

Primary (including EOTAS) Insights Report

September 2024 to June 2025



Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

Contents

Introduction and context	1
Key findings.....	1
Key challenges	7
Conclusion	9
Appendix 1: Helpful links	11
Appendix 2: Quantitative Terms	12

Introduction and context

During the period September 2024 to June 2025, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) undertook 49 inspections to primary schools ranging in size and geographical classification across Northern Ireland.

Eighteen of the schools had a nursery unit, two schools enrolled children who were not yet of school age in reception provision, nine had specialist provisions and one operated a Department of Education (DE)-funded nurture class. Seven planned inspections did not take place due to the industrial action short of strike (ASoS) undertaken by the teaching unions during this period.

This report references, where appropriate, the responses to ETI's primary pre-inspection questionnaires from: 1,392 year 7 children; 571 teachers; 552 classroom assistants; 203 support staff; and 2919 parents/carers.

Findings are drawn from evaluation and district work. This work included visits to 24 primary schools in June 2025, with a focus on evaluating the schools' arrangements for supporting children's attendance at school. In the reporting period, ETI carried out thematic evaluations, including:

[The Statutory Assessment \(Statementing\) Process \(November 2024\)](#)

[Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools - Part 1 \(November 2024\)](#)

[A Review of Art and Design at Key Stage 2 in Primary and Special Schools in Northern Ireland \(November 2024\)](#)

Key findings

Schools have responded positively to the introduction of the Empowering Improvement Framework

The new framework for inspection, the [Empowering Improvement Framework](#), was introduced in September, following a successful pilot phase in primary schools in May and June 2024.

School leaders tell us they appreciate that the framework was informed by, and co-designed with, them and that it is helping to empower them to articulate and engage others in their improvement planning and implementation.

During inspection, the nine contributory areas are well-understood and are helping schools to provide evidence when considering how to respond to the five core questions. School leaders report that using existing documentation has reduced workload related previously to inspection and has strengthened the confidence of the staff in developing self-evaluation processes and identifying priorities for improvement.

Schools welcome the new reporting format which has removed performance levels, reducing the perceived 'high stakes' nature of inspection. They appreciate greater opportunities for meaningful professional dialogue and our engagement with a wider range of stakeholders to understand and take better account of the context and uniqueness of each school.

School leaders are recognising more the centrality of the school's vision in shaping strategic direction, culture and whole-school improvement

All schools recognise that a clear, shared vision is crucial in setting the direction of the school to guide decision-making and reinforce the school's values and purpose. There is a better understanding of how vision may change as the school's context evolves and just over one-third of the schools inspected were reviewing or had reviewed recently their vision statement. Appropriately, almost all schools had sought and valued the collaborative engagement of the wider school community in shaping the school's vision. There is evidence also of effective support from the employing authorities in providing staff workshops for schools on setting their vision. The visibility of schools' visions and, importantly, their outworkings is more evident also to parents. Almost all of the parents/carers who responded to our questionnaire said that they know the school's vision. This inclusive approach enables the vision to be both aspirational and grounded in the shared values, culture and ethos of the school and the community in which it is rooted, helping to make school development planning a more meaningful and collaborative process.

In April 2024 DE published clarification to boards of governors and schools in relation to the requirements for [school development planning for 2024/25](#) pending the outcome of DE's End to End Review of School Improvement. During the COVID-19 pandemic DE had relaxed the requirements for school development planning. In 2024 schools were encouraged to return to a three-year school development plan (SDP), with discretion to retain a one-year interim plan depending on the school's individual context. On inspection, we found that schools were at varying stages in implementing the revised guidance; a significant minority of schools inspected were operating with a one-year transitional plan.

Where self-evaluation is working well, the school's development priorities were identified through a comprehensive consultation process involving the children, staff, parents and governors, and a robust analysis of the school's internal assessment data, including from first-hand evidence. Schools at this time were still working through the impact of the pandemic and prolonged periods of industrial action on school improvement. In a significant minority of schools, the systems for effective monitoring and evaluation by senior and middle leaders were being re-instated, or their reinstatement was planned. A small number of schools had developed child-friendly versions of the SDP, with input from the children, which ensured their views were valued and acted upon.

