



**Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement**



# Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
<b>1. Great Teaching First: Driving Learning &amp; Achievement</b>	
High quality teaching is the most significant in-school factor influencing pupil outcomes.	
■ <b>Building fluent, confident readers through scaffolded practice</b> <i>Ruth Howe – Principal, Rasharkin Primary School</i>	6
■ <b>Making writing even better</b> <i>David Corbett – Principal, Gilnahirk Primary School</i>	8
■ <b>To improve the standards of fictional writing in our school</b> <i>Alison Ford-Hutchinson – Senior Teacher, Moyle Primary School</i>	10
■ <b>Improving Talking and Listening</b> <i>Kathryn Jebb – Literacy Coordinator, Old Warren Primary School</i>	12
■ <b>Developing a whole school approach to writing</b> <i>Michael Moore – Principal, Grange Park Primary School</i>	14
■ <b>Building capacity to develop confident mathematicians</b> <i>James Cleland – Principal, Gorran Primary School</i>	16
■ <b>Building confidence in problem-solving across the school</b> <i>Shannon McCleery – Numeracy Coordinator, Harding Memorial Integrated Primary School</i>	18
<b>2. Every Learner Included: Communication, SEN &amp; Support</b>	
Inclusive approaches ensure all pupils can access, engage with and succeed in learning.	
■ <b>Developing early communication through attuned, responsive practice</b> <i>Nuala McGranaghan – Vice Principal, Cedar Lodge School</i>	21
■ <b>Implementing the SEN graduated response framework: Step-by-step support for special educational needs</b> <i>Emma Loughridge – Principal, Eden Primary School</i>	23
■ <b>From distress to readiness: Sensory room case study summary</b> <i>Ivor Hutchinson – Principal, Clough Primary School &amp; Nursery Unit</i>	25
■ <b>Total communication: Improving outcomes in communication and life skills</b> <i>Joanne Gray – Principal, Willowbridge School</i>	27
■ <b>Improving SEN provision for pupils with social communication through SPiM (Specialist Provision in Mainstream) class</b> <i>Kathryn Evans – Teacher and SENCO, Newbuildings Primary School</i>	29

- 
- **Tracking nursery pupils progress**  
*Laura Fitzsimons – Nursery Coordinator, Rathcoole Primary School & Nursery* 31

### 3. Ethos as a Priority: Culture, Behaviour & School Climate

A strong ethos creates the conditions in which effective teaching and learning can thrive.

- **Improving our approach to positive behaviour**  
*Melissa McCombe – Principal, Kilrea Primary School* 34
- **You can't build capacity if your school climate isn't right...**  
*Grace Anderson – Principal, Magherafelt High School* 37
- **Leading with values: Strengthening leadership and school ethos**  
*Gillian Hay – Principal, Donemana Primary School* 39
- **Values in action: Embedding a consistent, values-driven ethos**  
*Jill McKee – Principal, Cortamlet Primary School* 41

### 4. Growing People: Professional Learning & Leadership

Developing staff through collaboration and leadership sustains improvement over time.

- **Growing professional practice through collaboration and trust**  
*Ross Coulter – Principal, Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School* 44
- **Developing summative data in ICT for pupil progress**  
*Daniel Potts – Teacher & ICT Coordinator, Donemana Primary School* 47
- **Improving identification and response to pupil underachievement**  
*Ian Thompson – Assistant Vice Principal, Ballyclare Secondary School* 49

### 5. Spaces That Shape Learning: Environment & Innovation

Learning environments can enhance engagement, wellbeing and outcomes.

- **Enhancing outdoor learning through a shared, high quality approach**  
*Aimee Scott – Head of Foundation Stage, Moyle Primary School* 52
- **Transforming outdoor learning through inclusive, high quality practice**  
*Kim Wylie – Head of Nursery Unit, Oakfield Primary School and Nursery Unit* 55
- **Transforming outdoor learning: A strategic approach**  
*Louise Creighton – Principal, Thornfield House Special School* 58

- Glossary of Terms 61

## Foreword

---

The Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC) exists to support and represent the controlled schools' sector, the largest and most diverse education sector in Northern Ireland. Our schools are open to all, deeply rooted in their communities, and committed to providing high quality education for children and young people from all backgrounds.

There is clear and consistent evidence that the quality of teaching has the greatest impact on pupils' learning and experiences. Improving teaching is therefore central to school improvement and requires strong, reflective leadership focused on evidence, collaboration, and sustained improvement in classroom practice.

The CSSC Building Capacity Programme has been designed in response to international research on effective professional learning in high performing education systems. It reflects a shared understanding that improvement is most effective when professional learning is focused on teaching and learning, informed by evidence, collaborative in nature, sustained over time, and supported through coaching and mentoring.

The case studies in this publication demonstrate the impact of this approach. They show how leaders have strengthened the quality of teaching in their schools, developed more collaborative professional cultures, and improved outcomes for children and young people.

This work aligns closely with the Department of Education's TransformED NI strategy, which places the classroom at the centre of educational improvement and recognises high quality teaching and leadership as key drivers of change. This publication recognises the impact of the CSSC Building Capacity Programme and serves as a valuable resource for others seeking to lead improvement in their own schools.

**Mark Baker**

Chief Executive

Controlled Schools' Support Council

# Introduction

---

The Building Capacity Programme was introduced by CSSC in 2019 to support school leaders to lead meaningful and sustained improvement in teaching and learning, grounded in evidence and shaped by the realities of their own school contexts. At the heart of the programme is a shared belief in continual improvement, captured well by Dylan Wiliam's observation that:

*“Every teacher needs to improve,  
not because they are not good enough,  
but because they can be even better.”*

This principle has underpinned the work of participants throughout the programme. Over the course of the year, it has been a genuine privilege to work alongside a committed, reflective and ambitious group of school leaders engaged in professional inquiry and improvement practice. We are immensely proud of the professionalism, openness and integrity they have demonstrated and it has been a real joy to support and learn alongside them.

Informed by international research on effective professional learning, the programme supports leaders to focus their improvement work on teaching and learning through evidence informed inquiry, collaboration, coaching and sustained reflection. Participants identify a clear improvement priority, test approaches in practice and use evidence to evaluate impact within their own schools.

The case studies presented in this publication demonstrate the impact of that work. They show how leaders have strengthened classroom practice, developed more collaborative professional cultures and improved outcomes for children and young people. This publication is intended to serve as a reference for current participants, provide clarity of expectations for future cohorts and act as a stimulus for other schools, illustrating what is possible through disciplined, evidence informed leadership.

**Jill Brown and Derek Harkness**  
CSSC Building Capacity Programme Leads

1.

# Great Teaching First: Driving Learning & Achievement



Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement



# Building fluent, confident readers through scaffolded practice

**Ruth Howe**, Principal  
Rasharkin Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The focus of this improvement work was to strengthen pupils' oral reading fluency through scaffolded, fluency focused approaches. Through professional dialogue and observation, it was identified that provision in Talking and Listening could be further developed, particularly in pupils' ability to read aloud with expression and confidence. While many pupils demonstrated secure decoding skills, they often lacked appropriate pace, phrasing or intonation, which limited comprehension and engagement.

Oral reading fluency, one of the Five Pillars of Reading, is a critical component of Scarborough's *Reading Rope*, linking decoding with language comprehension to enable skilled, confident reading. Staff also identified aspects of the ETI *Learner Insight Profile*, including reading with understanding, adapting language for purpose and audience, and responding critically to texts, as areas for development. This work was supported by collaborative professional reflection, as promoted in ETI: *Empowering Improvement*, ensuring collective responsibility for enhancing pupils' reading outcomes.

## Relevant research considered

This work was informed by relevant research, particularly Christopher Such, who identifies oral reading fluency as a key bridge between decoding and comprehension. He advocates scaffolded approaches, including explicit modelling, shared reading and repeated oral reading, to develop fluency. Such highlights that pupils who decode accurately but lack fluency often struggle to fully engage with texts. This research informed the school's use of fluency focused reading, ensuring planned opportunities to practise pace, phrasing and expression. It also complements Scarborough's *Reading Rope* and supports

consistent, evidence informed classroom practice.

## Baseline audit

Through the school development planning process, standardised English assessments showed that 83% of pupils were making average or above-average progress, with reading scores in P4–P7 above the class average reading age. Despite these strong outcomes, the Literacy Action Plan, informed by staff monitoring and professional dialogue, highlighted oral reading fluency as an area for further development.

Staff identified that pupils required more purposeful opportunities to engage in scaffolded, fluency focused reading. As oral reading fluency is not captured through standardised data, baseline evidence was drawn from qualitative sources, including teacher observations, guided reading records, and listening to pupils engage in repeated oral reading, which highlighted difficulties with pace, phrasing and expression.

## Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes included increased pupil confidence, independence and competence in oral reading fluency through scaffolded, fluency focused approaches, as advocated by Christopher Such. Pupils were expected to read aloud with improved pace, phrasing and expression, leading to stronger comprehension and engagement, alongside improved listening and communication skills. For staff, outcomes included increased confidence in assessing and developing oral reading fluency through consistent, shared approaches, strengthening collective practice and supporting sustained improvement in literacy across the school.

## Actions taken

The EEF *Engage, Unite, Reflect* guidance structured this work, with a strong emphasis on collaboration and shared responsibility. John Hattie's research on collective teacher efficacy provided the

*“Pupil recordings and assessments indicated clear improvements in pace, phrasing and expression, reflecting increased fluency and confidence.”*

overarching framework, supporting staff to evaluate and act on impact collaboratively.

Staff engaged with Christopher Such’s *Primary Reading Simplified*, with dedicated time for reading and professional discussion. They agreed to trial scaffolded, fluency focused approaches, including modelling, shared reading and repeated oral reading, initially once per week, with plans to increase frequency. Following the CSSC course, DE TPL funding enabled staff to observe one another and reflect on practice. A recorded fluency lesson from the Research Schools Network was also viewed and discussed. Agreed approaches were informed by *Classroom Excellence and Science of Learning principles*, including modelling, feedback and spaced practice.



### Evidence collected

A range of qualitative and quantitative evidence was gathered to evaluate impact. Pre and post intervention teacher assessments and guided reading records were used to assess changes in oral reading fluency. Audio and video recordings provided before and after evidence of improvements in pace, phrasing and expression. Learner feedback was gathered using structured sentence stems, for example, “I joined in more because I felt confident” and “This reading helped me understand the story better.” Teacher reflections from observations and professional dialogue focused on pupil engagement,

participation and enjoyment, as well as changes in staff confidence and consistency in delivering scaffolded, fluency focused reading.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence demonstrated a positive impact on both teaching practice and pupil outcomes. Teacher reflections and observations showed increased confidence in teaching oral reading fluency and greater consistency in using scaffolded, fluency focused approaches. Staff also showed improved understanding of how to assess fluency and adapt support through modelling and repeated oral reading.

Pupil recordings and assessments indicated clear improvements in pace, phrasing and expression, reflecting increased fluency and confidence. Learner feedback highlighted strong engagement, with pupils reporting greater confidence when reading aloud. Overall, the evidence confirmed that collaborative professional learning strengthened staff practice, increased collective teacher efficacy and supported measurable improvements in pupils’ oral reading fluency and engagement.

### Challenges experienced

A key challenge was measuring gains in oral reading fluency, as no standardised assessment captures progress in this area. This required reliance on teacher assessment, observation and qualitative evidence. Resourcing also presented challenges, particularly in selecting suitable texts to support fluency focused reading. External funding was secured to purchase *Short Reads* with a teacher guide to ensure consistent, scaffolded practice.

Next steps include increasing the frequency of fluency sessions, refining assessment systems and continuing professional learning to support targeted intervention, progression in text complexity and sustained improvement informed by pupil voice.

# Making writing even better

**David Corbett**, Principal  
Gilnahirk Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Our focus has been on developing the teaching of writing across the school. The rationale for this action lay in what appeared to be a dissonance between a very strong literacy profile across the school and the standard of writing produced by our children. With circa 85% of our children achieving at expected levels or better in PTE and almost all of our children achieving expected levels or better at the end of KS1 and KS2, we felt that the quality of writing, whilst good, could be even better.

## Relevant research considered

We considered the *Improving Literacy at Key Stage 1 and 2* report on the Education Endowment Foundation, with a particular focus on the writing aspect of the report. As part of a staff development day on the teaching of writing we also considered some instructional videos, demonstrating current best practice in the teaching of writing, specifically on explicit instruction and the use of modelled writing as an effective tool in the teaching of writing.

## Baseline audit

As noted above, the starting position was what appeared to be a mismatch between a strong overall literacy profile and outcomes in writing. Writing had not been a whole school focus since approximately 2012. During this time, there had been considerable staff turnover and movement between year groups, which had contributed to a lack of consistency in writing pedagogy and progression. Recent book looks and professional discussions between staff and literacy coordinator, have highlighted a key concern: the journey of writing is not clear in pupils' books and the quality of the writing, whilst good, was not where it should be, particularly with our more able children.



## Expected outcomes

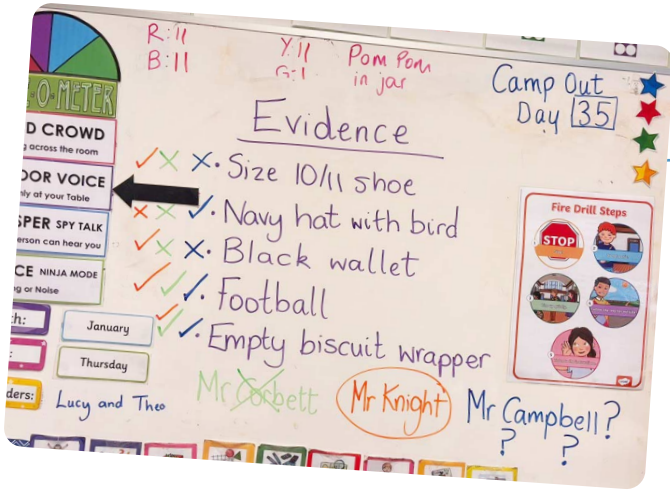
The following outcomes were expected:

- A more consistent approach to the teaching of writing across the school, with an agreed teaching framework, 'The Big Write Week'.
- Greater evidence of the full writing journey in writing books, not just evidence of the finished product. We wanted teachers to understand that immersion, modelled writing, shared writing, planning for writing and drafting are all as important as the final published version.
- Increased confidence amongst staff in the explicit teaching of writing in a writing audit, over half of teaching staff expressed a lack of confidence in the teaching of writing.
- Evidence of greater confidence in writing amongst our children, with clear improvement in the standard of writing produced.

## Actions taken

- Audit of teaching staff to ascertain baseline position on the teaching of writing – term 1.
- Pupil focus group with Literacy Coordinator to gain children's views on the learning and teaching of writing – term 1.
- Findings of teacher and pupil audits summarised and provided to staff, with

*“The quality of writing, whilst good, could be even better.”*



relevant actions emanating from the findings – term 1.

- Targeted CPD day on the teaching of writing, focusing on the components of the ‘Big Write Week’ – term 2.
- Peer observation of learning and teaching – year group partners to observe each other teaching a writing lesson – term 2.
- Staff to deliver at least one (preferably two) ‘Big Write Weeks’ between January and June – term 2 and 3.
- Evidence of ‘Big Write Weeks’ in children’s books to be submitted – term 3.

### Evidence collected

Please note, some evidence yet to be collated. However, we have collected or expect to collect:

- Teacher views on teaching of writing.
- Pupils’ views on the learning of writing.
- Evidence in children’s books of the ‘Big Write Week’.
- Evidence in teachers’ planning of our new approach to writing.
- Completed teaching observation proformas.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence has told us (or we expect it to tell us):

- Children report enjoyment of writing but said there should be more of it and a greater variety offered.
- Staff reported some confidence both in what they were teaching and how they were teaching but just over half indicated a lack of confidence.
- Early evidence indicates real ‘buy in’ from all

year groups, all year groups have delivered at least one ‘Big Write Week’, with what appears to be some enthusiasm!

