests and knowledge in creative and visually appealing displays.

The children understand and follow the rules and routines of the nursery well and they engage in collaborative play with respectful behaviour. They persevere very well with tasks and seek help when needed. They demonstrate very good gross and fine motor skills and engage in a range of mark making activities to express their creativity and to convey meaning, for example, drawing plans to guide their building and construction. The children's speech, language and communication skills are developing well as they engage in meaningful conversations in the wide range of authentically resourced play areas, for example, in the large outdoor sand and building areas and in the indoor sensory and water play areas. These areas are also promoting well the development of the children's early thinking, problem-solving and investigative skills. All of the children's efforts, work and achievements are recognised and celebrated daily through for example, positive praise with comments such as 'lovely walking' and use of positive Makaton* gestures.

The staff recognise the talents of all of the children and celebrate and value their unique artwork. They listen attentively as the children describe their artwork and make annotations to capture the views of each child. The children's work is then used by the staff to create very attractive and stimulating two- and three-dimensional displays. The children's achievements are further recognised and celebrated with, family fun days, workshops for parents/carers and Christmas and graduation events.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Parental engagement is a cornerstone of the nursery school's approach to building a community of learning and all are welcomed into the bright and inviting parent's room. Regular communication with parents including monthly newsletters, curriculum packs, and digital updates, enables them to be informed about their child's progress. The staff use 'Two Stars and a Wish' as a strategy to foster collaborative relationships between home and school and provide parents with clear actionable steps to support their child's learning at home, reinforcing skills and addressing challenges in a focussed way. It also encourages parents to become more involved in their child's learning, leading to increased attendance at meetings and workshops with parents which is impacting positively on the children's learning. Feedback from parents and questionnaire responses indicate a high level of satisfaction with the additional strategies and support provided by the staff.

The nursery school's induction and transition process is very effective. Before the children begin the nursery school, the staff have established positive relationships with the families through visits to homes and the local Sure Start* project, the provision of a summer family picnic and stay and play sessions. The "All About Me" box of familiar things from home is supporting the children to settle well into the nursery school and is used effectively to develop the children's interests across the curriculum.

The staff have very good relationships with the local primary school to which the majority of the children transition. They invite the primary one children and staff to use their extensive outdoor facilities twice a week in the third term. This is developing the relationship between the pre-school's children and the primary one staff. In addition, the nursery school's participation in the Moving Up Programme* with the primary school and the regular visits between the schools for seasonal events is supporting effectively the children's preparation for their next stage of learning.

The establishment of collaborative networks with other nurseries and community organisations enhances the nursery school's ability to provide comprehensive support. For example, the nursery school is part of an extended school cluster, 'Little Voices', with three local nurseries, and through this partnership has been able to engage a speech and language therapist to work with the children, resulting in improved speech and language outcomes for the children. The establishment of partnerships with community groups has enabled the school to offer a variety of programmes tailored to the needs of families and to fund the part-time employment of a parent support worker. These partnerships help parents to receive access to valuable resources, including parenting courses, workshops, and community events, which in turn fosters a culture of shared learning and support.

There is a significant emphasis on enhancing staff skills and knowledge in Arellian Nursery School, with professional development opportunities closely aligned with the school's strategic development plan and key priorities. Staff are very research informed and their commitment to professional growth is not only boosting confidence in their own practice but is also directly enhancing the educational experiences of the children.

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

The central aims of Arellian Nursery School play a crucial role in shaping its provision. The caring and dedicated staff are committed to fostering a warm and inclusive environment where children express enthusiasm and wonder in their learning, they feel appreciated, supported and motivated to explore and learn. They prioritise not only the physical and emotional growth of each child but also work to build enduring connections between home, school and the community. Consequently, a solid support network for all children and their families is evident.

ETI will continue to work with Arellian Nursery School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the comprehensive, high-quality and robust cycle of planning, observation and assessment which supports the staff to monitor and evaluate the children's progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- the highly effective strategies and approaches used by the staff which are characterised by skilful interactions with the children and nurture their learning, personal, social and emotional development while also encouraging the children's active engagement in learning; and
- the nursery school's strong partnerships and collaborative relationships with parents, caregivers, and the broader community, which is significantly enhancing the children's learning experiences.

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

Getting Ready to Learn

The Getting Ready to Learn project supports DE funded pre-school education providers to encourage and develop parental involvement in children's early learning. It 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.

Raising Achievement in Schools and Education (RAISE)

The RAISE programme aims to reduce educational disadvantage and raise achievement levels among children and young people across Northern Ireland.

School of Sanctuary

The Schools of Sanctuary programme is an award scheme currently available in the Urban Villages areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.

The programme is aimed at helping schools to provide welcoming places where cultural diversity is valued and celebrated, and every child feels safe and accepted.

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Personal Learning Plans (PLPs)

A Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is a document which supports a child identified with special educational needs by outlining the child's learning goals and the support they need to make progress.

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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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Sure Start

The Sure Start project supports parents with children aged under four years old, living in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.

Moving Up Programme

The Moving Up Programme is a community-based initiative which provides a support programme for children and their families transitioning from nursery to primary one and from primary seven to secondary school.



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