Almost all schools identify a small number of appropriate, evidence-based priorities for improvement. There is variation in the quality of the supporting action plans to guide the staff to make identified improvements. For example, not all schools are consistent in the setting and application of 'SMART' targets to effect improvement for children.

There is a growing and commendable strategic focus on fostering inclusive, nurturing environments that prioritise the children's emotional health and wellbeing and holistic development

During this reporting period, almost all schools had arrangements for child protection which aligned with the statutory guidance. In two schools the arrangements for child protection did not align to the statutory guidance. These schools had a six week progress inspection for child protection, by which point the arrangements for child protection aligned to the statutory guidance.

Society is changing constantly and schools are highly responsive to the evolving needs of their children. In almost all of the schools inspected, the provision for children's health and wellbeing and the arrangements for keeping children safe were effective, with just over one-half being highly effective. Schools are reporting that more children are entering year 1 who are not yet ready to learn and who are lacking language skills and social skills such as sharing or taking turns. As a result, the schools are having to adapt provision to support the social and emotional needs as the primary approach to successful learning. Schools with a strong alignment between vision, values and ethos, supported by committed staff and governors, work hard to create environments where children feel safe, secure and able to thrive. In these schools, the prioritisation of the children's emotional health and wellbeing within the school development plan and in the curriculum planning is improving the children's self-esteem and self-belief, enabling them to access learning at their own pace.

To ameliorate the higher number of children presenting with emotional and social needs, a growing number of schools are adopting whole-school nurture approaches and are embedding nurture principles to support the development of the children's social and emotional skills. Effective strategies include: sessions in mindfulness; provision of sensory regulation; and health initiatives such as [The Daily Mile](#). Effective partnerships with education and health professionals, and community organisations, including initiatives such as the [Take 5 programme](#), the Regional Integrated Support for Education (RISE) programme, [Fresh Little Minds](#), and [Roots of Empathy](#) are developing the children's self-awareness and ability to manage their emotions.

School leaders report also that the wellbeing of staff is a key focus. More schools are appointing a staff member with specific responsibility for leading and co-ordinating support for both the children and staff, strengthening further the school's capacity to promote and sustain the emotional health and wellbeing of the children and the whole school community.

Schools are focusing on providing rich and relevant learning experiences which are integrated across the breadth of the curriculum

Twenty-six of the 49 schools inspected had areas identified for dissemination. The most common elements of practice identified for dissemination related to the contributory area within the Empowering Improvement Framework of planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning. Planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning was effective in most of the schools inspected. Three-quarters of the children who responded to our questionnaire said they enjoy school always or most of the time.

Where learning was most successful, the teachers plan active learning opportunities often set in real-life contexts related to the school's location, history and the interests of the children. They use skilfully open-ended questioning, and other assessment for learning strategies, to enhance the children's engagement and promote deeper understanding. These approaches have a positive impact on the children, supporting them to develop the skills to structure their thinking, develop ideas, solve problems and reflect on their learning.

Where learning observed was not as successful, there was limited opportunity to develop the children's creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills. There was a need for teachers to plan activities to stretch and challenge the more able children and there was too much focus on completing worksheets which did not progress the children's learning.

In the best practice, digital technology is embedded seamlessly across the curriculum with clear progression and diverse, purposeful opportunities that develop the children's creativity and critical thinking

As technology continues to shape every aspect of society, we all recognise the importance of equipping children with the digital skills needed to navigate the digital world confidently, safely and successfully.

Inspection evidence shows that the most effective practice occurs when digital technology is embedded seamlessly across the curriculum, rather than treated solely as a discrete area of learning. This integrated approach supports the development of the children's creativity, critical thinking, and communication skills.

Over one-quarter of schools demonstrated high levels of effectiveness in the provision of digital skills, providing the children with regular, purposeful opportunities to apply a wide range of digital tools in meaningful contexts. The children had opportunities to engage in activities such as researching, managing data, coding and creating multimedia content, including animations, podcasts, and presentations. These experiences enhanced their ability to investigate, collaborate, and express their ideas with increasing independence and confidence.