- We expect children’s books to demonstrate greater evidence of the whole writing journey from immersion to final publishing.
- We also expect children’s books to demonstrate a higher standard of writing as a result of the clear whole school focus.

### Challenges experienced

One of the biggest challenges in any change is answering the ‘why?’ question. Some teachers considered what they were doing in writing to be good enough and were not convinced that the suggested changes would lead to much improvement. However, we have developed a working environment at Gilnahirk in which there are high levels of trust and a willingness to have a go, even if there are doubts about the direction of travel.

WALT: write descriptions 29/01 FIRST DRAFT

We discovered a crime scene this morning. Our cookies are missing! Your task is to describe all the clues in full and guess the culprit.

Someone has stolen our cookies. We found some clues. There was a muddy trainer and a empty wallet. We also found a blue hat with a bird on it. I think it was Mr Knight and Mr Campbell because their stuff was there.

What a brilliant report Detective!  
Lots of great descriptive words 😊

# To improve the standards of fictional writing in our school

**Alison Ford-Hutchinson**, Senior Teacher  
Moyle Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The aim of my project was to improve the standards of fictional writing in our school. This is an area for development on the school action plan, as we found that writing was the weakest of the three strands of literacy when assessed against the levels of progression. Linked to this was the fact that teachers were noting in pupil progress meetings that an increasing number of pupils were starting school with reduced oracy skills. We therefore needed to develop storytelling skills, alongside the other elements that help to create skilled writers, in order to see progress across the school from the bottom up.

## Relevant research considered

Through my own research, I was aware of Joan Sedita's *Writing Rope*, which explains that skilled writing is created by weaving together multiple strands. The Talk for Writing approach brings these elements together to support children in telling stories, learning language patterns and inventing their own stories. When discussing Kotter's *8-Step Change Model* on the CSSC course, I was able to reflect on the progress I had already made in implementing Talk for Writing in school, critically evaluate where I could have had a greater impact, and consider how I could affect more sustainable change this time.

## Baseline audit

I began implementing the Talk for Writing process in a previous action plan cycle, but due to staff changes, Covid, and ASOS, we were in a position where each year group was using the Talk for Writing process, or elements of it, to varying extents, and new staff had received no formal training. We carried out pupil evaluations in June prior to starting the project. We surveyed 70 pupils; headline findings showed that 48% agreed that they enjoyed writing and

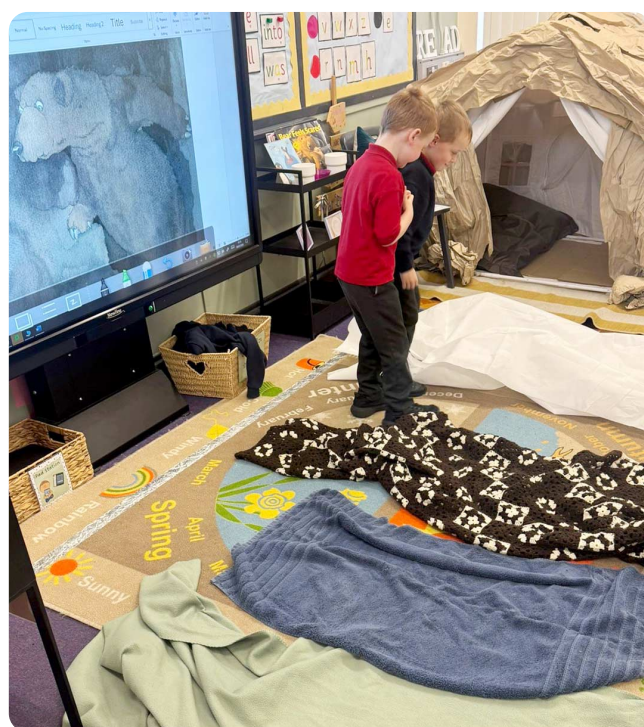
31% agreed that they knew how to improve their writing. This time, I embarked on the project alongside a consultant who is an expert in the process.

## Expected outcomes

Firstly, I hoped to see teachers become confident in teaching Talk for Writing and to see clear evidence of the process in classrooms and pupils' books. We set out to ensure that every class taught one unit each term, aligned with our whole school focus. Overall, I expected to see an improvement in the standard of fictional writing across the school, evident either in pupils' written work or in their oral storytelling. Alongside this, I hoped to see improved pupil attitudes towards writing and greater enjoyment of the subject.

## Actions taken

In August 2025, we held a Talk for Writing training day for teachers and teaching assistants. We outlined a schedule for the year and created a project team, working alongside two other members of the literacy team. Staff



*“We celebrated successes and addressed areas identified for further development.”*

meeting time was allocated to check in with colleagues and allow for more focused discussions. I liaised closely with our consultant to respond to staff queries and led staff meetings, explaining key content and processes. Midway through the year, we carried out a learning walk and book scrutiny to evaluate progress in teaching and learning. This informed subsequent staff meetings, where we celebrated successes and addressed areas identified for further development.

### **Evidence collected**

I reviewed a selection of books from each class and across attainment levels to gain an understanding of pupil progress, and coordinators evaluated teachers' planning. Learning walks provided opportunities to see Talk for Writing strategies in use within classrooms. Evidence of the process was visible in every classroom, and I included photographs from across the school to support this. I also collected data from pupil questionnaires completed before and after the project in three year groups, which provided valuable feedback directly from pupils.

### **What the evidence showed**

The Talk for Writing books that we retain year on year provided the strongest evidence of impact. Any book shows clear improvement between pre and post unit assessments, as well as sustained progress when comparing pupils' work across years. Planning documents demonstrated teachers' sound understanding of the process, and evaluations consistently reflected pupil progress. During the learning walk, we observed increased teacher confidence and clarity in delivering each stage of the process, while also identifying areas for future focus. Pupil questionnaires indicated that 51% of pupils agreed they enjoyed writing and 34% agreed they knew how to improve their writing, representing a 3% increase in both

areas. While positive, I would have liked to see greater improvement, and further discussion with pupils may support future gains.

### **Challenges experienced**

One of the biggest challenges in leading this project was managing teacher workload. While the project team planned the implementation, as the link person to SMT I was responsible for delivering timescales and setting expectations. At SMT level, we explored ways to reduce pressure and provide staff with protected time to embed changes. TPL funding enabled sub-cover, allowing teachers to have dedicated planning time before each unit. As each teacher was on their own journey of understanding the process, clear communication was essential, alongside offering practical support, encouragement and guidance tailored to individual needs.

# Improving Talking and Listening

**Kathryn Jebb**, Literacy Co-ordinator  
Old Warren Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Taking on the permanent role of Literacy Co-ordinator from September 2025 provided an opportunity to strengthen an area of literacy that had long been a priority for development. Talking and Listening was identified within the School Action Plan as a key focus, based on several years of observing class assemblies, whole school productions and classroom presentations. This case study aspect was chosen to ensure teachers had clarity on the skills progression expected at each stage and practical strategies for embedding effective oral language development in daily practice. The overarching aim was to build pupils' confidence and competence in Talking and Listening, so these skills became a natural, consistent part of their learning across the school.

## Relevant research considered

In planning this school improvement intervention, the principles of Kotter's *8-Step Change Model* helped shape a clear and purposeful approach. Early on, the focus was on building shared understanding ensuring staff recognised why Talking and Listening had been prioritised and how everyone would contribute to the improvement journey. Open communication was central, with teachers kept informed of the changes being introduced and the progress being made. Looking ahead, the aim is to embed this work fully by integrating Talking and Listening into the annual literacy plan so that the improvements become a sustained and consistent part of school practice.

## Baseline audit

Within the Literacy Action Plan, a valuable opportunity was identified to further strengthen pupils' spoken language by developing a more structured approach to

teaching the conventions of effective communication across different contexts. To support this, the school adopted the Focus on Talk programme, aligned with the Northern Ireland Curriculum. At the start of the autumn term, each teacher completed a baseline evaluation for their class using the programme's traffic light system, with a follow up assessment in the spring term to monitor progress. This provided a clear, consistent framework for understanding pupils' starting points and tracking improvements in Talking and Listening skills.

## Expected outcomes

Class teachers would dedicate time for Talking and Listening activities alongside their usual Literacy lessons giving opportunities to undertake Talking and Listening tasks and use ICT to record these as a way which would potentially improve their communication skills. By the end of the school year each class teacher should have completed at least two Talking and Listening tasks and have an understanding of their children's, as well as the whole classes achievement levels using the traffic light assessment page from *Focus on Talk*.

## Actions taken

Three staff meetings in the autumn term created space for shared professional learning around Talking and Listening. The *Focus on Talk* programme was introduced as a practical resource offering age appropriate skills and activity ideas for each Key Stage. Teachers explored CCEA task suggestions for the autumn and spring terms and used a baseline audit to understand the starting points of each group in their class. Examples of a 'Use Your Words' display were shared to inspire classroom practice and promote consistent language expectations. Regular half term check ins supported ongoing progress and provided opportunities for reflection. Two new members

## *“Regular half term check ins supported ongoing progress and provided opportunities for reflection.”*

of staff were welcomed into the process through individual meetings to ensure they felt fully informed and supported in their Literacy responsibilities.

### **Evidence collected**

Teachers completed their Talking and Listening tasks with their class and from this gave me QR coded examples of the children’s work. I was then able to scan these to watch and review them at a staff meeting in the spring term and we as a whole staff decided on which level we thought each piece of work was. From this, a whole school display board was created for Talking and Listening which is available for all to see in our entrance hall. Each class teacher created a ‘Use your Words’ display in their classroom to showcase the words and phrases taught to the children for them to include in their Talking and Listening tasks. Moving forward it would be useful to continue these tasks next year to fully implement Talking & Listening within our school.

### **What the evidence showed**

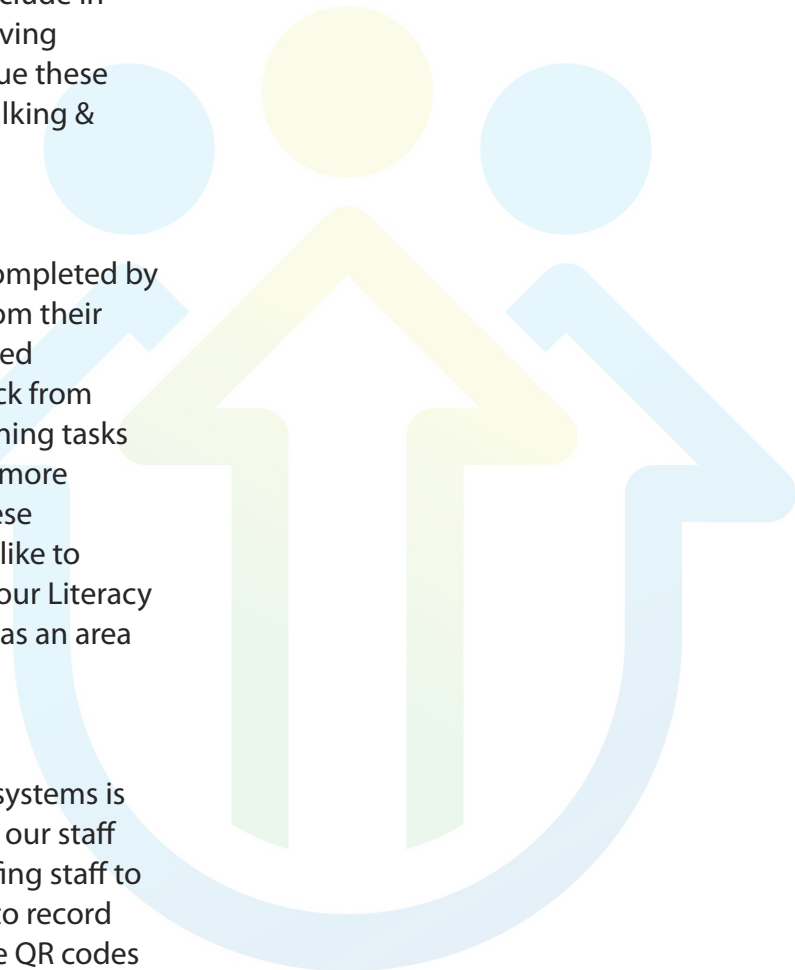
There was a good mix of activities completed by all year groups and it was evident from their video recordings that children enjoyed completing the tasks. Verbal feedback from colleagues about the Talking & Listening tasks demonstrated that they were much more confident in their ability to teach these elements on a regular basis. I would like to integrate Talking and Listening into our Literacy calendar each year as it is still noted as an area that is weak.

### **Challenges experienced**

Familiarity and confidence with ICT systems is often a barrier for some members of our staff team so it was important when briefing staff to go back to first principles with how to record their tasks, share progress and create QR codes within the Seesaw App. Instructions provided

were clear and concise but where there were still some challenges, I meet with staff on a one to one basis to ensure felt competent with the system.

One year group needed some additional support, as the agreed protocol was interpreted differently in practice. For example, although whole class involvement had been discussed, one task was completed with only part of the class, so the recording didn’t fully reflect overall progress. This created a helpful opportunity to revisit expectations together and offer reassurance, ensuring everyone felt confident and supported in applying the approach consistently.



# Developing a whole school approach to writing

**Michael Moore**, Principal  
Grange Park Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

A staff audit showed a general confidence in teaching all the writing genres however most staff reported challenges in conveying the key features of genres in a way that children will remember and apply across the curriculum areas. Staff also found the area of differentiation challenging when teaching writing. They found that children who struggled required support to write words and sentences and therefore lost the general structure of their work. This need also meant that teachers found it challenging to then stretch the more capable pupils as their attention was often drawn to the less able pupils. Staff were confident in teaching the requirements of the current curriculum and all followed the 'modelled, shared, guided, independent' cycle of writing.

## Relevant research considered

I looked closely at the work of Steve Graham, a leading researcher whose decades of work have defined evidence-based writing instruction. His extensive meta analyses, including the influential *Writing Next* report, identify key practices such as explicit instruction in planning, revising, and editing.

Graham's research highlights the 'writing-reading connection', proving that teaching writing significantly improves reading comprehension and word recognition. He advocates for the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model, which helps students manage the complex cognitive demands of composing. His findings also emphasise that while practice is necessary, students require explicit teaching of foundational skills like spelling and handwriting to achieve true fluency.

## Baseline audit

The staff audit identified the desire from staff for further training in up-to-date approaches to writing and for a clear structure for each genre to be applied systematically across the school.

## Expected outcomes

By implementing Stephen Graham's evidence based techniques, the expected outcomes included stronger writing quality, improved structure and increased independence and these gains quickly became evident. Approaches such as the Self Regulated Strategy Development model helped pupils produce longer, more organised pieces while also supporting wider literacy skills, including reading comprehension and word recognition. Teachers noted a marked rise in engagement as writing tasks shifted from feeling 'dull' to genuinely enjoyable. Pupils developed confidence through explicit instruction in planning and revising, and the structured routines reduced cognitive overload, allowing them to focus more on creative content than on the mechanics of writing.

## Actions taken

We adopted the SRSD Instructional Framework: Use a structured six step process to move from modelled to independent writing:

1. **Develop background knowledge:** Teach genre-specific vocabulary and features.
2. **Discuss the strategy:** Gain student buy-in by explaining why the technique works.
3. **Model it:** Perform 'think-alouds' where teachers demonstrated their own planning and self-talk.
4. **Memorise it:** Use mnemonics like TREE (Topic, Reasons, Explain, Ending) for opinion pieces or TIDE (Topic, Important details, Ending) for informative writing.
5. **Support it:** Provide guided practice with scaffolds like graphic organisers and peer collaboration.

6. **Independent performance:** Gradually remove supports as pupils gain mastery.

