An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Early-Years Education-focused Inspection

Report

Grainne’s Montessori School
09CC0104

Western Road
Clonakilty
County Cork

Date of Inspection: 18 June 2017
CONTEXT OF SETTING

Grainne’s Montessori School is a privately owned setting located in the little town of Clonakilty. Two practitioners provide early-years education for a group of children in the morning and for another group in the afternoon. On the morning of the inspection, there were sixteen children and a support worker from the ‘Co-action’ Programme present. The two main practitioners attended the post-inspection feedback meeting. The setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised in this report, the setting chose to accept the report without response.

AREA 1
QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the context to support the children’s learning and development is fair.
- A caring ethos and a warm, affirming atmosphere are evident. Practitioners have a positive and sensitive regard for the children, using a respectful approach with a gentle, friendly tone of voice.
- Caring and respectful child-child relationships are fostered and practitioners provide some guidance and encouragement towards positive behaviour, often sorting children’s problems for them.
- The practitioners praise and encourage the children largely for academic achievement and compliance.
- Snack time is very effectively utilised as a social occasion, providing lovely opportunities for small-group conversations as practitioners and children sit and eat together, thus promoting well-being and a healthy lifestyle.
- The children are very well supported to manage their own hygiene and personal care needs.
- The current daily routine needs to be revised as some children were sitting down and being physically inactive for the majority of the three-hour session, mainly following practitioner-initiated/led activities.

Actions advised

- Practitioners are advised to explore conflict resolution strategies in order to empower the children to self-regulate and resolve conflicts autonomously.
- Praise, encouragement and recognition need to be more process-oriented, focusing on personal and social skills such as resilience, persistence, resourcefulness, negotiation, turn-taking, and problem-solving, rather than on compliance and academic achievement.
- Practitioners are advised to revise the daily routine. A better balance between physically inactive and active times as well as between practitioner-initiated/led and child-initiated/led activities needs to be established. Practitioners need to be cognisant of the fact that purposeful, child-initiated/led free play takes time to develop and unfold and therefore the daily routine must provide scope for that to happen. Once drafted, the daily routine needs to be displayed in writing for the parents and in picture form for the children to orient themselves by it. Pictorial representation of the daily routine is particularly beneficial for children with additional needs.
- In reviewing the daily routine, practitioners are advised to reduce the number of transitions and to ensure that times of transition are supporting positive learning experiences for the children. For example, tidy-up time can be used to foster pre-mathematics skills through children sorting, pairing, matching, sequencing and organising materials, toys and resources. Preparing the tables for snack time is another transition time where children can get actively involved in counting how many chairs, plates, and cups are needed, thus expanding mathematical skills through everyday life experiences. The ‘Transition’ pillar in the online Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide provides useful guidance in this regard.
- The children’s uniqueness, individuality, interests and values need to be reflected in an inclusive learning environment, in the toys, resources and materials used, as well as in the displays such as a family wall, a job chart, pictures of the sequence of the daily activities, the children’s art work, and a world map. Other ways to celebrate diversity and promote inclusion include the inviting of
family members into the setting to share their expertise or interests and hobbies with the children, the marking of festivities, and the development of an awareness of the range of food, clothes, art and craft work which are significant to the children and their families.