To sustain and extend this impact, schools will benefit from planning strategically for progression in digital learning, ensuring equitable access to a broad range of technologies that empower the children to compose, code, create, animate, collaborate, and store information securely. Such planning is essential to develop digital competence and prepare the children to contribute effectively to an increasingly digital society.

Over one-half of the schools inspected are very successfully living out equitable and inclusive practices leading to improved outcomes for the children

Almost all of the schools inspected had effective equitable and inclusive practices, with just over one-half having highly effective practices. Inspection evidence demonstrates that schools which prioritise equity, diversity, and inclusion are achieving tangible improvements in the outcomes for children, particularly for those

with special educational needs (SEN). These schools exemplify a well-embedded culture of positive relationships and a nurturing environment that extends to families, creating a strong foundation for inclusion. The number of children presenting with complex SEN continues to rise, and schools work with empathy and diligence to meet the needs of these children in a landscape of budgetary pressures, staffing shortages and increased workload.

A key factor for successful outcomes for the children lies in the early identification of need through robust assessment and observation processes. Tailored intervention strategies, delivered collaboratively by teachers, classroom assistants and external agencies, and which are monitored closely for progress and adjusted as required, are impacting positively on the children's progression in learning and leading to improved outcomes.

Nine schools were identified as having practice relating to SEN worthy of wider dissemination. Common features include: evidence-based, research-informed and strategically planned professional learning programmes; the systematic use of a wide range of assessment and pastoral information to identify and address barriers at an early stage; the use of assistive technologies; and the use of a whole-school SEN provision map which is monitored robustly to ensure supports remain targeted and impactful.

Crucially, impact is greatest when schools work meaningfully with parents, offering workshops designed to build their knowledge, understanding and skills to support their child's learning at home. Themed awareness days, such as Blue Day for Diabetes, Epilepsy Awareness, and Autism Awareness, strengthen further school and community understanding of children's needs.

Going forward, prioritising SEN-specific high-quality staff professional learning (SPL) opportunities will strengthen further staff expertise and confidence, empowering them to respond effectively to the diverse needs of all of the children. Without this intentional focus, the risk remains that best practice will be isolated rather than systemic.

Where children achieve high standards in writing, opportunities to write independently are embedded in meaningful, purposeful contexts across the curriculum that spark the children's enjoyment and enthusiasm

Where children achieve the best standards in writing it is integrated into real-life and cross-curricular experiences, rather than confined to isolated activities, fostering the children's creativity and engagement. Where schools avoided the use of rigid templates and worksheet-based activities the children were able to express their ideas freely and develop their own writing style. The quality of the children's writing is enhanced when schools plan for well-considered assessment for learning strategies which ensure that feedback provided to the children is constructive and that children have sufficient opportunities to act on teacher feedback when redrafting and refining their work.

More schools are becoming confident in exploring safely and responsibly the benefits of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In a small number of schools, AI was integrated creatively and responsibly into the writing process, particularly in the drafting and editing of creative writing and in supporting self- and peer-evaluation. This emerging practice is contributing positively to the development of the children's reflective and evaluative skills, enabling them to refine their work with greater independence and providing them with an opportunity to reflect on **how** they are learning as well as **what** they are learning.

Well-planned outdoor learning opportunities are a powerful catalyst for improvement, enabling the children to explore key concepts, build meaningful connections, work collaboratively and strengthen their problem solving and inquiry skills

Increasingly, schools are incorporating locally based topics and community projects to set the children's learning in relevant, real-life contexts. These approaches deepen the children's engagement and help the children make meaningful connections between classroom learning and the world around them. For example, we saw how opportunities to participate in biodiversity projects, the use of polytunnels and the development of outdoor learning spaces, are enriching the children's learning experiences. Notably, outdoor learning approaches are being extended into key stage (KS) 2 in a growing number of schools. The staff told us how this development is improving the children's motivation, environmental awareness and teamwork skills. More schools should provide the older children with opportunities to take their learning outdoors.

Four primary schools were identified as having practice worthy of wider dissemination in relation to play-based learning. These examples include: transforming outdoor lunchtime play areas to promote positive behaviour and inclusion; and highly effective outdoor play-based learning that develops progressively the children's knowledge, skills and understanding across the curriculum.