■ **We integrated writing across the curriculum:**

Pupils have started to write summaries or explanations in subjects like science and history to deepen comprehension of that content.

■ **Dedicated daily time:** My staff now aim for at least 60 minutes of writing-related activities daily, split between explicit teaching and actual writing practice.

■ **Foster a motivating environment**

■ **Publish work:** Display student writing in classrooms or create class anthologies to provide a real audience via our ‘Wow Wall’.

**Evidence collected**

Evidence was gathered through comparative samples of pupils’ writing, including planning notes, drafts and final pieces. Pupils’ books were reviewed to examine use of planning scaffolds, drafting processes and independent writing outcomes. Teachers’ planning documentation and shared instructional materials were analysed to confirm consistent use of the SRSD framework and agreed genre structures across the school. Classroom observations and professional dialogue focused on the use of modelling, scaffolding and gradual release strategies. Samples of cross-curricular writing in subjects such as science and history were also reviewed to examine application of writing approaches beyond English lessons.

**What the evidence showed**

We found significant improvements in both writing quality and complexity as well as Genre-Specific Elements with pupils including more structural components, such as clear statements and reasoned arguments. There was also a substantial increase in the number of words written by our children moving from single paragraphs to structured multi-paragraph

pieces alongside improved use of transition words and more precise scientific vocabulary.

We found our pupils spend an increasing amount of time on pre-writing activities (planning) for example, using writing scaffolds.

Lastly, we tracked an impact on Literacy and Learning with improved reading comprehension and word recognition and cross-curricular growth.

**Challenges experienced**

The transition to evidence-based writing marked a pivotal shift for the staff. As Principal I was required to find the time for training and while some staff initially reach for familiar, previously used resources, the new framework encouraged a deeper professional dialogue.

My teachers are also re-engaging with their craft, talking about their teaching with newfound precision. Classroom observations were seen as a hurdle with staff being unfamiliar with providing evidence of student learning.

# Building capacity to develop confident mathematicians

**James Cleland**, Principal  
Gorran Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The primary aim of our school improvement project was to raise standards in numeracy across the whole school. We placed a particular focus on lower-attaining pupils who lacked confidence in mathematics, while ensuring the approach was inclusive and beneficial for all learners. By promoting consistent strategies, mathematical talk, and positive learning experiences, we aimed to build confidence, resilience, and enjoyment in maths. Central to the project was our shared belief that every child can be a successful mathematician, and we worked to ensure that pupils and parents embraced this mindset.

## Relevant research considered

We explored a range of relevant research to inform our approach. This included maths clips from the Research Schools Network and guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation, *Improving Mathematics*. We were particularly inspired by the work of YouCubed, with its emphasis on growth mindset, mathematical thinking, and learner confidence. This aligned closely with our school ethos and our beliefs about teaching and learning.

The programme we ultimately chose to support this work was *Number Sense*. *Number Sense* focuses on developing a deep understanding of numbers, relationships, and flexible calculation strategies rather than rote procedures. It encourages pupils to reason, explain their thinking, spot patterns, and approach mathematics with confidence. We felt this approach would empower all learners, particularly those who lack confidence, while strengthening mathematical understanding across the whole school.

## Baseline audit

We are a small rural school where pupils generally perform well across the curriculum, and outcomes in mathematics have been consistently strong. However, evidence from standardised testing, pupil profiling meetings, teacher feedback, and targeted small group sessions highlighted a specific concern. Pupils who began their mathematical journey behind their peers were not making sufficient progress to close the gap. In addition, some of these pupils had a negative perception of mathematics and lacked confidence in their own abilities, which impacted both enjoyment and progress.

## Expected outcomes

We expected to see improvements in attainment, particularly for targeted pupils and those attending the lunchtime maths club. Beyond academic outcomes, we hoped the project would increase enjoyment for both staff and pupils. We aimed to see a positive shift in attitudes towards mathematics, with increased confidence when tackling problems and a greater willingness to have a go. We also hoped that pupils who had previously been hesitant would feel more comfortable exploring mathematical ideas and learning from mistakes.

## Actions taken

- **Shared vision established:** A whole staff meeting to reflect on our own views of maths and agree what we wanted for all pupils.
- **Research phase:** A small staff team explored relevant research and approaches.
- **Options shared:** Findings and possible programmes were presented to all staff.
- **Staff training:** Online professional learning completed through the *Number Sense* programme.
- **Small, achievable goals set:** Shared across classes to encourage collaboration, consistency, and mutual support.

*“...the evidence ... reinforced our understanding that this is a longer term journey, requiring sustained time and focus over the next two or more years.”*

- **Wider community engagement:** Our aims and vision for maths were shared with pupils, parents, and governors.
- **Monitoring and celebration:** Regular staff catch ups and pupil focus groups; governors with expertise in mathematics visited, spoke with pupils, and celebrated progress.
- **Implementation:** The programme will be embedded into classroom practice and planning by the end of June 2026.
- **Review and next steps:** Plans are in place to reset goals and refine the programme further during August Baker Days.

### Evidence collected

Formal evidence gathering is an area we find challenging. As educators, we are often more focused on doing, improving, and adapting practice than on recording impact in detail. However, a range of evidence was collected to support this work. This included standardised assessment data, with a particular focus on year-on-year progress and the impact on targeted pupils. We also gathered pupil voice through a short survey exploring attitudes towards mathematics and perceptions of support. In addition, informal evidence came from classroom visits, participation in *Number Sense* sessions, and pupil focus groups, which provided valuable insights into confidence, engagement, and enjoyment in mathematics.

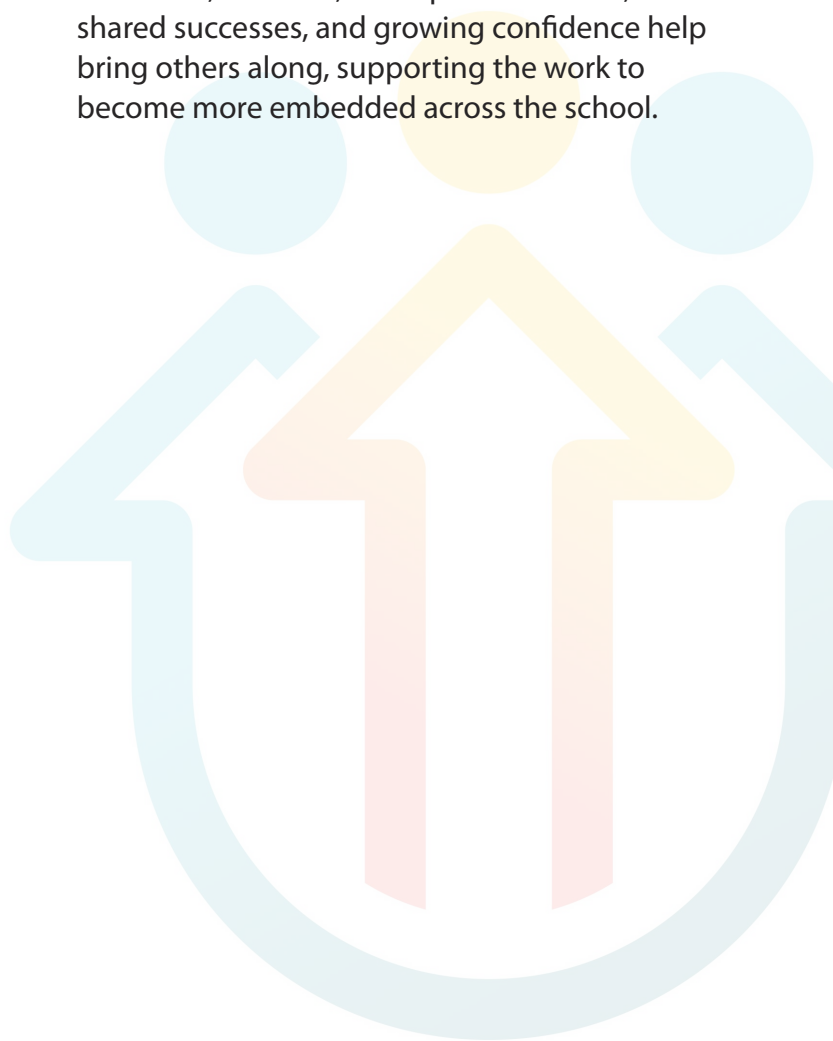
### What the evidence showed

The evidence showed that staff clearly see the value in the work and are keen to continue embedding and developing it further. Pupils reported enjoying *Number Sense* activities and felt these had helped develop their mathematical skills. For targeted pupils in particular, there were noticeable improvements in confidence and engagement, with a greater willingness to take part and have a go. Overall, the evidence suggests perceptions of mathematics are beginning to shift and self

confidence is improving. It has also reinforced our understanding that this is a longer term journey, requiring sustained time and focus over the next two or more years.

### Challenges experienced

We did not experience any major challenges. The main one, as always, was time, particularly in maintaining this work as a priority when many external demands compete for attention, not all of which have a positive impact on pupils' learning. We were also realistic that there is no single 'perfect' outcome or finish line. As with any change, some staff naturally buy in more quickly and enthusiastically than others. Over time, however, these positive voices, shared successes, and growing confidence help bring others along, supporting the work to become more embedded across the school.



# Building confidence in problem-solving across the school

**Shannon McCleery**, Numeracy Coordinator  
Harding Memorial Integrated Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

In my role as Numeracy Coordinator at Harding Memorial Integrated Primary School, I focused on developing pupils' problem-solving and logical reasoning skills within mathematics. This was identified as an important area for development within our Numeracy Action Plan, as PTM data and teacher professional judgement suggested that progress in this area could be strengthened.

Discussions with staff highlighted that some colleagues felt less confident in planning and delivering problem-solving lessons, particularly those that encouraged enquiry-based learning. As a result, opportunities for pupils to engage in problem-solving were not always as frequent or consistent as they could be. This project aimed to support teachers in developing confidence and approaches to teaching problem-solving, while increasing opportunities for pupils to build essential skills and strategies in an engaging and meaningful way.

## Relevant research considered

Kotter's *8-Step Change Model* informed my approach, particularly as a new coordinator working to support whole school development. This model provided a helpful framework for understanding how change can be introduced gradually and collaboratively over time.

Throughout the year, I have worked through different stages of the model, beginning to develop a shared vision for improvement. I recognise that meaningful, sustainable change takes time and I have focused on building understanding, communicating the vision clearly and encouraging staff engagement. This approach has supported a steady and supportive introduction to developing

problem-solving across the school.

## Baseline audit

Analysis of PTM data in April 2025 indicated that problem-solving was an area where progress could be strengthened. This was supported by discussions with staff, who shared that problem-solving was not always taught regularly, often due to limited confidence in how to approach it effectively.

This aspect of mathematics had not been a recent focus for development and with changes in staffing over time, there had been fewer opportunities to build shared approaches or consistency. As a result, pupils had fewer opportunities to develop problem-solving strategies and confidence.

This baseline provided a clear and helpful starting point, highlighting the need to support staff confidence and increase opportunities for pupils to engage in rich problem-solving experiences.

## Expected outcomes

In the short term, I hoped to support increased teacher confidence in planning and delivering problem-solving lessons, leading to more regular and meaningful opportunities for pupils to engage in this area.

It was also anticipated that pupils would become more confident in approaching unfamiliar problems, showing greater willingness to explore ideas and learn from mistakes.

Recognising the demands on staff workload, expectations were approached sensitively, with an understanding that engagement and confidence would develop over time. Longer term, the intention is to foster a positive, whole school culture where problem-solving becomes a natural and embedded part of mathematics learning.

*“...pupil engagement and confidence are beginning to grow.”*

### **Actions taken**

A number of supportive and collaborative actions were introduced to develop problem-solving across the school. Staff engaged in professional learning focused on problem-solving approaches, including reflection on previous practice, shared challenges and the benefits of enquiry-based learning.

The plan do reflect model was introduced as a simple and practical structure to support lesson planning, alongside examples to illustrate its use in practice. To support consistency, a range of problem-solving activities was provided for each year group, along with a pupil-friendly recording proforma for Key Stage 2.

Ongoing support was provided through discussion, guidance and reassurance, allowing staff to develop confidence at their own pace. The focus remained on creating a supportive environment where staff could explore and develop their practice.

### **Evidence collected**

Evidence was gathered through a combination of formal and informal approaches. Each class contributed samples of problem-solving work across the year, which were compiled into a whole school portfolio to reflect developing practice.

Classroom observations provided opportunities to explore how problem-solving was being implemented, while professional discussions with staff offered valuable insight into their experiences and confidence levels.

PTM data was also reviewed to identify any emerging trends, alongside ongoing reflection during the process. Together, this evidence provided a balanced picture of both progress and areas for further development.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence suggests that problem-solving is increasingly being incorporated into classroom practice, with pupils engaging in more practical and structured approaches to solving problems. It was encouraging to see pupils working systematically and developing strategies, which had been a key focus of training.

Staff feedback indicated growing confidence and a willingness to continue developing this area. In some cases, particularly within Key Stage 2, further support will help to build confidence in using shared approaches such as the problem-solving proforma.

While improvements in PTM data in logical reasoning have been gradual, this has reinforced the understanding that sustained development over time is essential. Overall, there are positive signs that both pupil engagement and confidence are beginning to grow.

### **Challenges experienced**

As with any change, introducing a new focus across the school required time and sensitivity. Staff were balancing this development alongside other responsibilities and some initially felt unsure about aspects such as observation or new approaches.

These experiences highlighted the importance of maintaining a supportive and collaborative approach, allowing staff time to build confidence and adapt practice gradually. There were also valuable opportunities to reflect on how professional dialogue and shared practice could be further developed, for example through more collaborative approaches such as team teaching.

Overall, these experiences have helped shape the next steps, ensuring that the work continues to develop in a supportive, sustainable and inclusive way.

2.

# Every Learner Included: Communication, SEN & Support



Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement



# Developing early communication through attuned, responsive practice

**Nuala McGranaghan**, Vice Principal  
Cedar Lodge School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

As our school profile has shifted from predominantly MLD to a more complex SLD profile, it became clear that our existing approaches to communication and progress monitoring were no longer capturing the full picture of pupil development. Many pupils now communicate through micro behaviours, fleeting glances, shifts in posture, sensory actions, or brief vocalisations, that are meaningful but easily missed without a consistent, attuned adult approach.

I also recognised that traditional progress measures risked overlooking the significant micro progress our SLD pupils were making, such as reduced prompting, increased initiation, or more sustained engagement. My Master's in Autism reinforced the importance of structured, sequenced teaching and systematic prompt fading, highlighting the need to capture and celebrate these small steps. This aligns with Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) evidence showing strong impact when adults model language, scaffold interaction and respond sensitively to children's communicative attempts.

This inquiry aimed to strengthen early communication through a consistent, integrated approach: intensive Interaction, commenting, pausing, sensory aware joining and core board modelling so that pupils' subtle communication could be recognised, supported, and celebrated.

## Relevant research considered

The inquiry was informed by research on early communication for pupils with SLD, particularly Nind & Hewett's work on Intensive Interaction, which emphasises attunement, shared rhythm and following the child's lead. We also drew on

responsive interaction and naturalistic language modelling, highlighting the importance of reducing communicative pressure and creating predictable, low demand opportunities for pupils to initiate.

Universal Design for Learning supported embedding core board modelling across routines, ensuring consistent exposure to visual language without expectation or demand. My Master's in Autism further informed structured teaching, including breaking skills into small teachable steps and fading prompts systematically to build independence.

EEF evidence highlights the strong impact of modelling, responsive interaction and structured communication opportunities. Similarly, EEF findings on oral language interventions emphasise the importance of high quality adult child interaction, scaffolding, and purposeful communication, all of which underpin the integrated strategies used in this inquiry.

