

Report of a Pre-school Inspection

Early Learners Day Nursery,
Belfast

DE Ref No 1CA-0411

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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

Early Learners Day Nursery is located in a building adjacent to St Bride's Primary School in South Belfast. The majority of the 32 children enrolled come from the local area and almost all transition to year 1 in the adjacent primary school.

The proprietor is supported by a team consisting of a leader, a deputy leader and three full-time assistants. All staff assume additional duties in the wrap around care prior to and after the pre-school session.

The pre-school is oversubscribed each year and their application to the Department of Education's (DE) Standardisation of Pre-School Classes* has received approval. As a result, Early Learners Day Nursery will offer two full-time classes from September 2025.

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.

Almost all of the parents (29) and all of the staff (8) completed the questionnaire, the responses of which were wholly positive. All of the parents indicated that their child is happy; is making progress; they are clear on how to report a safeguarding or child protection concern; and, feel their views are sought and acted upon and would recommend Early Learners Day Nursery to others. Over three-quarters (23) of the parents who responded to the questionnaire also provided written comments in which they highlighted the nurturing environment which enables their child to thrive and the wide range of learning opportunities their child experiences. They also praised the supportive and caring staff who go 'above and beyond' and who bring "learning to life with real world experiments and experiences".

A summary of the questionnaire responses was shared with the leader and the proprietor.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Early Learners Day Nursery 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

- The highly professional, dedicated, hard-working staff are implementing successfully the well-established vision where each child develops and progresses in a safe, secure, exciting learning environment. The vision is palpable and evidenced through the extremely pastoral engagement of staff with the children.
- The children are highly curious and enthusiastic learners, who enjoy exploring the world around them. They engage independently in purposeful and sustained play and use the wide range of innovative and authentic resources to problem solve and extend their learning, such as investigating items which float and sink.
- Early mathematical language is used consistently by the children during their play experiences, and they reference shape, colour and capacity as they fill containers, measure and make symmetrical patterns. They listen attentively to stories and engage enthusiastically in songs and rhymes. All of the children are making progress in their learning across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- All of the staff contribute to the strategic planning and self-evaluation processes, undertake honest reflections on the provision and use a range of evidence to support the identification of clear and appropriate child-centred priorities for improvement.
- The planning is detailed and guides well the work of the staff which they adapt confidently and flexibly in response to the children's interests and needs. The recent focus by the staff to enhance the voice of the child is resulting in an environment where the children are confident to lead their learning, take risks and develop high levels of concentration.
- A key strength is the highly respectful and positive relationships which have been developed between the children and adults. This enhances the children's learning and impacts positively on their self-esteem and confidence. During activities the children collaborate, share and take turns with one another and enjoy discussing their early representation work with each other and the adults.
- The staff are very responsive to the culturally diverse needs of the children and their families. They actively integrate celebrations, for example, Chinese New Year and the Hindu festival Diwali into their planning to embrace diversity. The children who have been identified as having specific needs, are fully immersed into the life and work of Early Learners Day Nursery and are making good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.

- The positive working relationships fostered with parents are at the heart of the community of learning which are enriched and sustained throughout the year, through for example, the range of opportunities the staff provide for parents to learn how to support better their children's learning at home.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by Early Learners Day Nursery demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

The dedicated and hard-working staff are implementing successfully the well-established vision where 'each child develops and progresses in a safe, secure, exciting learning environment'. The vision is palpable and evidenced through the extremely pastoral relationships between the staff and the children. The strategic planning and self-evaluation processes, to which all of the staff contribute, are highly effective and are informed by robust evaluations. The staff use a wide range of evidence, including feedback from parents to support the identification of clear and appropriate child-centred priorities for improvement.

The child is truly at the centre of the life and work of Early Learners Day Nursery. The well-established staff team work collaboratively and use their broad range of skills and experience to deliver successfully all aspects of the pre-school curriculum and support the holistic development of each child.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The long-, medium- and short-term planning is informed by the pre-school curriculum and includes highly effective assessments of the children's learning which guides very well the work of the staff. All of the staff know the children well and they adapt confidently and flexibly the planned learning in response to the children's interests which enables the children to lead their learning, take risks and develop high levels of concentration. The highly effective staff interactions are encouraging and supportive; they use effective questioning and model language very well to extend the children's learning and their vocabulary. A particular emphasis is placed on the development of the children's interest in the world around them. The staff seize learning opportunities presented through the children's personal experiences and through local services, such as the postal services and gardeners which are used effectively to spark interest in the children's local environment. The children are totally engaged in these meaningful learning opportunities which develop successfully their observation and exploratory skills.