Evidence from district inspector visits to specialist provisions highlights that many children with sensory needs, who find traditional classroom environments to be challenging due to a heightened sensitivity to noise, light and limited movement, may experience greater calm and engagement when the learning is moved outdoors.

A successful community of learning within a school begins with an ethos of trust and a culture of openness

Evidence from inspections indicates that almost all schools are growing effectively a community of learning; this element was highly effective in just under one-half of the schools inspected. In these schools, collaborative planning and the regular exchange of research-informed strategies between staff were commonplace. Significantly, this culture extended beyond teachers to include classroom assistants who were included in SPL opportunities. This inclusive model strengthens consistency in the quality of teaching approaches across the school and contributes positively to the children's learning experiences and the outcomes they attain.

Eleven schools were identified as having practice worthy of wider dissemination in how they created a community of learning. These included innovative approaches to maximising holistic learning opportunities for children in rural settings, leveraging partnerships with external agencies to enable the children to overcome barriers, and positioning the school as a hub for community learning and development.

Key challenges

Reinstating coherent and robust self-evaluation processes, informed by first-hand evidence remains a work in progress in many schools

For almost one-third of the schools inspected, a key priority is the reinstatement of a coherent and robust range of self-evaluation processes to support school development planning. These schools are at the early stages of gathering and analysing first-hand evidence to monitor and evaluate the impact of their school development work to support the children's learning and progression.

In just under one-fifth of the schools inspected, there is a clear need for support for middle leaders to ensure their work has the necessary impact. Inspection findings highlight the importance of providing further opportunities for them to develop their leadership roles and skills through, for example, identifying and sharing best practice to promote consistently high-quality teaching across the school. In addition, greater opportunities for middle leaders to collaborate with others (both within school and externally), to share effective and innovative practice, and to contribute strategically to whole-school improvement are required.

The rapid expansion of specialist provision brings significant challenges for primary schools

Around 160 primary schools (approximately 20%), with the support of the Education Authority and colleagues in special schools, have worked diligently to set up specialist provision classes to meet the growing demand for places. A number of children with placements in the specialist provision classes experienced delays in starting school owing to accommodation, staffing and transport challenges, which school leaders report caused considerable stress and disruption for the children, their families and staff. There needs to be better forward planning between the Department of Health, the EA and DE to ensure that children with SEN are treated equitably with their peers at these critical times of transition.

The capacity of schools to meet the increasingly complex needs of the children is constrained by ongoing difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified staff. There is a need to disseminate more widely the effective practice that is emerging and to prioritise areas for further development, particularly in relation to providing the children from the specialist provision classes with regular, well-planned opportunities to participate in learning with their peers in the mainstream classes.

The SPL offer for teachers and classroom assistants from the EA has not kept pace with the scale and pace of system change. While progress has been made since the publication of ETI's report in December 2023 on [Teacher Professional Learning to Support Children with SEN](#), most school leaders continue to report that all staff require greater access to high-quality external professional learning to meet more effectively the increasing complexity of children's needs.

Attendance remains a significant issue and is impacting negatively on the children's learning and wellbeing

Since the COVID-19 pandemic non-and low-attendance is proving to be a difficult issue for schools to address. Low levels of attendance are correlated closely with lower levels of achievement. The children with low levels of attendance are missing out on important aspects of education, such as the development and application of wider skills, participation in after-school activities and opportunities to enhance confidence and self-esteem.

In June 2025, ETI carried out focused district visits to 24 primary schools across Northern Ireland to discuss attendance priorities, including the number of children who are currently on a reduced school day and the strategies in place to support them in returning to full-time education. The schools reported a wide range of reasons for low attendance, including a sharp rise in non-agreed family holidays and emotionally based school non-attendance.

Inspection evidence shows that schools with creative and supportive approaches to supporting children's emotional health and wellbeing are maintaining higher levels of attendance and engagement. Key staff in schools who work closely with the EA's Education Welfare Service are reporting that this engagement is also helping to address low rates of attendance.