## Baseline audit

A baseline communication assessment was completed for all nine pupils in Lemurs Class using the communication checklist. Four pupils were identified for the inquiry as they demonstrated emerging initiation, short but meaningful engagement, and responsiveness to attuned adult support. Baseline observations captured how each pupil currently communicated, including micro behaviours, sensory preferences, and existing exposure to core boards. Staff discussions helped establish shared starting points, and short video clips were recorded to support comparison at the end of the cycle.

## Expected outcomes

We expected increased initiation (moving closer, offering objects, vocalising, gesturing), longer engagement and more frequent communicative attempts across sensory, physical, vocal and

*“The evidence showed clear increases in initiation, engagement and communication across all pupils.”*



behavioural modes. We also anticipated clearer expression of needs and greater responsiveness to modelling, including looking towards or reaching for core boards. For staff, we expected increased confidence, consistency and shared understanding of the integrated approach.

### **Actions taken**

We implemented a whole day, child led communication approach using five strategies consistently: Intensive Interaction, commenting, pausing, sensory aware joining, and simple core board modelling. Staff were guided on how the strategies work together as an integrated approach.

Each week, one strategy was highlighted while maintaining the full approach. Two short Intensive Interaction sessions took place daily, and core boards were used across key areas. Staff completed weekly monitoring, captured video clips and engaged in co observations. Daily micro noticing and reflection meetings allowed us to adjust practice and celebrate emerging progress.

### **Evidence collected**

We collected qualitative notes, frequency counts and short video clips to capture changes in engagement and interaction. Staff completed monitoring forms, while co observations

provided additional insight and ensured consistency. Baseline and end of cycle comparisons were made using checklists and video evidence, supported by photographs and clips of Intensive Interaction, sensory aware joining and core board modelling, which illustrated pupil engagement and the development of staff practice over time.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence showed clear increases in initiation, engagement and communication across all pupils. Pupils initiated more frequently through movement, vocalisation, offering objects and seeking proximity, and were able to sustain shared interaction for longer, with increased turn taking. Staff noted greater clarity in how pupils expressed preferences and needs, along with increased responsiveness to adult modelling, including engagement with core boards.

Video comparisons showed richer interaction, more purposeful sensory play and improved co regulation. Staff reflections highlighted increased confidence, deeper understanding and consistency. The integrated approach proved more effective than isolated strategies, confirming that communication flourishes when adults are attuned, responsive, and developmentally aligned.

### **Challenges experienced**

Initial challenges included consistency, particularly with pausing and commenting which required conscious practice. Some pupils' engagement fluctuated due to sensory regulation needs, requiring flexibility in when and how strategies were used. Core board modelling initially felt unfamiliar for some staff, and confidence grew gradually through practice and reflection. Time pressures affected evidence capture. However, regular check ins, modelling, and shared reflection helped overcome these challenges and strengthened whole team consistency.

# Implementing the SEN graduated response framework: Step-by-step support for special educational needs

**Emma Loughridge**, Principal  
Eden Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The intervention centred on implementing the SEN Graduated Response (GR) framework to improve consistency and quality in identifying and supporting pupils with SEND. The framework strengthens the Assess Plan-Do-Review cycle, ensuring early identification, purposeful target setting and regular review of progress. It was introduced to address inconsistent practice across year groups, variable staff confidence and delays in providing timely support. The GR framework promotes shared language, accountability and collaboration between teachers, SENCO, pupils and families, while also creating a sustainable, school wide approach to inclusive improvement that supports long term outcomes for pupils with SEND.

The rationale stemmed from variability in staff confidence and inconsistent translation of SEN guidance into classroom practice. Some teachers relied heavily on SENCO led support, leading to delays in early intervention. The GR framework reinforces inclusive teaching as a core responsibility for all staff, not a specialist task, and supports evidence-based decision making. Strengthening staff confidence and ownership was essential to improving equity, inclusion and outcomes for pupils with SEND through a consistent, whole school approach.

## Relevant research considered

The intervention aligned with Northern Ireland policy developments responding to rising SEN demand. The NI Audit Office and Assembly highlighted concerns around inconsistent provision and delays in support. The Department of Education's SEN Reform Agenda (2025) emphasised the Graduated Response and school led support through the IPAMER cycle. System wide analysis reinforced the

urgency for reform, particularly the need for earlier intervention and more consistent school-level provision. This policy context provided a strong evidence base for prioritising the GR framework as a school improvement focus.

## Baseline audit

A baseline audit assessed staff understanding and application of the GR framework. Questionnaires, PLP scrutiny, SEN records, learning walks and observations revealed inconsistent implementation, weak documentation of reasonable adjustments and variable quality of PLP targets. Classroom observations also highlighted gaps in inclusive strategies and the need for stronger monitoring processes. Staff confidence varied significantly, reinforcing the need for clearer expectations, targeted training and structured support.

## Expected outcomes

The intervention aimed to improve consistency and quality of SEN support, increase staff confidence in early identification and strengthen use of the Assess Plan-Do-Review cycle. Expected outcomes included clearer and more measurable PLP targets, improved pupil progress through earlier intervention, and enhanced communication with parents. Strengthening parental engagement was a key expectation, with the aim of ensuring clearer communication and more meaningful involvement in the review process. The overarching goal was to embed a sustainable, whole school approach to inclusive practice.

## Actions taken

Implementation involved whole-staff training on the GR framework, targeted CPD on early identification and SMARTER target setting, and modelling of effective practice through SENCO drop-ins and joint planning. Staff meetings and one to one support provided opportunities for professional dialogue. Monitoring systems,

## *“Policy context provided a strong evidence base for prioritising the GR framework as a school improvement focus.”*

including termly PLP reviews and learning walks, were introduced to embed consistency. A sensory map was also completed for learners with sensory needs, strengthening inclusive classroom provision.

### **Evidence collected**

Evidence was gathered through a combination of qualitative and quantitative sources. These included pre and post staff questionnaires examining confidence and understanding of the Graduated Response framework. PLPs and SEN records were scrutinised to review the quality and consistency of target setting, reasonable adjustments and review comments. Learning walks and classroom observations were used to examine inclusive strategies and classroom practice in action. Pupil progress information and individual case studies were reviewed to explore the timing and impact of interventions. Parent feedback was also collected to assess communication and understanding of the support in place.

### **What the evidence showed**

Impact was measured through qualitative and quantitative evidence. Staff questionnaires

showed increased confidence and understanding. PLP audits demonstrated clearer targets and improved review quality. Learning walks confirmed greater use of inclusive strategies and reasonable adjustments. Pupil progress data and case studies indicated earlier intervention and improved outcomes. Parent feedback highlighted better communication and understanding of support. Assess Plan-Do-Review was now embedded in practice, enabling timely, evidence based support across the school.

### **Challenges experienced**

Challenges included initial resistance to change, variable staff confidence and time pressures affecting documentation. Some teachers struggled to apply the framework independently and move away from reliance on SENCO led support. Addressing these challenges required sustained modelling, reassurance and ongoing monitoring. Time pressures and confidence levels were significant barriers, reinforcing the need for continued support. The experience highlighted the importance of clear communication, incremental change and ongoing professional development to embed inclusive practice as routine.



# From distress to readiness: Sensory room case study summary

**Ivor Hutchinson**, Principal  
Clough Primary School & Nursery Unit

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Learning for neurodiverse pupils by creating a dedicated sensory room. Rising enrolment had increased the number of children requiring enhanced sensory and emotional support. At least twelve pupils were identified as significantly benefitting from a calm, predictable environment, with three experiencing severe morning distress that affected wellbeing, staff capacity and parental confidence. Transforming an underused cloakroom into a sensory room provided a safe, regulated space designed to reduce anxiety, support self-regulation and strengthen inclusion across the school.

## Relevant research considered

The project was strongly research informed. Unwin, Powell & Jones (2022) found that *“having control over sensory changes was associated with increased attention and reduced sensory and repetitive behaviours, suggesting that sensory environments can help create better conditions for learning for autistic children.”* Marrone et al. (2025) reported that *“learning readiness, including emotional wellbeing and engagement, was found to be a catalyst for academic success.”* Research on soft starts further highlighted the link between emotional wellbeing and learning readiness, reinforcing the value of structured morning support. Visits to three local schools validated these findings through observation of effective sensory provision.

## Baseline audit

The baseline audit revealed a clear gap in provision: the school had no dedicated sensory or regulation space. Teachers recorded frequent emotional dysregulation, especially during morning transitions, with several pupils requiring significant adult support before



learning could begin. Informal observations showed prolonged settling times, classroom disruption and heightened anxiety for pupils and parents. The physical environment limited consistent support, confirming the need for a purposeful sensory space to enable proactive rather than reactive intervention.

## Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes included reduced anxiety, improved self-regulation and greater readiness to learn. Shorter settling times, fewer dysregulation incidents and improved engagement following sensory breaks were anticipated. Wider benefits included improved attendance for two pupils, increased parental confidence at drop off and enhanced staff capacity to support neurodiverse learners. Overall, the sensory room was expected to contribute to a calmer, more inclusive school environment where pupils felt safe, supported and ready to learn.

## Actions taken

An underused cloakroom was repurposed into a

*“Pupil voice was gathered through check ins and emotion scales.”*

sensory room. The space was cleared, repaired, repainted in calming tones and fitted with safe flooring and updated electrics for soft lighting. High quality sensory resources were selected based on pupil needs, including bubble tubes, fibre optic lighting, soft seating, weighted items, tactile boards and low level projection. Staff agreed routines for soft starts, regulation breaks and de escalation. Baseline data was gathered, and staff were supported to record observations consistently. Parents were informed to build trust and shared understanding. The room was introduced gradually to ensure it was experienced as calm, predictable and safe.

### **Evidence collected**

Evidence included baseline and ongoing records of settling times, dysregulation frequency and time taken to re engage with learning. Staff provided regular reflections on pupil readiness and engagement. Pupil voice was gathered through check ins and emotion scales. Parental feedback captured changes in morning routines and home behaviour. Usage logs identified patterns and the effectiveness of specific resources. Photographs documented the improved learning environment.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence demonstrated a clear and significant positive impact. Targeted pupils showed reduced anxiety, shorter settling times and fewer dysregulation incidents. Teachers reported pupils returning from the sensory room calmer, more focused and better able to engage in learning. Classroom environments became more settled, benefitting both neurodiverse pupils and their peers. Parents noted reduced morning distress and increased confidence in drop off routines. Staff felt more empowered, with the sensory room reducing pressure on classrooms and adults. Overall, the sensory room proved to be a small but transformative intervention that strengthened

inclusion, improved wellbeing and enhanced learning capacity across the school.

### **Challenges experienced**

Challenges included limited physical space, requiring careful planning to repurpose an existing area. Funding constraints necessitated grant applications to meet project costs. Balancing access was essential to ensure the room remained calm and purposeful rather than overstimulating. Ongoing reflection and review helped maintain effective use of the space.



# Total communication: Improving outcomes in communication and life skills

**Joanne Gray**, Principal  
Willowbridge School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

This project strengthened priorities within the Willowbridge School Development Plan (2025–26), particularly Total Communication, life skills development and pupil wellbeing. A whole school *Core Word Programme* supported by AAC was introduced to improve functional communication for pupils with complex SEND, especially those who are preverbal or minimally verbal. Previously inconsistent practice limited pupils' ability to express themselves, contributing to frustration and reduced engagement. Embedding high frequency core words across daily routines aimed to increase pupil voice, autonomy and emotional regulation.

## Relevant research considered

Research comparing phonics based approaches (e.g., *Sounds Write*) with AAC based Core Word approaches informed the direction of this work. Evidence from systematic reviews and applied frameworks (e.g., *Project Core*) shows that AAC and aided language input are more appropriate for pupils at early communicative stages, supporting expressive communication without inhibiting speech. Phonics approaches remain valuable but are more effective once symbolic communication is established. This evidence supported prioritising AAC based core vocabulary as the foundation for functional communication.

## Baseline audit

The baseline audit identified inconsistent communication systems across classes, limited AAC modelling and variable staff confidence. AAC use was often restricted to requesting, with few opportunities for pupils to communicate socially or emotionally. Inconsistent symbol sets and availability created barriers to continuity.

Behaviour and wellbeing data showed that unmet communication needs contributed to dysregulation and frustration.

## Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes included increased use of AAC for a wider range of communicative functions, improved engagement and smoother transitions. Staff were expected to develop greater confidence and consistency in modelling AAC. At a whole school level, the aim was to establish a coherent communication framework aligned with the Northern Ireland Curriculum and SEN Code of Practice.

## Actions taken

A shared core vocabulary was introduced across Early Years and Key Stage 1 as an initial focus group. Core words were embedded into daily routines and made accessible on AAC boards and devices throughout key environments. Staff received targeted professional learning on core vocabulary principles and aided language input. Classroom environments were adapted to improve AAC accessibility, and staff were supported through coaching, shared planning and reflective discussions. Personalised vocabulary continued to ensure communication remained meaningful for individual pupils.

## Evidence collected

Evidence included observations of AAC use, staff feedback, examples of pupil communication, and engagement and wellbeing data. Photographs captured AAC embedded across environments. Progress towards SEN targets was monitored through PLPs, and informal feedback from staff and families provided insight into communication gains beyond structured sessions.

## What the evidence showed

Evidence demonstrated increased and more consistent AAC use, with pupils communicating

*“Staff received targeted professional learning.”*



for a broader range of purposes. Engagement improved, and some pupils showed reduced frustration related behaviours. Staff confidence grew, and AAC became more routinely embedded in teaching and care routines. The shared core vocabulary strengthened continuity between classes and reinforced communication as a whole school responsibility.

### **Challenges experienced**

Challenges included supporting staff to shift from expecting immediate responses to understanding the importance of modelling over time. Embedding AAC consistently during busy routines required ongoing coaching. Concerns about reducing noun based vocabulary were addressed through training on balancing core and personalised vocabulary. Practical issues such as ensuring AAC accessibility and device maintenance required new systems. These challenges highlighted the need for sustained professional learning and reinforced that phonics based programmes alone are not sufficient for pupils who are preverbal.

# Improving SEN provision for pupils with social communication through SPiM (Specialist Provision in Mainstream) class

**Kathryn Evans**, Teacher  
Newbuildings Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Our school is seeking to enhance SEN provision for pupils with social communication needs by establishing a SPiM class, a priority identified in the School Development Plan in response to a growing cohort requiring targeted support in pragmatic language, peer interaction and emotional regulation. Current mainstream provision cannot consistently meet these complex needs. A SPiM class would enable structured, evidence informed interventions while maintaining inclusive access to learning. This development would strengthen the school's capacity to improve both academic and social outcomes and ensure all learners receive the personalised support needed to engage successfully and thrive in a mainstream environment.

## Relevant research considered

Research from Education Authorities and wider UK SEND literature strongly underpins the development of SPiM (Specialist Provision in Mainstream) models. Education Authority guidance highlights that SPiM provision is designed to address increasing demand for specialist placements while enabling pupils to remain in their local mainstream school, promoting inclusion and access to peers. Evidence indicates that specialist provision classes particularly for social communication and autism provide structured, small group environments with enhanced staffing and targeted interventions, which support pupils' communication, regulation, and engagement.

## Baseline audit

A baseline audit of SEN provision, using both quantitative and qualitative evidence, showed a 25% rise in pupils with social communication needs over two years, signalling increased

demand for targeted support. Staff feedback highlighted ongoing challenges in meeting these needs particularly around communication, interaction and emotional regulation within mainstream classrooms. A review of current provision also revealed that interventions lacked cohesion and sufficient specialisation. Together, this evidence confirmed the need for a more structured, consistent and specialist approach to supporting these pupils effectively.

## Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes were to improve the quality and consistency of support for pupils with social communication needs, leading to enhanced engagement, behaviour, and emotional regulation. It was anticipated that pupils would develop stronger communication and interaction skills, enabling them to access the curriculum more effectively. Additionally, staff confidence and capability in supporting these needs were expected to increase. Overall, the SPiM class was intended to promote inclusion, reduce barriers to learning, and lead to improved academic and social outcomes for this group of pupils.