AREA 2
QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the processes to support the children’s learning and development is fair.
- A broad-based, long-term and short-term Montessori curriculum loosely linked to Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework is documented and a weekly curriculum plan is displayed in the foyer for the parents. Children’s emergent interests and dispositions are not acknowledged or reflected within the curriculum.
- A variety of assessment approaches is used such as Montessori check lists and some narrative summaries of the overall development of each child at the end of the year, which are then given to the parents. Photos of children working and playing are kept in a box and some are posted on the setting’s social media page.
- Practitioners use a variety of interaction strategies to involve children in conversation and to inspire their thinking. These include the asking of open-ended questions and the use of hand puppets during small-group activities in order to prompt the children to take turns in talking and in thinking of solutions. This approach needs to be extended and used during child-initiated/led free-play activities where practitioners and children construct knowledge together.
- The very bright, light-filled, spacious and aesthetically pleasing indoor environment is very well maintained, safe and inviting with high quality Montessori material on display. In order to enable the children to learn and develop in a variety of contexts throughout the day, the play value of both the indoor and outdoor environment needs to be enhanced.
- On the day of the inspection, the beginnings of child-initiated/led, interactive free play were observed only during the short period of outdoor play that took place.
- With regard to emergent language, literacy and numeracy skill development, some use of Irish words for everyday life situations and things was noted during the inspection. Practitioners used songs and nursery rhymes during circle time and there were high quality books on display. There were some missed opportunities to expand mathematical thinking and learning through the everyday life experiences of the children, such as when making playdough with a small group. The children in the group could have counted the cups of flour, salt and water needed and, at a later stage, a weighing scales and measuring cup could be used to weigh and measure the ingredients using mathematical language during the process. In general, there is an overuse of didactic teaching methods aimed towards academic achievement.

Actions advised
- Practitioners are advised to engage in depth with the ‘Planning and assessment’ pillar of the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide and to source continuous professional development (CPD) options to gain knowledge and competence in the development and implementation of an enquiry-based, emergent curriculum.
- Assessment approaches need to be expanded to include the observation of the children’s interests, strengths, values, dispositions, attitudes, needs and skills which will mainly become apparent during child-initiated/led activities. The ‘Learning record’ template in the resource section of the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide is a valuable and easy-to-use tool for recording an emergent interest as well as for further curriculum planning based on that interest. It also has a section for parents to sign; this ensures that children’s interests, achievements and experiences are regularly shared with the families. Use of the photographs gathered throughout the year and the creation of a group learning journal with the children which reflects their learning and experiences in the setting in the course of a year is advised. This group learning journal can then be reviewed by children and parents alike, as well as being a very valuable advertisement tool when new families come to see the setting.
- Practitioners are advised to engage with the ‘Environment’ pillar of the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide and, in particular, to use the environmental audit for indoor and outdoor play environments in order to self-evaluate their practice. The environment, the toys, the materials and resources in the setting need to provide opportunities for children to engage in a variety of child-initiated/led
play including creative play, language play, physical play, imaginative play, socio-dramatic play and construction play. To this end, the practitioners are advised to create well-resourced, designated play areas such as a home-corner, a construction area, a junk-art area, and a messy play area.

- Children need to be active agents in their learning and development. They need to have choice around their engagement with the environment, resources and activities, including the development of their physical fitness, their gross motor skills, their sense of balance and spatial awareness and their core muscle strength.
- Play needs to become the central medium through which the children in this setting learn and develop. Practitioners are advised to promote and foster interactive playful exploration in small groups and pairs. Play provision needs to accommodate diversity in the style, pace and focus of every child’s learning and development in accordance with their individual needs and abilities. Use of the ‘Play’ pillar of the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide is strongly advised.
- It is advised that approaches involving colouring-in, tracing letters and numbers, formal commercial phonics programmes, and the testing of children’s knowledge of letters and numbers while they are sitting at a table, be replaced with kinaesthetic, sense-rich experiences. The latter experiences enable the children to use everyday life situations, songs, rhymes, whole-body movement games, making of playdough, cooking, baking, mark-making and daily interactive story exploration to extend and develop their learning.