There remains considerable untapped potential to develop sufficiently the children's participation in shaping and enriching the curriculum

While all schools inspected demonstrate a clear commitment to promoting learner participation, the current approaches can limit the full potential of learner voice and engagement. In almost one-fifth of the schools inspected, learner participation is not developed sufficiently to have a meaningful impact on learning. Too often, involvement is limited to operational or social roles, such as membership of school councils or playground buddies, rather than influencing core aspects of both curriculum and teaching. This narrow remit constrains the transformative potential of learner engagement. Twenty percent of the year 7 children who responded to our questionnaire said that they are not asked about what type of learning activities they like to do. Moving forward, school leaders have an important opportunity to build on existing good practice by broadening leadership roles available to the children to include decision-making about all aspects of school life that affect them. Such steps would empower all children to take greater ownership of their learning journey and transform participation into authentic agency.

Creativity and art and design require a greater strategic focus

Monitoring, evaluation and review of planning for art and design has not been a high enough priority in most of the schools visited during the [Review of Art and Design at Key Stage 2 in Primary and Special Schools](#). School leaders report increasing challenges in recruiting teachers with specialist knowledge of art and design, gained either as part of their initial teacher education degree or other third level education programme. A shortage of specialists in the school system has implications for developing the curriculum, levels of teacher expertise, planning for progression and

leading the subject in schools. Schools can benefit from engagement with industry, for example, in exploring the potential of digital art. Inspection evidence also reveals that an over-reliance on worksheets and rigid templates has constrained originality and independent thinking, limiting opportunities for children to engage in creative learning experiences.

There is a significant opportunity for schools to strengthen creativity and art and design as a cornerstone of high-quality learning. Where practice is most effective, school leaders prioritise experiences that inspire originality, foster independent thinking, and promote emotional wellbeing. In these schools, children articulate confidently their enjoyment in art and design, engage enthusiastically, and explore ideas through rich, meaningful learning opportunities that extend beyond the classroom.

To realise this potential more widely, schools should work to develop and embed a clear, strategic vision for creativity, ensuring that planning, monitoring and evaluation processes champion innovation and reduce reliance on restrictive pedagogical approaches. By doing so, every child can access the cognitive and emotional benefits of high-quality art and design experiences.

While most schools organise the school day effectively, a small number need to review its length to optimise learning time and ensure compliance with statutory guidance

While schools have flexibility in setting opening and closing times, inspectors identified, in a small number of schools, the need for school leaders and governors to review these arrangements to comply with [DE statutory guidance](#) in the best interest of the children. By reviewing proactively and aligning time management with the statutory guidance, school leaders and governors can strengthen the school's capacity to deliver an engaging, well-structured curriculum that meets the needs of every child.

More schools are implementing reduced timetables to address children's complex needs, primarily related to emotional health and wellbeing, behaviour and special educational needs. It is important that schools work in partnership with parents and external agencies and ensure these interventions are not long-term and are designed to support a phased integration into full-school attendance. Adjustments must also be communicated to DE or EA. The board of governors has responsibility for ensuring the school is applying DE guidance correctly and for monitoring the practice.

Conclusion

The inspection evidence from September 2024 to June 2025 highlights the resilience, creativity, and commitment of primary schools across Northern Ireland to deliver high-quality, inclusive and inspiring education.

Schools are increasingly shaping aspirational visions, embedding nurturing approaches, and leveraging partnerships to prioritise children's wellbeing and holistic development. Where practice is most effective, learning is active, connected, and enriched by digital innovation and children's participation in decision-making, outdoor experiences, and authentic opportunities for creativity.

These examples of excellence demonstrate that, even amid the financial and societal challenges such as rising complexity of needs and attendance issues, schools can transform outcomes through collaboration, strategic planning and a relentless focus on equity and inclusion.

Moving forward, the sector has a powerful opportunity to scale best practice, strengthen leadership capacity, and champion learner voice, ensuring that every child is empowered to thrive academically, socially and emotionally in a rapidly changing world.

Appendix 1: Helpful links

Further information on **nurture** can be found at:

[Education Authority Nurture Advisory and Support Service](#)

Further information on **social, behavioural, and emotional wellbeing (SBEW)** can be found at:

[Education Authority Behaviour Support and Provision-Primary Education Authority High Five Newsletter](#)

[Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Schools](#)

Further information on **teacher professional learning** can be found at:

[Empowering Improvement Project 2 for senior leaders](#)

[Education Authority Courses and Events](#)

Appendix 2: 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%

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