## Actions taken

The SPiM class was established in collaboration with the newly appointed class teacher, with clear routines, structure and targeted support put in place for pupils with social communication needs. Detailed provision maps were developed to identify individual needs and match appropriate interventions. Staff development was prioritised through CPD on social communication strategies, Nurture in Education approaches and training from the Primary Behaviour Team to deepen understanding of behaviour as communication. Work with external specialists including speech and language therapists and the Autism Advisory Service ensured interventions were targeted and evidence based. A new graduated response framework was introduced to

*“A strong focus was placed on staff development, including CPD on social communication strategies.”*



promote consistency in identification, support and review across the school. Inclusive practices were embedded throughout the curriculum, supported by ongoing communication, monitoring and reflection to maintain a cohesive whole school approach.

### **Evidence collected**

Evidence collected included both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative data such as attendance records, behaviour logs, and progress against speech and language targets demonstrated improved regulation, increased engagement in tasks, and better attendance. Qualitative evidence was gathered through pupil, parent, and staff feedback, highlighting increased confidence, inclusion, and satisfaction with provision. Observational evidence from SENCO notes, teacher journals, and lesson observations provided insight into classroom impact. Visual evidence, including photographs of group activities and implemented learning strategies illustrated pupils' active participation and the effectiveness of the provision.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence demonstrated clear improvements in pupils' confidence and social engagement, with many showing greater willingness to participate in classroom activities and interact with peers. Positive changes in classroom participation were evident, with pupils more consistently engaged and able to sustain focus during learning tasks. Progress against targeted speech and language goals further confirmed that interventions were effective and appropriately matched to need. Feedback and observations also highlighted an increasingly inclusive classroom culture, supported by improved staff confidence and capability in meeting SEN needs. Additionally, the range of evidence gathered provided valuable insights to inform future SEN planning and resource allocation, ensuring that provision can be refined and sustained. Overall, the findings indicated that the SPiM approach was successfully enhancing both pupil outcomes and whole school practice.

### **Challenges experienced**

One of the main challenges was managing staff capacity and addressing varying training needs across the school. While CPD was planned and delivered, ensuring consistency in how strategies were applied across different classrooms required ongoing monitoring and support. Scheduling time for CPD and delivering targeted interventions alongside existing demands also proved complex. As a leader, this prompted me to reflect on the importance of clear communication, realistic planning, and prioritisation. I recognised that I cannot micromanage every aspect of implementation and instead needed to build trust, empower staff, and promote shared ownership. Being adaptable and responsive to feedback was key. These challenges strengthened my leadership skills and reinforced the importance of developing a confident, collaborative team.

# Tracking nursery pupils' progress

**Laura Fitzsimons**, Nursery Coordinator  
Rathcoole Primary School & Nursery Unit

## What did you seek to improve and why?

My experience in early years settings highlighted the value of understanding children's developmental progress, and this prompted reflection on how effectively our own assessments captured pupils' starting points and growth. In our context, where many children present with SEN or social, emotional and behavioural needs, traditional academic measures do not fully reflect the significant progress pupils make. This reinforced the importance of developing an approach that recognises the whole child and tells a more accurate story of learning across the school. Stepping into the role of Nursery Coordinator, alongside participation in the CSSC Building Capacity programme, provided the ideal opportunity to take this work forward.

## Relevant research considered

As a Nurture school, we embrace the concept that learning is understood developmentally, and so it made sense to explore an assessment system which supported this. We are also a trauma-informed school, embedding our learning from the Solihull Approach from Nursery through to Primary 7.

## Baseline audit

In order to assess children's learning developmentally, I needed to identify a tool to enable us to understand the stages of development across the Areas of Learning. I spent some time researching what was available and came back to a resource we had used in England when I taught there, called *Development Matters*.

This document was designed to support Early Years practitioners in understanding developmental stages from birth to age five.

Having worked extensively with it, it offered a familiar and reliable framework for guiding staff through this new approach in our setting. Using an established resource, rather than introducing something entirely unfamiliar, provided a clearer starting point and helped ensure a more confident and coherent transition for everyone involved.



## Expected outcomes

I had hoped that trialling this new approach would lead staff to a deeper understanding of how young children learn; building the team's confidence to recognise each individual pupil's stage of development in each area of learning. I hoped it would align with our inclusive ethos by understanding and honouring each unique child with their particular strengths and capabilities at their current stage, regardless of typical, age-related expectations.

The new assessment model is designed to give the Primary One teacher a clear and robust

*“Evidence collected had a direct impact on our practice and approach.”*

baseline of each child’s developmental stage on leaving Nursery. This creates a consistent starting point that can be built upon year by year, helping to form a coherent developmental picture of every pupil as they progress through the school. It also gives us a way of demonstrating the progress each child has made in their Nursery experience helping inform our planning and teaching. For the Underage children in our Nursery (those in their pre-Preschool year), the system gives us a meaningful way to continue tracking their progress in their second year with us.

### **Actions taken**

To help make our journey as smooth as possible, I began by creating a more concise toolkit based on the Development Matters document for each member of staff to use. I devised a Child Development Profile and Individual Assessment Tracker for each pupil, then held a practice session for our team demonstrating how to use the toolkit and the tracker within a reflective conversation framework about each child. We began by assessing three areas of learning as a baseline in October after the children had settled: Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Language Development and Physical Development and Movement. In February, we revisited these areas and completed assessments in the remaining areas: Early Mathematical Experiences, The Arts and the World Around Us. We will complete the assessment cycle in June, and then take some time to evaluate the project.

### **Evidence collected**

We used a range of observation techniques to collect evidence about each child; including photographs, videos, professional dialogue, scribing pupil voice, planned observations of particular skills and attributes, and spontaneous observations of children’s interests, challenges and achievements during both child-initiated

play and adult-guided activities. We also used information from parents and carers to inform our view of each child. We used the evidence to guide our assessments, using Development Matters as the framework for our collegial conversations about each child.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence indicated a wide range of stages within our cohort and impacted how we looked at what we expected of children; for example, reinforcing that it was not developmentally appropriate for every child in our classes to be able to sit and listen to a story yet, so what could we do that was more valuable and more developmentally appropriate for those children at that time? The evidence collected had a direct impact on our practice and approach, and led us to have more reflective conversations about what we were doing and why.

### **Challenges experienced**

Staff initially anticipated workload pressures, but once the assessments were established they proved quick to complete and highly valuable in understanding each child. Practice has begun to shift towards meeting children’s developmental needs rather than relying on age related expectations. When the project was shared with the Board of Governors, Parent Governors particularly those with children with SEN welcomed the focus on recognising what each child can do.

A key aim was to present a clear picture of progress across the Nursery setting using meaningful data. Although the first round of analysis was time consuming, it demonstrated the value of this approach. Developing more efficient methods for analysing and presenting data will be a priority next year to strengthen early years evaluation and support whole school planning.

3.

# Ethos as a Priority: Culture, Behaviour & School Climate



Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement



# Improving our approach to positive behaviour

**Melissa McCombe**, Principal  
Kilrea Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

As a school, we recognised the need to strengthen our approach to positive behaviour, ensuring it reflected our renewed Ethos, Vision, Mission and Values, developed collaboratively with pupils, staff, parents and governors. Emerging trends in pupil readiness and increasing Social, Behavioural, Emotional and Wellbeing needs highlighted the importance of a shared, preventative and coherent behaviour framework. Data gathered for improvement planning reinforced this need. Our aim was to better support pupils and staff by recognising and nurturing positive behaviour, teaching emotional regulation and helping children understand consequences and rebuild relationships.

*“Why crush behaviours with punishment when you can grow them with love? Visible consistency with visible kindness allows exceptional behaviour to flourish.” Paul Dix*

## Relevant research considered

We considered a range of relevant research and practice based evidence. We visited and spoke with other schools to learn from their approaches to positive behaviour and understand what had worked well in different contexts. We also explored *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes* by Paul Dix, which draws on anecdotal case studies, scripted interventions, and strategies tested across a wide variety of school settings. The research emphasises the importance of adult behaviour, consistency, and relational approaches. Further reading and examples demonstrated that this approach has had a significant and positive impact in many schools, reinforcing our decision to adopt similar principles.

## Baseline audit

To prepare for improvement planning, we gathered a comprehensive range of qualitative and quantitative evidence to establish a clear baseline. This included data from parental questionnaires, pupil questionnaires, and feedback from School Council meetings. Staff voice was captured through questionnaires completed by both teaching and non teaching staff, alongside structured consultation discussions. In addition, PASS (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) data was analysed to gain insight into pupils’ perceptions, attitudes, and emotional wellbeing. Collectively, this evidence provided a well rounded understanding of existing strengths and areas for development, informing our next steps confidently and objectively.

## Expected outcomes

We expected to establish a clear, consistent and shared approach to behaviour across the whole school, underpinned by an updated Positive Behaviour Policy. This included creating conditions where more time could be dedicated to recognising and reinforcing high standards of behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. We also aimed to develop a clear and supportive pathway for pupils who require help with emotional regulation, supported by calm, consistent and scripted adult responses to effectively de escalate situations. A further expectation was that all staff would be well trained, confident and aligned in their practice, with our school values clearly understood and reflected by all members of the school community. Ultimately, we expected this work to empower staff, promote consistency and ensure our values are visible in everything we do.

## Actions taken

A Baker Day was used to introduce Paul Dix’s approach to behaviour, with a focus on scripted responses, consistency and a staged approach

to managing challenging behaviour. Staff were encouraged to work collaboratively and support one another to maintain shared practice. Targeted professional learning included EA training on emotional regulation, calm plans and sensory needs, alongside specialist training for classroom assistants supporting social, behavioural, emotional and wellbeing needs. A clear, consistent approach to restorative practice was established using structured questions to support reflection, repair relationships and build emotional understanding. All staff were provided with the book, *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes* to support a shared vision. Mental health and wellbeing were further promoted through the *Take 5* approach, with pupils in P4–7 attending a weekly *Take 5* club. Whole school assemblies reinforced school values and celebrated success. Pupil voice and leadership were strengthened through consultation and meaningful roles, including digital leaders, buddy systems, Pupil Champions, Eco Council and School Council. Further whole staff Restorative Practice training is planned for term 3, led by Education Welfare (EANI).

### Evidence collected

Evidence was gathered throughout the year using a range of quantitative and qualitative measures. Staff consultation took place regularly, alongside pupil voice collected



through school council meetings. Observations across the school and review of classroom and communal displays provided further insight into day to day impact. One to one consultations with parents offered valuable perspectives. Pupil progress data demonstrated improvements in learning behaviours, while behaviour logs showed a clear reduction in incidents compared to the start of the year.

Additional evidence is being collected through a parent questionnaire and PASS data to strengthen evaluation.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence indicated that the approach has had a positive impact across the whole school. Staff confidence in responding to challenging behaviour has increased, with a stronger, more consistent team approach when supporting pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs. Behaviour logs show improved consistency,

though they also highlighted how easy it is to revert to old routines if practice is not revisited strategically. This reinforced the need for regular review points across the academic year. Feedback identified restorative practice as a key next step; consequently, an action plan has been developed to schedule targeted training over the next academic year. Importantly, the work has strengthened staff relationships and shared ownership. The overall behaviour in KPS has always been of a high standard, but this

*“Shift your expectation for good behaviour to over and above tomorrow and you will never look back!” Paul Dix*

---

initiative has ensured we have greater capacity to focus on the majority of pupils who model the school’s ethos and values. This marks the beginning of a longer journey, with clear momentum for continued improvement.

### **Challenges experienced**

Progress in this area is difficult to measure, as change is often gradual and influenced by many factors. In a small school, staff are required to manage multiple priorities, so sustaining focus and consistency can be demanding. Careful consideration is needed to make best use of limited training days. While external facilitators significantly reduce workload and support high quality professional development, access to this support is not always possible due to financial constraints and time pressures.



# You can't build capacity if your school climate isn't right...

**Grace Anderson**, Principal  
Magherafelt High School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The focus of this improvement work was to strengthen the overall school climate at Magherafelt High School. Following COVID 19 and subsequent industrial action, relationships, communication, and collegiality had been significantly affected. Staff operated more independently, and opportunities for meaningful collaboration were reduced. Classroom health measures also created more formal teacher pupil interactions, resulting in a controlled but less relational learning environment.

Recognising that school climate underpins learning, wellbeing, and behaviour, the aim was to rebuild connection, belonging, and shared purpose across the school community. The goal was to create a more positive, inclusive, and supportive environment where staff and pupils felt valued, connected, and motivated.

## Relevant research considered

This work drew on key research on school climate and relationships in education: Jonathan Cohen (National School Climate Council) emphasises the impact of school climate on learning outcomes, wellbeing, and social development.

Carl Rogers' *Freedom to Learn* – highlights that meaningful learning is built on connection rather than compliance, stressing trust, authenticity, and positive relationships. Mara W. Allodi (Stockholm University) identifies the direct influence of emotional wellbeing and social climate on engagement and achievement.

These research foundations supported a focus on relationships, collaboration, and emotional

wellbeing as drivers of whole school improvement.

## Baseline audit

The baseline reflected the disruption of recent years. Evidence showed reduced collegiality, fewer opportunities for collaboration, and more formal staff pupil relationships. Indicators reviewed included:

- Staff and pupil attendance.
- Behaviour data (detentions, suspensions).
- PASS data.
- Participation in extracurricular activities.
- Parental engagement.
- Incidents of bullying and racial conflict.

While core systems remained in place, the data highlighted the need to strengthen relationships, engagement, and a sense of belonging.

## Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes focused on improving relationships, wellbeing, and engagement. For pupils: increased engagement, improved behaviour, stronger relationships with staff, and greater participation in extracurricular activities.

For staff: enhanced collaboration, professional confidence, and willingness to share practice, contributing to a more open and supportive culture.

At whole school level: a more welcoming, cohesive, and positive environment with relationships at its core.

## Actions taken

A wide range of strategic and practical actions were implemented:

**Coaching culture:** Staff engaged in coaching; leaders trained and accredited to support reflective practice and empowerment.

**Restorative practice:** Staff trained in structured

*“Evidence showed a clear, positive shift in school climate.”*

scripts to support positive communication and conflict resolution.

**Circles:** Introduced in classrooms, staff training, and restorative conversations to promote equality, inclusion, and open dialogue.

**Redesigned PRSD:** A Trusted Colleague Network and Open Door practice reduced paperwork and encouraged meaningful professional dialogue.

**Enhanced student engagement:** Expanded extracurricular programme, trips, and fundraising activities strengthened relationships and participation.

**Wellbeing initiatives:** Professional supervision for safeguarding staff and therapy animals to support emotional needs.

**Strengthened leadership:** New roles focused on ethos and behaviour ensured sustained attention to school climate.

### Evidence collected

Evidence included:

- Staff feedback and professional dialogue.
- Pupil voice and engagement levels.
- Participation in extracurricular activities and trips.
- Attendance and behaviour data.
- Parental engagement and feedback.
- Observation of interactions and culture.

### What the evidence showed

Evidence showed a clear, positive shift in school climate.

Staff demonstrated greater collaboration, openness to innovation, and willingness to share practice. Pupils showed increased engagement, improved behaviour, and stronger relationships with staff. Feedback indicated pupils felt more supported and connected. Parental engagement also increased.

Overall, improvements in school climate positively impacted staff practice and pupil

outcomes, reinforcing the importance of relationships, wellbeing, and collaboration.

### Challenges experienced

Challenges included balancing improvement initiatives with workload and curriculum pressures, and initial reluctance from some staff. Maintaining momentum and ensuring consistent engagement required careful management.