AREA 3

QUALITY OF CHILDREN’S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements is fair.
- The children are motivated and interested and they demonstrate some enjoyment, self-reliance and persistence during activities such as buttering their toast, squeezing oranges to drink the juice, while having that self-created snack together.
- During the short episodes of child-initiated/led interactive free play in pairs and in small groups, such as when playing catch outside, the children show an understanding of and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.
- Through the use of Irish words for everyday life situations and things, the children are beginning to understand that different languages can be used with different people and in various situations.
- The children demonstrate an emerging awareness and understanding of the meaning and uses of symbols, pictures, print and numbers as a means of communication.
- The children’s capacity to reflect, to use judgements, to make decisions, and to develop their personal and social skills needs to be fostered.
- The children use language to share their stories, thoughts and feelings; this was particularly evident during the snack times and outdoor play. Many more opportunities for this kind of exchange need to be provided.
- Currently the art and craft work is carried out as a whole-group activity, with the majority of it being template art and outcome focused rather than process oriented.

Actions advised

- Children’s personal skills such as imagination, resilience, resourcefulness, and self-confidence need to be developed. Their social skills such as negotiating, turn-taking, co-operating, and building relationships also need to be fostered through the provision of time and space for interactive play. This will further promote the use of language to give and receive information, interpret experiences, ask questions, make requests, refuse, solve problems, imagine and recreate roles to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings.
- The practitioners are advised to offer the children a variety of process art and craft as free choice activities parallel to free-play time so that the children who are interested in those art and craft activities can join in, while others carry on following their own line of enquiry and exploration through their play. The provision of a well-resourced junk-art table to foster creativity, autonomy and agency is advised. Such a table could have paper, coloured card, pipe cleaners, straws, felt, wool, scissors, glue, crayons, playdough, a painting easel and similar materials permanently on offer.
- Literacy and numeracy need to be fostered by offering the children a wide variety of mark-making opportunities such as chalk ing outside, note paper and pencils in the home corner and/or shop to
'write' shopping lists and price labels, as well as in the construction area to draw plans, blank paper for free drawing, and buckets of water with paint brushes outside to 'paint' with.

- Children need to be provided with plenty of opportunity throughout the day to engage with, explore and experiment in their environments, using their developing physical skills to manipulate objects and materials and following their own interests and line of enquiry, with the help of supportive practitioners when and where necessary.

**AREA 4**

**QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING**

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is fair.
- An ethos of collaboration, teamwork and partnership between the two main practitioners is evident. The support worker’s role in relation to the children and the routine of the setting is unclear.
- Practitioners have informal daily chats for reflection, planning and briefly exchanging information about individual children. A clear structure for regular reflection and review needs to be established. Regular formal team meetings need to be held and the outcome of those meetings needs to be documented, so that that information can be used to improve the children’s learning experiences and achievements.
- The practitioners are committed to improving and developing the standard of education provision in the setting and avail of some opportunities for continuous professional development.
- *Síolta, the National Quality framework for Early Childhood Education* needs to inform planning, review and improvement practices.
- Some channels of communication between the setting and the families are established such as short daily informal chats, text-a-parent, a notice board and an interactive social media page.
- The voice of the child is currently not heard or included during decision-making processes that affect the children.
- Transitions into, from and within the setting need to be reviewed.

*Action advised*

- The role and responsibilities of the support worker in the setting needs to be reviewed and clear guidelines established.
- Practitioners are advised to avail of mentoring and external advisory supports such as ‘Better Start’ which is accessible through the local County Childcare Committee.
- In-depth engagement with all areas of the *Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide* is highly advised in order to define a clear vision and direction for the work of the setting. Practitioners are advised to start with the ‘Curriculum foundation’ pillar.
- Clear two-way channels of communication need to be established with the families, where parents/guardians as primary educators are regularly consulted with and informed about the children’s learning and achievements in a spirit of openness, mutual respect and transparency.
- The voice of the child and his/her family needs to be actively sought out and considered in matters that affect them.
- Practitioners are advised to review transitions into, within and from the setting. Engagement with the ‘Transition’ pillar and the ‘Parental involvement’ pillar of the *Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide* is therefore advised.

**CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE**

The capacity of the service to implement the actions advised above is good.
## Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Quality Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of context to support children’s learning and development</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of processes to support children’s learning and development</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of management and leadership for learning</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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### Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.</td>
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