The health and well-being of the children are promoted very well by the staff. The children manage their snack routine independently and enjoy the choice of healthy food on offer. In addition, the staff liaise with a local dentist, who visits the day nursery and provides advice and guidance to the children and the parents on developing good dental hygiene. The staff provide a broad range of opportunities for physical and energetic play which facilitates very well the development of the children's gross motor skills, for example yoga sessions and participation in developing their balancing skills through circuit activities.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The vision of Early Learners is exemplified in the inclusive and caring environment that the staff provide to support appropriately the individual and diverse needs of all of the children. Cultural diversity is valued and the parents are encouraged to share their cultural, religious or national days of celebration with the staff. This is integrated effectively into the planning and the children's learning experiences through opportunities to celebrate for example Chinese New Year, St Patrick's Day Ceili and Nowruz*. The parents are encouraged to participate in the celebrations which provides the children with the opportunity to learn more about the world around them and develop respectful relationships.

The staff are developing effectively their understanding of special educational needs (SEN) and have written individual education plans (IEPs) for the children who require additional support. The targets in the IEPs are appropriate and are reviewed regularly to detail the progress and achievement of the children. The staff welcome the support from the Speech and Language therapists, Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISE NI)* and the Education Psychology service and have identified that additional professional learning opportunities for SEN is required to develop further their understanding and provision for children with additional needs.

D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

A key strength is the highly respectful and positive relationships which have been developed between the children and adults which enhance the children's learning and impacts positively on their self-esteem and confidence. The children are very mannerly and share and take turns as they engage confidently in collaborative, sustained play. All of the children, are highly independent, choose resources to extend their play, talk freely about their experiences and ask questions to deepen their understanding.

All of the children are making progress in their learning across the six areas of the pre-school curriculum. They are curious and enthusiastic learners who enjoy exploring the world around them. They are developing well their thinking and problem-solving skills through, for example, using the broad range of authentic resources to create patterns and investigate which items float and sink. They listen attentively to stories and engage enthusiastically in songs and rhymes. Most of the children are developing very well their fine motor skills and hand-to-eye co-ordination, show a keen interest in early mark making and are keen to show the adults how they are beginning to write their own names. Early mathematical language is used consistently by the children during their play experiences, and they reference shape, colour and capacity as they fill containers, measure and make symmetrical patterns.

The children's early representational 2D and 3D artwork, which is annotated to share their thinking, is displayed and celebrated across the playrooms. The staff consistently praise the children in their achievements, encourage them to talk about their work and celebrate the children's work with parents and the wider community through a digital application, social media and printed photographs.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The positive working relationships fostered with parents are enriched and sustained throughout the year and are at the heart of the community of learning within the Early Learner's Day Nursery and enable the holistic development of each child. Through the Department of Education's: Getting Ready to learn (GRtL) programme* the staff have worked hard to involve parents more fully in their child's learning. For example, the staff use a range of strategies to support the children's learning such as Makaton* and sensory resources and share these with parents to continue the children's learning at home. The staff also support families to access additional external providers such as Sure Start, Foodbanks and local community hubs to enable all of the families and children to have appropriate support at home. There are well established links with the local primary school to which almost all of the children transfer for year 1. Arrangements, such as their attendance at a range of events in the school throughout the year, enable a smooth transition for each child.

Staff professional learning (SPL) is promoted and facilitated by the proprietor. The staff proactively source and complete relevant SPL which is linked intrinsically to the identified areas for improvement. They reflect on their professional learning opportunities and embed effectively aspects within their own practice which impact positively on the children. The recent SPL on the use of 'loose parts'* has developed further the children's exploratory and investigative skills.

F. CHILD PROTECTION

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

4. GOING FORWARD

The Early Learners Day Nursery staff work collaboratively and effectively to successfully achieve their vision. The children are confident, happy, motivated and engage enthusiastically in their learning, supported by the dedicated and caring team.

The ETI will continue to work with Early Learners Day Nursery in sharing the example of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the innovative use of authentic and recyclable resources by staff which enhance the learning environment and extends successfully the creativity, exploration and problem-solving skills of the children.

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

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Standardisation of Pre-school Classes*

DE, in conjunction with the Education Authority, is progressing a Pre-School Standardisation programme for approximately 100 pre-school settings to deliver full-time pre-school education (22.5 hours per week) from September 2025 or as soon as possible thereafter.

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Nowruz*

Nowruz is the Iranian or Persian New Year.

Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISE NI)*

RISE NI is a regional early intervention service which supports children in pre-school educational and mainstream primary school settings by working closely with parents and education staff to help children develop the foundation skills for learning

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Department of Education: Getting Ready to learn (GRtL) Programme*

The Getting Ready to Learn project seeks to support pre-school education providers with DE funded places 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.

Makaton*

Makaton is a language program that uses a combination of signs, symbols, and speech to support communication for individuals with learning or communication difficulties.

‘loose parts’*

Loose parts are a range of natural, recycled and commercially produced resources such as clothes pegs, wooden spools, keys which have no predetermined use and are designed to inspire creativity, exploration, and open-ended learning experiences.



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