These challenges were addressed through clear communication, ongoing support, and a phased approach. A strong emphasis on wellbeing and collaboration helped sustain progress.

This experience highlighted the importance of patience, flexibility, and strong leadership in embedding long term cultural change.



# Leading with values: Strengthening leadership and school ethos

**Gillian Hay**, Principal  
Donemana Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

I aimed to strengthen leadership and management by developing coordinators' capacity to lead improvement while embedding a shared, values led ethos across the school community. The ETI inspection provided a valuable opportunity for reflection and highlighted the need to develop not only systems, but a coherent school culture to support behaviour, learning and wellbeing. A period of industrial action and staffing changes created challenges in maintaining consistency but also provided a clear focus for improvement. Priority was given to clarifying leadership roles, strengthening planning and monitoring, and establishing a shared vision and values. Working with CSSC, staff, parents and pupils, the school developed a common language for learning and behaviour, ensuring improvement was understood and embedded. Strengthening ethos became a key foundation for improving teaching quality, consistency and outcomes.

## Relevant research considered

Relevant research and guidance strongly informed the action plan, including ETI evaluation criteria and the central role of self-evaluation in driving sustained improvement. Professional learning was enriched through participation in the CSSC Building Capacity Programme, promoting research-informed practice across the school. Hattie's work on *Visible Learning* shaped a clear focus on learning intentions, feedback and teacher impact, while Rosenshine's *Principles of Instruction* supported highly effective teaching approaches, including structured lessons, modelling, guided practice and checking for understanding. Together, these research-informed approaches strengthened consistency in pedagogy and are supporting improved outcomes for pupils.

## Baseline audit

The baseline audit drew on ETI inspection findings, complemented by focused self-evaluation, providing a clear and constructive picture of current practice. It identified valuable opportunities to enhance consistency in leadership, monitoring and planning. Coordinators recognised that they would benefit from greater clarity in their roles, increased confidence, and more experience of structured monitoring activities.

Whole school data highlighted areas for continued improvement in numeracy and literacy, alongside opportunities to strengthen the use of ICT data. Planning approaches varied between classes, and data was not yet used consistently to inform improvement priorities, providing a clear focus for future development.

## Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes included increased leadership confidence and effectiveness among coordinators, improved consistency in planning and teaching, and a stronger culture of self-evaluation supported by a shared school ethos. Structured monitoring was expected to provide reliable evidence to inform improvement and professional dialogue. For pupils, this would lead to clearer progression in learning, more consistent classroom experiences and targeted interventions to narrow attainment gaps. Pupils were expected to confidently use the shared language of values to discuss their learning and behaviour, supporting sustained improvement in outcomes.

## Actions taken

Coordinator roles were clarified through audits and job descriptions. Coordinators engaged in professional learning through the CSSC Building Capacity Programme or subject-specific support from EA officers. A whole school Monitoring and Evaluation Policy and calendar established

*“...aligning leadership development with a clear focus on ethos has strengthened school culture and is positively impacting learning and teaching.”*



consistent systems for lesson observation, planner scrutiny, book looks and data review. Medium-term planning was revised collaboratively to support alignment, progression and reduced workload. Regular coordinator meetings with the Principal focused on impact and next steps, while literacy and numeracy coordinators developed skills in pupil voice. Governors contributed through curriculum subcommittee reviews, strengthening accountability. A CSSC-led community evening supported the development of a shared vision, values and aim. Pupils designed graphics for each value, with final designs selected by the School Council and displayed across the school. The Principal reinforced these through regular interactive assemblies, ensuring values were understood and applied in daily practice.

### **Evidence collected**

A wide range of evidence was gathered, including coordinator audits, updated job descriptions, CPD records, staff meeting minutes and monitoring files. Evidence from lesson observations, planner scrutiny and book looks demonstrated changes in classroom practice. Action plans and monitoring logs showed leadership activity and follow-up actions. Ethos-related evidence includes pupil-designed value graphics, playground signage, records of the CSSC community evening, School Council minutes and assembly plans. Pupil voice, captured through Principal lunch, informal conversations and observations, provided additional evidence of

pupils' understanding and use of values in discussions about behaviour and learning.

### **What the evidence showed**

Evidence showed strengthened leadership capacity and increasing consistency in planning, monitoring and teaching across the school. Coordinators now lead improvement with greater confidence and clarity, using evidence to inform next steps. Ethos evidence was particularly strong, with pupils clearly articulating school values and using this language independently when discussing behaviour, relationships and learning, indicating that values are embedded. Pupil-designed graphics and playground signage have strengthened visibility and ownership across learning environments. Staff report improved clarity in expectations, and shared values provide a common reference point for responses to behaviour and learning. This strengthened culture is creating positive conditions for learning and supporting sustained improvement in teaching and attainment. Overall, the evidence confirms that aligning leadership development with a clear focus on ethos has strengthened school culture and is positively impacting learning and teaching.

### **Challenges experienced**

Managing time and workload within a small team was an important consideration while progressing post-inspection improvement alongside daily school demands. Staff showed strong commitment in balancing leadership development, monitoring and ethos work with teaching and pastoral responsibilities. Implementation was carefully paced to ensure new systems became embedded in everyday practice. A proactive approach supported staff wellbeing through phased implementation, consultation and targeted PPA support. This approach helped ensure improvements were manageable, sustainable and effectively integrated, while maintaining a positive, supportive environment for both staff and pupils.

# Values in action:

## Embedding a consistent, values-driven ethos

**Jill McKee**, Principal  
Cortamlet Primary School

### What did you seek to improve and why?

The focus of this improvement plan was to deepen pupils' understanding and daily practice of core values, while strengthening staff and community engagement with those values. Self-evaluation evidence showed that, although relationships were strong and the school ethos was nurturing, values were not always explicit or consistently reinforced across learning, behaviour and wider school life. Pupils could describe positive behaviour but struggled to link it to specific values or explain their impact on daily interactions. Staff and parents expressed a desire for greater consistency, visibility and shared language around values. This was important to ensure values were not only stated but actively lived, supporting pupils' personal development, wellbeing and behaviour. Strengthening shared understanding across the community was key to sustaining a positive, values-driven environment.

### Relevant research considered

Research on values-based education highlights the importance of explicitly teaching and modelling values. Studies show that consistent language, reinforcement and pupil leadership help embed values. Restorative practice informed the focus on relationship-based behaviour management and reflective dialogue. Belbin's team roles theory supported collaborative staff approaches by recognising individual strengths and model positive values such as respect, cooperation and responsibility. This ensured actions were purposeful and evidence informed.

### Baseline audit

Baseline evidence was gathered through pupil surveys, parent feedback, staff surveys and governor discussions. Pupils felt safe and could describe positive behaviour; however, many were unclear about the school's values and how

they linked to daily routines. Classroom displays and assemblies referenced values inconsistently, and staff confidence varied in explicitly reinforcing them. Parent feedback highlighted strong care but limited visibility of how values were taught and celebrated. This confirmed strong relationships but highlighted a need for greater clarity and consistency and intentional practice across the whole school community.

### Expected outcomes

Pupils would become more confident in naming, explaining and demonstrating the school values in everyday interactions. Staff would model and reinforce values using shared language and restorative approaches. Greater consistency across classrooms, assemblies and behaviour systems was expected to improve pupil behaviour, relationships and engagement, alongside increased parental awareness and involvement, strengthening home-school partnerships and reinforcing shared expectations.

### Actions taken

Actions were introduced to embed values more intentionally across school life. A 'Values in Action' monthly focus was introduced, supported by assemblies, circle time discussions and classroom activities. Values were embedded in displays and rewards, with weekly celebration. The School Council was developed to include pupil 'Values Ambassadors', giving children leadership in promoting values among peers. Behaviour policy and restorative practices were reviewed to ensure alignment with agreed values. Staff received restorative training and regular opportunities for reflection. Engagement with parents was strengthened through newsletters, a child-friendly values leaflet and co-developed displays, helping to promote shared understanding across the school community.

### Evidence collected

A range of qualitative and quantitative evidence

*“...values were becoming more visible, intentional and embedded, positively influencing pupil behaviour, wellbeing and sense of belonging.”*

was gathered to evaluate impact. This included pupil surveys and focus groups exploring understanding of values, samples of pupil work reflecting values themes and feedback from staff development meetings. Learning walks and classroom observations provided evidence of consistent modelling and language use. Parent questionnaires and informal feedback assessed community engagement, while newsletters and display materials evidenced ongoing communication. Attendance records from workshops and reviews of updated behaviour policy documents supported monitoring. Photographs illustrated values in practice.

### What the evidence showed

Evidence demonstrated clear progress in embedding school values across Cortamlet Primary School. Pupils voice showed increased confidence in naming and explaining values, with many able to give examples of their application in friendships and learning. Classroom observations confirmed greater consistency in displays, language and staff modelling. Behaviour was increasingly

addressed through restorative approaches, supporting positive relationships rather than punitive responses. Staff reported improved confidence and shared understanding, leading to a more unified approach. Parents noted greater awareness of school values and valued regular communication. Overall, values were becoming more visible, intentional and embedded, positively influencing pupil behaviour, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

### Challenges experienced

Ensuring consistency across all classes required ongoing reinforcement, particularly alongside curricular demands. Time constraints occasionally limited opportunities for reflection and development, especially during busy periods. Engaging all parents proved challenging due to availability. Additionally, embedding restorative approaches required sustained practice and confidence building for staff. These challenges were addressed through regular monitoring, follow up support and flexible communication methods, ensuring improvements remained achievable and sustainable.



4.

# Growing People: Professional Learning & Leadership



Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement



# Growing professional practice through collaboration and trust

**Ross Coulter**, Principal  
Ballycarrickmaddy Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

While considering school improvement as a senior leadership team, we felt strongly that teaching and learning required more focused attention. Our school development plan outlined peer observation as a means of monitoring teaching and learning. However, in practice this hadn't happened frequently or rigorously, due to time constraints and periods of industrial action.

My core aim was to raise the quality and consistency of teaching and learning through staff training and monitoring.

This work was not just about improving classroom teaching; it was also about building capacity by strengthening middle leadership and equipping coordinators to raise standards



within their areas. We deliberately created opportunities for coordinators to share their expertise, support colleagues and play an active role in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. By increasing collaboration, putting supportive structures in place and sharing good practice openly, we aimed to reduce anxiety and inspire professional confidence.

## Relevant research considered

Research played an important role in shaping this work. Research into team teaching and collaborative professional practice reinforced my belief that teachers learn best when working together. Sherrington's 'rainforest' metaphor particularly resonated, as it supports non-threatening, horizontal monitoring that allows good practice to grow naturally. Hattie's work on collective teacher efficacy helped me focus on collaboration as a driver of improvement rather than individual performance. We also drew on Coe's components of effective teaching and Rosenshine's *Principles of Instruction* to help us reflect upon delivering high quality teaching and learning.

## Baseline audit

An initial baseline audit showed an enthusiastic staff team, and we identified UICT and Forest School as key areas, as confidence and experience varied across the team. In a single intake school, teachers rarely get the chance to plan or work closely together, therefore team teaching felt like a practical and purposeful way to drive professional growth and school culture.

## Expected outcomes

I hoped that through this work, staff would grow in confidence and competence in these areas, and that greater consistency in teaching and learning would emerge across the school. I expected team teaching to strengthen planning, reduce anxiety for less confident staff and support meaningful professional reflection. At a

cultural level, my aim was for collaboration to feel safe and normal, with teachers comfortable observing one another, sharing ideas and learning together. Ultimately, I hoped that upskilling our teachers would lead to richer learning experiences for our pupils.

### Actions taken

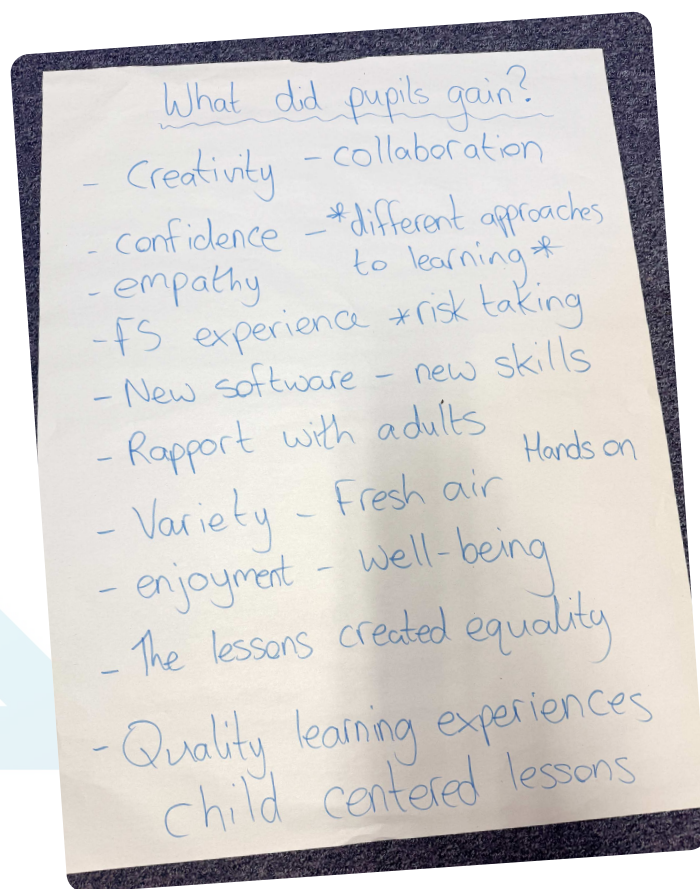
To achieve this, I introduced a structured programme of team teaching and professional learning, supported by clear timetabling so staff had protected time to plan, teach and reflect together. Teaching partnerships were established to co plan and deliver lessons in UICT and Forest School. The coordinators and I led and organised targeted staff development sessions and twilights, outlining vision, expectations and examples to help build confidence in effective teaching and to strengthen lesson design, progression and assessment within UICT and Forest School.

Following training, teachers used time provided outside of the classroom to plan out high-quality lessons in their pairs. Lessons were then delivered across the school, with each teacher being observed by their partner. This benefitted the observer as much as the deliverer of the lesson as they learned from each other's practice. We developed a peer observation cycle which enabled supportive learning conversations both before and after the lessons.

A summative 'Celebration and Reflection Day' provided an important pause point, allowing staff to reflect on their learning and acknowledge progress. The day concluded with a video of pupils expressing gratitude to teachers for their efforts and sharing highlights from the observed lessons. This was a powerful moment that demonstrated the impact of the work and reminded staff why continual improvement matters.

### Evidence collected

A wide range of evidence was gathered to capture both professional learning and classroom impact, stored centrally through Google Drive. This included shared lesson plans, peer observation records and agreed action points. Pupil voice was gathered informally through lessons and discussion, photographs captured learning in action, and examples of pupils' work demonstrated progress made. Staff reflections from the

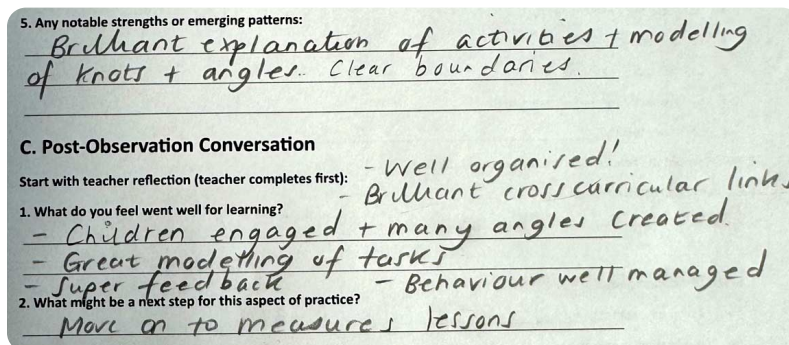


Celebration Day provided rich insight into confidence, learning and professional growth. Together, this evidence provided a clear picture of developing practice, confidence and pupil engagement.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence showed clear growth in staff competence and confidence. Staff who were initially hesitant began to lead parts of lessons more confidently in the targeted areas of UICT

*“We developed a peer observation cycle which enabled supportive learning conversations both before and after the lessons.”*



and Forest School. Observation notes highlighted highly effective lessons, with improved modelling, clearer structure and stronger pupil engagement. Pupils responded positively, demonstrating confidence, independence and collaboration in both outdoor and digital learning contexts. What stood out most, however, was the deep culture of trust and shared desire to improve that developed. Team teaching and observation were not seen as something to be endured, but as enjoyable, supportive and worthwhile. Professional conversations became more open and reflective, and staff spoke with pride about what they had achieved together. The Celebration Day helped bring this learning to the surface and embed a shared sense of confidence, progress and collective responsibility for teaching and learning.

### Challenges experienced

The project was not without challenges. Time remained a constant pressure, particularly when balancing planning and reflection with everyday school demands. Differences in staff confidence required careful handling to ensure everyone felt supported rather than exposed. Running both UICT and Forest School simultaneously was ambitious; while the planning phase was manageable, the delivery phase was very busy. Additionally, the high volume of Forest School sessions in February created practical challenges due to wet and muddy conditions. These experiences reinforced the importance of realistic pacing, flexible planning and clear communication. However, by maintaining a focus on learning rather than performance, and by celebrating progress along the journey, trust and momentum were sustained.



# Developing summative data in ICT for pupil progress

**Daniel Potts**, Primary 5 teacher,  
Designated Teacher for Child Protection,  
ICT Coordinator and PE Coordinator  
Donemana Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Following our full ETI inspection in April 2025, the outcome highlighted areas for development while also providing a clear roadmap for strengthening our practice. The recommendations have given us a clear focus for improvement, and the return visits will provide a valuable opportunity for staff to showcase the progress already being made as our collective efforts continue to drive positive change across the school.

As ICT coordinator in school I liaised with my Principal before deciding on specific targets. I picked two key targets for the 2025/2026 ICT Action Plan. The first target was the need for summative data in ICT. The second target was: To improve planning, teaching and assessment to ensure progress in learning across the curriculum and support better the holistic development of each child. This was also a target adopted across other curricular areas due to the nature of feedback on our inspection report.

## Relevant research considered

As part of my professional development, I chose to build on my Principal's guidance by enrolling in the CSSC Building Capacity programme, recognising it as a valuable opportunity to strengthen my skills and grow as a subject leader. In one of the specific Building Capacity days I was extremely intrigued by Kotter's *8- Step Change Model*. I liked the step by step approach of it and found it particularly useful for my journey as a leader. I wasn't aware of this evidence informed change leadership framework and I liked how it was broken down into both manageable and meaningful steps.

## Baseline audit

We identified ICT as an area where greater consistency was needed across planning, teaching and assessment. Although there were many strong practices already in place, staff recognised the value of developing comparative data for the subject and strengthening whole school approaches. Due to the disruption caused by COVID and industrial action, moderation in ICT had not taken place for some time, and, as with other subjects, a more collegial, collaborative approach to planning was encouraged to support improvement.

## Expected outcomes

I expected to see children's ICT work demonstrating progress and meeting age related expectations, children to show confidence and independence when using ICT tools and skills, children to demonstrate progression across the five strands of ICT, children to be actively engaged and motivated in ICT lessons, children to talk positively about their ICT learning and feel proud of their achievements as well as children's ICT work to reflect creativity, independence and real world application.

## Actions taken

As ICT co-ordinator I provided clear leadership and guidance around ICT expectations, ensuring staff understood progression and year group outcomes. Teachers were encouraged to embed ICT meaningfully across the curriculum and share good practice through staff meetings and CPD links. Staff were also supported to plan open ended, real world ICT tasks aligned to strand specific objectives, with opportunities such as one CCEA task per term built into planning. ICT learning was celebrated through displays, the school website and an ICT Pupil of the Month award. I also strengthened my leadership capacity by completing the CSSC Building Capacity Programme.

*“A valuable opportunity to strengthen my skills and grow as a subject leader.”*

### Evidence collected

As part of the ICT coordinator role, one dedicated monitoring and evaluation day was allocated each term. In term 1, this time was used to observe ICT lessons across four different year groups, providing valuable insight into varied teaching styles, pedagogical approaches and the differing levels of pupil need across classrooms. Term 2 focused on reviewing teachers’ planners to identify evidence of progression, curriculum integration and opportunities for independence. Findings were collated into a summary document shared with staff and later discussed with the Board of Governors. Redacted observation notes were retained as evidence of the monitoring process.

### What the evidence showed

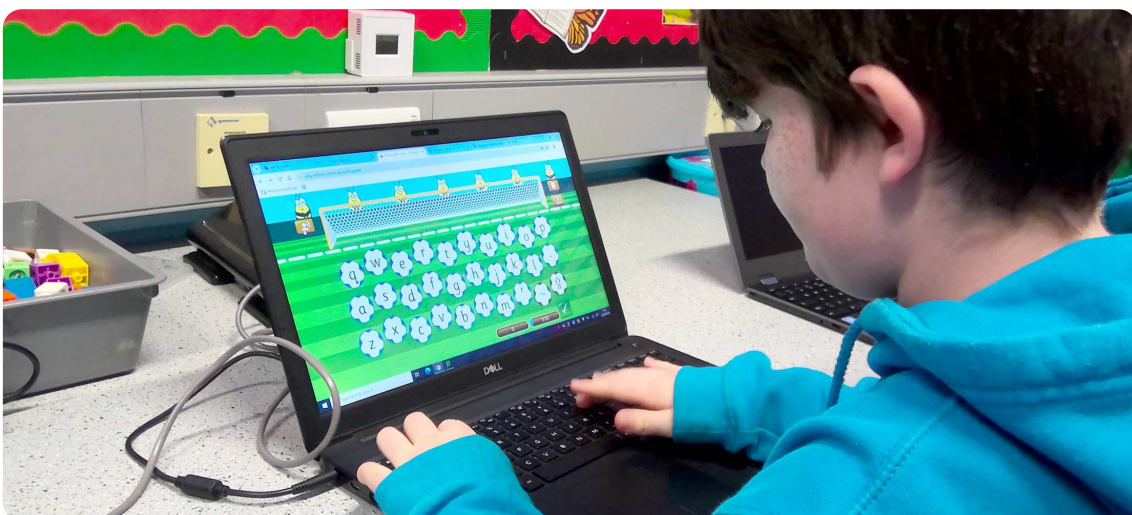
Observations – I was extremely pleased at the amount of activities across all classes which offered choice, experimentation and trial and error. I was pleased by the progression from class to class and the high level of engagement from pupils.

Planners – Planning demonstrated clear progression, meaningful cross curricular links and a wide range of high quality digital tools. Pupils were given frequent opportunities for independence, creativity, collaboration and

problem-solving, with learning celebrated and showcased. While differentiation and assessment could be made more explicit and consistent, staff are reflective and adaptable. It did become apparent that staff use a variety of ways to record their planning. In our next ICT action plan, we will look together at how best to strengthen our ICT planners. Agreeing a shared, standardised planning proforma will help us maintain consistency across the school and ensure our work aligns clearly with curricular expectations.

### Challenges experienced

After the April 2025 inspection, staff recognised that the year ahead would involve significant change, increased workload and substantial professional learning. The first term was particularly intense, as major improvements in Literacy and Numeracy took priority, meaning ICT naturally received less focus. With support from EA specialists, action plans were revisited and planning in core areas strengthened. A follow up visit in term 2 brought encouraging feedback, with inspectors noting the strong direction of travel and the impressive progress made in a short time. This was a welcome boost to morale, and although further challenges remain, the staff team is committed to moving forward together.



# Improving identification and response to pupil underachievement

**Ian Thompson**, Assistant Vice Principal  
Ballyclare Secondary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The focus of this intervention was to improve the identification and response to pupil underachievement across the school. Although attainment data is regularly analysed and staff are familiar with it, there was inconsistency in how underachievement was defined, communicated, and addressed across departments. This sometimes resulted in pupils 'flying under the radar' and duplicated parental contact.

The intervention policy was designed to create a whole school approach that clearly defined underachievement and established a structured response involving subject teachers, form tutors, Heads of Department, Heads of Year, and Senior Leadership. Ultimately, the goal was to improve pupil progress, confidence, and engagement while building consistency amongst staff in addressing underachievement.

## Relevant research considered

The intervention policy was informed by research highlighting the importance of early identification and targeted support in addressing underachievement. We used Richert's (1991) definition of underachievement as a discrepancy between potential and actual performance.

The use of PASS (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) data from GL assessments is informed by evidence linking pupil attitudes, motivation, and engagement to academic outcomes. Also, the principle that 'every interaction is an intervention' reflects research emphasising that the day to day impact of high quality teaching, feedback, and relationships aids pupil progress. This research supports us in school where low level, classroom based interventions are

prioritised alongside more formal support where needed.

## Baseline audit

The starting point was a review of existing practices around tracking, intervention, and communication. While CAT4 data, assessment windows (AU data), attendance, and behavioural information were available, there was no consistent guidance in school for staff. Staff used a range of informal strategies, but expectations and follow up varied across departments. PASS data had been collected previously but was not always used to inform interventions. This baseline highlighted the need for a clearer structure to ensure underachievement was identified early and addressed consistently across the school.

## Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes included:

- Improved consistency in identifying underachievement.
- Greater staff engagement in addressing underachievement.
- Improved pupil outcomes in the next set of assessments against initial expectations.
- Improved pupil engagement with learning.
- Greater parental support at home with pupils.

## Actions taken

A whole school intervention policy was developed and shared with Heads of Department and subject leaders, who disseminated and implemented it within their teams. Clear definitions of underachievement were established using initial expectations (CAT4), assessment (AU data), attendance, and PASS data. A structured intervention timeline was introduced, outlining Level 1 classroom based strategies, Level 2 subject specific interventions, and next step academic and pastoral supports.

*“Every interaction is an intervention.”*



Roles and responsibilities were clarified to avoid duplication of interventions and parental contact, with Heads of Year and Heads of Key Stage leading the PASS Programme. Staff were encouraged to view daily classroom interactions as meaningful interventions, ensuring support was consistent. Regular evaluation points were built in to review impact and adjust interventions where necessary.

### **Evidence collected**

A range of data was collected. This included assessment window (AU) data, CAT4 baseline comparisons, attendance records, and PASS survey results for pupils involved in targeted support and was centralised on SIMS to allow easy access for all staff. Teachers kept their own records of conversations and parental contact. Departmental actions by Heads of Department, subject leaders and pastoral teams were also gathered.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence indicated improved consistency and clarity in how underachievement was identified and addressed across the school. Staff reported greater confidence in using data to inform conversations with pupils and parents and on who to intervene with. The PASS data provided valuable insight into underlying barriers, allowing interventions to address attitudes and engagement.

AU data showed that some pupils identified as underachieving at AU1 made improved progress by AU2, particularly where interventions were implemented consistently. This will need further evaluation in the summer months. Attendance and engagement for pupils on the PASS Programme also showed signs of improvement. We are seeking to further develop this through work with the newly appointed health and wellbeing officer.

### **Challenges experienced**

One challenge was ensuring consistency in implementation across all departments, particularly during the initial phase. Before this, explaining and helping staff become familiar with the flow chart detailing the stages and flow of information was key. Avoiding duplication of parental contact also required close coordination between pastoral and academic teams. Ensuring that interventions were meaningful was another challenge, reinforcing the importance of professional judgement alongside the data we hold. These challenges highlighted the need for ongoing evaluation as the policy becomes fully embedded.

5.

# Spaces That Shape Learning: Environment & Innovation



Building Capacity:  
Leading Improvement



# Enhancing outdoor learning through a shared, high quality approach

**Aimee Scott**, Head of Foundation Stage  
Moyle Primary School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

As Head of Foundation Stage, I focused on enhancing the quality and consistency of outdoor play provision, as identified in the school development plan under Learning and Teaching. Through self-evaluation, observation and staff discussion, it became evident that outdoor learning offered significant potential for further development in terms of purpose and structure. Changes in leadership within Foundation Stage had presented challenges in maintaining consistent communication, monitoring and a shared understanding of play-based learning. As a result, opportunities to maximise children's engagement, sustained focus, social development and language rich, collaborative play were not fully realised. This improvement focus was driven by a strong commitment to evidence informed practice and continuous development, recognising that well planned outdoor environments, supported by clear leadership and shared understanding, can significantly enhance children's learning, wellbeing and engagement.

## Relevant research considered

A range of research and evidence informed frameworks guided my approach. Kotter's *8-Step Change Model* informed how I structured and communicated change, particularly in developing a shared vision and embedding practice over time.

Hattie's *Visible Learning* influenced my focus on identifying strategies within the 'zone of desired effects' to ensure changes had a measurable impact on children's engagement and learning. In addition, guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) for Early Years supported decisions around high quality play, adult interaction and the effective use of

outdoor learning environments.

## Baseline audit

The starting point was a review of the existing baseline audit from the previous year's development plan, which highlighted limited progress in outdoor play provision within the Foundation Stage. A staff survey supported self-evaluation and identified a lack of confidence, unclear expectations, and inconsistent practice. Observations showed low engagement and underutilised areas.

Using Kotter's *8-Step Change Model*, I created urgency by sharing the rationale, formed a project team to support clean up and resourcing, communicated the vision consistently, encouraged reflective questioning, simplified systems, refined practice, and secured quick wins to maintain collective momentum.

## Expected outcomes

A positive expectation for children was higher levels of independence, engagement and collaboration, with them confidently accessing resources, sustaining play for longer periods and demonstrating problem-solving, creativity and communication outdoors.

For staff, expectations included working alongside the Foundation Stage outdoor play planner to purposefully plan, create and evaluate high quality outdoor learning experiences. Staff were also expected to contribute ideas to enhance outdoor spaces, maintain tidiness and safety, and communicate any concerns. By the end of the year, teachers were expected to be more confident in leading outdoor play, with increased parental involvement and a stronger sense of shared whole school responsibility.

## Actions taken

A staff survey was distributed in June 2025 to

*“Lesson observations highlighted . . . more purposeful adult interaction, supporting higher-quality play experiences for children.”*

gather baseline views on outdoor play. On returning to school, I met with Foundation Stage teachers and classroom assistants to share findings, agree priorities and establish a shared vision for change.



I worked closely with the literacy team to co-develop an outdoor play theatre aligned with our Literacy Action Plan, supporting *Talk for Writing* through talk prompts, rich language, story maps and oral storytelling opportunities. I also partnered with the local Men’s Shed and community craftsmen to design and create high quality outdoor play furniture, improving resourcing and sustainability.

Collaborative actions included introducing a play space cleaning rota, renewing the outdoor timetable and co-developing an outdoor play policy with the Principal. Using CCEA Foundation Stage guidance, I supported staff in creating defined outdoor areas, reviewed

planners, carried out observations, monitored progress through check-ins and provided ongoing updates to the Board of Governors.

### **Evidence collected**

A range of qualitative evidence was collected to evaluate impact. Staff engagement was monitored through weekly checks of the outdoor play cleaning rota, demonstrating increased shared responsibility and ownership. Lesson observations of outdoor play were undertaken to monitor consistency and quality of practice across the Foundation Stage.

Follow-up staff surveys evidenced improved confidence and organisation of outdoor learning. Pupil voice was gathered through discussions, informing the future development of play areas. Photographs captured the development of defined zones, safety improvements and enhanced resources.

### **What the evidence showed**

The evidence indicated that the intervention had a positive impact on both staff practice and children’s engagement with outdoor learning. Increased staff ownership, demonstrated through rota completion, collaboration and survey feedback, showed that a shared ethos around outdoor play was developing. Lesson observations highlighted greater consistency in the use of defined outdoor areas, improved organisation and more purposeful adult interaction, supporting higher quality play experiences for children.

Pupil voice confirmed increased enjoyment, choice and sustained engagement outdoors, while parent feedback reinforced the value children placed on outdoor learning. Photographic evidence further illustrated tangible improvements in the environment, safety and resourcing. Overall, the evidence

suggested that clear leadership, collaborative planning and evidence informed approaches were effective in embedding change. It also highlighted areas for further development, particularly the need for ongoing staff reflection and continued evaluation to ensure improvements are sustained over time.

### Challenges experienced

One challenge was limited initial engagement with the community donation station. While some families contributed, uptake was lower than anticipated however, this is viewed as a long term initiative that should strengthen as awareness grows. Securing protected time for staff reflection, particularly bringing teaching and non teaching staff together each half-term, required careful planning alongside competing priorities. A further challenge occurred within one year group where the class teacher was absent due to illness at the end of term 1, with two short term substitute teachers unfamiliar with the school. This made maintaining consistency and a shared vision for outdoor play more difficult. Overall, these experiences highlighted the importance of persistence, flexibility and adaptive leadership, supporting the continued development of sustainable, whole school improvement.



# Transforming outdoor learning through inclusive, high quality practice

**Kim Wylie**, Head of Nursery Unit  
Oakfield Primary School and Nursery Unit

## What did you seek to improve and why?

The focus for improvement was the physical layout and resources of the Foundation Stage lower outdoor area. The goal was to move beyond basic equipment towards stimulating, multi-sensory zones, providing opportunities for curricular alignment and ensuring the outdoor area functions as an effective learning space. A stimulating environment reduces passive behaviour and encourages active, playful learning, which is critical in the Foundation Stage.

A further focus was developing the professional capacity of teaching staff, particularly their understanding of outdoor learning and confidence in delivering lessons outdoors. Outdoor learning is only as effective as the adult facilitating it. By investing in professional development, the school aims to embed outdoor learning in practice. Encouraging staff to reflect and collaborate ensures the school's Outdoor Learning Vision remains a living document, refined through practice and peer feedback.

Finally, the project focused on moving from incidental outdoor activity to deliberately planned, inclusive and curriculum linked sessions. This ensures outdoor learning supports all learners, including those with SEN (Special Educational Needs), so no child is excluded. Clear links to the curriculum ensure time spent outdoors contributes directly to teaching, learning and pupils' developmental milestones.

## Relevant research considered

To enhance our outdoor learning provision, we integrated the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on *Improving Early*

*Education Through high quality Interactions*, focusing on evidence-based strategies that maximise adult-child engagement in open-ended environments.

Simultaneously, we adopted the pedagogical documentation practices of Reggio Emilia, a framework deeply rooted in qualitative research. This dual approach ensures that staff not only facilitate cognitively challenging interactions but also systematically document the learning process, allowing for deeper reflection and a research-led curriculum that evolves in response to children's needs.

## Baseline audit

Our baseline audit responded to strong parental feedback from June 2025 requesting outdoor learning continuity from nursery. In November 2025, staff completed a comprehensive Google Form, ranking statements from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This evaluated resource sufficiency, inclusivity, and the balance between adult-led and child-initiated play.

Crucially, the data measured staff confidence in curricular planning, risk-taking, and pedagogical training. The findings highlighted a need to align leadership support with a shared vision for high quality outdoor provision.

## Expected outcomes

The project aims to create a transformed outdoor environment where stimulating, inclusive zones support curricular achievement. Expected outcomes include teaching staff who are pedagogically fluent and confident in delivering high quality, research informed sessions that prioritise pupil wellbeing. By bridging the gap between indoor and outdoor learning, the school will develop a cohesive, shared vision. Success will be evidenced through collaborative professional reflection and a curriculum that adapts fluidly to children's

*“The evidence ... reflects a growing willingness among staff to embrace outdoor learning as a core pedagogical approach, moving beyond isolated activities to make it an integral part of long-term curricular planning.”*

interests, ensuring every child engages in safe, purposeful and playful learning.

### Actions taken

To achieve these outcomes, we conducted an audit of existing play spaces, mapping experiences to curriculum areas such as Numeracy, Literacy and WAU. We developed rich, multi-sensory zones, including a mud kitchen, construction, gross motor and role-play areas, using open-ended materials to promote inquiry.



Accessibility was prioritised through sensory tools, quiet areas and visual supports for EAL and SEN learners. Pupil voice was integrated into planning, with pupil led signage created to promote ownership.

Professional capacity was strengthened through high quality training, including visits to Gilnahirk Primary School (January 2026) and

Stranmillis University College (March 2026), supporting planning, scaffolding and observation. A shared resource bank was established and curriculum planning updated to embed outdoor learning. Successes are shared through Seesaw and social media, ensuring the outdoor vision is visible across the school community.

### Evidence collected

Robust evidence was systematically collected to track the project’s impact and evolution. Formal minutes from Outdoor Learning Team meetings document strategic decision making and collaborative planning, while detailed lesson plans demonstrate the integration of curricular goals into practice.

Visual evidence, including photographs of the developing play zones, provides a clear record of physical transformation. Furthermore, action plans from P1, P2, and the Foundation Stage SPiM outline specific developmental milestones. Finally, the Google Form audit completed in November 2025 serves as a critical baseline, with a follow-up scheduled for June 2026 to measure shifts in staff confidence and provision quality.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence collected serves as a strong indicator of the progress made since our initial baseline. Most notably, it reflects a growing willingness among staff to embrace outdoor learning as a core pedagogical approach, moving beyond isolated activities to make it an integral part of long-term curricular planning.

Reflecting on the baseline of October 2025, there is a strong sense of achievement regarding the transformation of the lower playground into a purposeful learning environment. This success is reflected in the high frequency of use, with the outdoor space now utilised by the majority of Foundation Stage classes.

To sustain this momentum, year groups have developed specific action plans with SMART targets to be implemented throughout term 3. This structured approach ensures that insights gained from documentation and audits are translated into continuous, measurable improvements in teaching, learning and pupil wellbeing.

### Challenges experienced

Establishing a high quality outdoor learning culture presented logistical and cultural challenges. Time was required to set up and maintain zones, ensuring they remained stimulating and well organised. Developing a sense of ownership among staff and pupils was essential, particularly in promoting respect for shared resources and responsibility for tidying up.

While most staff embraced the initiative, a small minority were initially less confident. This was largely due to limited experience of outdoor, play based learning, highlighting the importance of ongoing support to build confidence and strengthen pedagogical understanding.



# Transforming outdoor learning: A strategic approach

**Louise Creighton**, Principal  
Thornfield House Special School

## What did you seek to improve and why?

Following an Inspection Day visit in December, outdoor play provision was identified as a valuable opportunity for further development. This provided a clear focus to review and enhance the school's outdoor learning environment.

It became evident that the existing outdoor space offered significant potential to be further developed, with opportunities to maximise the use of resources and strengthen staff confidence in facilitating high quality outdoor learning. Given the important role outdoor play has in supporting children's physical development, social skills, creativity, resilience and wellbeing, there was a strong commitment to ensure provision fully reflected its value.

The aim was to create a purposeful, well-designed outdoor environment that would support active, engaging learning experiences, while encouraging meaningful pupil interaction and confident, supportive staff involvement.

## Relevant research considered

This work was underpinned by research highlighting the value of outdoor learning. Evidence from the NI Assembly and the Government Outdoor Learning Project (2025) shows that outdoor education improves wellbeing, strengthens social development and enhances curriculum delivery across all ages.

ETI (2021) similarly emphasises its role in promoting resilience, engagement and wellbeing. Together, this reinforced the need to embed outdoor learning as a core element of teaching and learning rather than an optional add on.

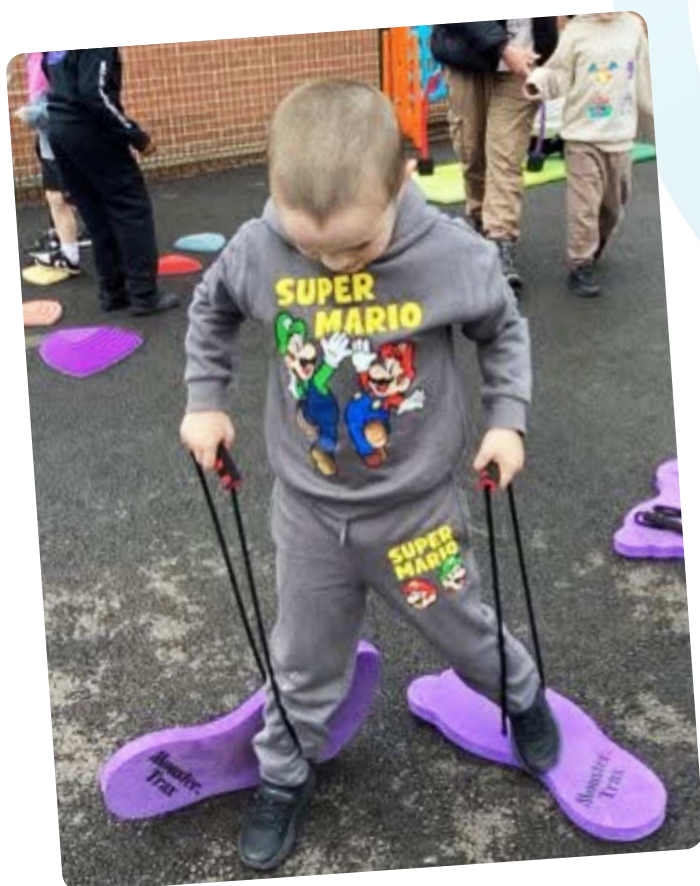
## Baseline audit

The baseline audit included staff consultation, observation of current practice, and review of teacher planning. A survey conducted by the Play Coordinator gathered staff views, while planners were analysed to assess references to outdoor learning.

Findings showed that outdoor learning was rarely planned, with only one teacher including it explicitly in sampled planners. Observations also highlighted limited engagement during playtimes and inconsistent adult involvement.

Photographic evidence and observation of pupil behaviour confirmed that the outdoor space lacked structure, stimulation, and purposeful design.

This baseline demonstrated a clear need for improved planning, resourcing, and adult facilitation to enhance outdoor learning experiences.





### Expected outcomes

- Improvements in outdoor learning experiences.
- Outdoor Play evidenced in teachers' planning and evaluations.
- A more welcoming and stimulating Outdoor Learning Space for Pupils.
- Engaged pupils – active and learning outdoors.
- Engaged staff during Outdoor play activities.

### Actions taken

The School Development Plan was refocused to prioritise outdoor learning, supported by a structured and collaborative approach. Staff feedback shaped clear priorities, and funding from the Education Authority, PTA and external grants enabled meaningful development of the outdoor space. A visit to Dunclug Nursery School helped establish a shared vision,

followed by a detailed action plan and a volunteer led 'Clean up day'. Practice was strengthened through a structured outdoor play rota for Classroom Assistants and specialist input from Messy Play practitioners, with further training planned to ensure sustainability. Together, these actions reflect a coordinated and strategic effort to enhance both the outdoor environment and the quality of children's learning experiences.

### Evidence collected

A wide range of evidence was gathered to monitor impact:

- **Staff voice:** Highlighted recognition of the need for improved provision and active engagement during play.
- **Pupil observations:** Showed patterns of engagement, behaviour, and interaction.
- **Funding records:** Demonstrated strategic investment in improvement.
- **Specialist involvement:** Confirmed commitment to high quality design.
- **Clean up day participation:** Reflected staff ownership and collaboration.
- **Research and school visits:** Provided examples of best practice.

This combination of qualitative and practical evidence ensured that improvement was informed, targeted, and ongoing.

### What the evidence showed

The evidence shows a clear improvement in both staff practice and pupil engagement. Staff developed a stronger understanding of outdoor play as a purposeful learning opportunity, and the new rota led to more active facilitation, better regulation and earlier intervention. Observations indicated improved behaviour, higher participation and smoother transitions back to class.

While the physical environment still limits what is possible, pupils showed greater engagement,

*“The evidence indicated a clear and positive shift in both staff practice and pupil engagement.”*

better social interaction and improved regulation when structured resources were available. Overall, the evidence highlights a shift from reactive behaviour management to proactive teaching of play skills, with positive effects on pupil outcomes and staff wellbeing.

### Challenges experienced

Several challenges were identified during implementation, alongside strategies to address them:

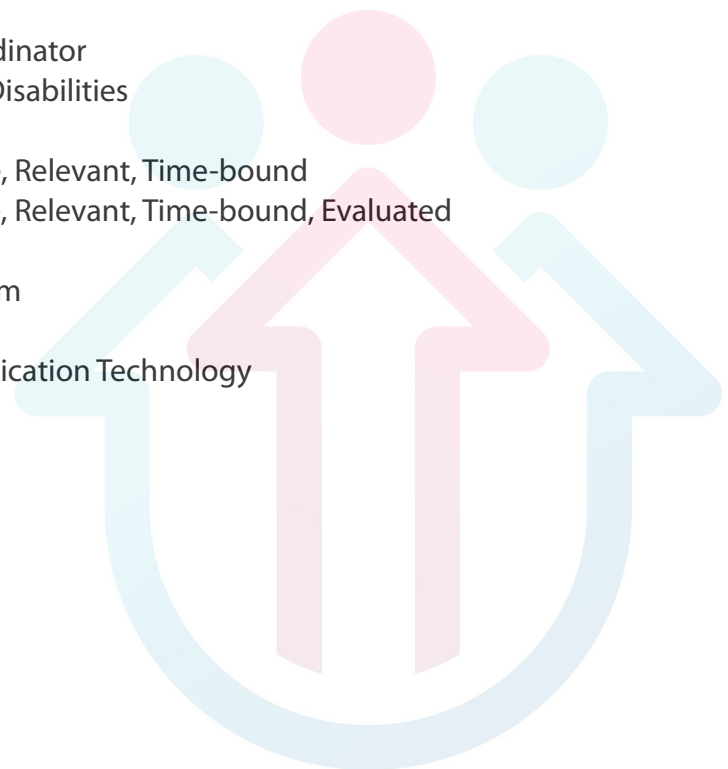
- **Staff confidence** – Some staff initially viewed outdoor play as supervision. A rota and targeted CPD improved consistency.
- **Time and priorities** – A phased approach helped manage workload and maintain momentum.
- **Funding** – Limited resources required staged development and active pursuit of additional funding.
- **Environment** – The space needed preparation; a Clean up day enabled progress and built ownership.
- **Sustainability** – Continued monitoring, training and resource development were identified as essential.

These challenges highlighted the need for strong leadership, collaboration and strategic planning to embed lasting change.

## Glossary of Terms

---

AAC	Augmentative and Alternative Communication
App	Application
ASOS	Action short of strike
CAT4	Cognitive Abilities Test (Fourth Edition)
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment
CPD	Continued Professional Development
DE	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IPAMER	Identity, Plan, Act, Monitor, Evaluate, Review
KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulties
PASS	Pupil Attitudes to Self and School
PLP	Personal Learning Plan
PPA	Planning, Preparation and Assessment
PRSD	Performance Review and Staff Development
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
PTE	Progress test in English
PTM	Progress test in mathematics
QR code	Quick response code
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SLD	Severe Learning Difficulties
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound
SMARTE	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Evaluated
SMT	Senior management team
SPiM	Specialist Provision in Mainstream
TPL	Teacher Professional Learning
UICT	Using Information and Communication Technology
WAU	World Around Us





Second Floor, Main Building  
Stranmillis University College  
Stranmillis Road, Belfast, BT9 5DY  
t: 028 9531 3030  
e: [info@csscni.org.uk](mailto:info@csscni.org.uk)



© Controlled Schools' Support Council is the sectoral support body for controlled schools in Northern Ireland.

