Early-Years Education-focused Inspection Report

The Old Schoolhouse Montessori
09LK0002
Ballyclough
County Limerick

Date of Inspection: 12 May 2017
CONTEXT OF SETTING

The Old Schoolhouse Montessori is a privately-owned service located in a building which was previously used as a primary school. It is in operation for over fifteen years and provides a morning only Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the morning of the inspection two practitioners and twenty children were present. 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 welcoming atmosphere is evident as children and families arrive into the setting. The children happily say goodbye to their parents and eagerly show others what they brought from home.
• There are some opportunities for the children to develop physical, social and emotional security through the organisational structures and routine. However, some of the routine procedures lead to long waiting times for many of the children.
• Snack time is promoted as a social occasion and the children have many opportunities to chat together during this time. It was noted that, on the day of the inspection, the majority of the snacks were unhealthy and opportunities to discuss and promote well-being and healthy eating were missed.
• Some responsive and caring interactions between the practitioners and the children are evident. For example, when a child fell and hurt himself outdoors he immediately approached a practitioner who empathised with him while offering him comfort and reassurance.
• Some transitions are managed well such as when a practitioner reminded the children when it was time to tidy up.
• The children’s developing sense of identity and belonging is supported, as illustrated in a family tree display which was developed in partnership with the children and the parents.
• On several occasions during the inspection, the children showed difficulty in resolving minor conflict situations and some children displayed persistent negative social behaviours.

Actions advised

• Young children learn best when they have choices about materials and learning activities. In this regard, the children would benefit from more opportunities throughout the morning to actively engage in choosing their own activities. For example, rather than teaching the children facts about Australia, practitioners are advised to provide materials, artefacts and learning experiences about Australia that children can freely explore, discover and investigate on their own, in pairs or in small groups. This will provide children with the opportunity to learn and think for themselves. By interacting with the children, the practitioners can determine what the children already know while also supporting and guiding the children to extend their thinking and understanding.
• The practitioners are advised to create a healthy eating policy that supports and informs parents and children about the importance of eating healthy food for optimum health and well-being. In this regard, the practitioners are advised to consider engaging in the Healthy Ireland Smart Start Programme (National Council Network), a programme that emphasises the importance of healthy lifestyle behaviours in early childhood.
• The practitioners are advised to model and provide guidance and encouragement towards positive behaviour and to develop boundaries with the children in relation to acceptable behaviours. This will encourage the development of self-regulation, empathy and positive pro-social behaviours.
• It is advised that the practitioners consider using more auditory cues combined with visual cues for transitioning between activities in the daily routine. Some further ideas in this regard are provided in the ‘Transitions’ pillar of practice in the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide.

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.
- The curriculum as documented is underpinned by Montessori principles and philosophy although the children did not use any of the Montessori materials on the day of inspection.
- A thematic approach to planning exists where pre-determined themes are chosen for each month and transferred into weekly plans. These are largely the same every year. For example, learning about family is the theme for September. The planned themes are explored mainly through practitioner-directed experiences and discussions followed by template art and craft activity. Planning does not take account of children’s varying interests, cultural backgrounds, strengths, needs and previous learning experiences or the goals of Aistear.
- The assessment approaches used in the setting are not effective in capturing a broad picture of the children’s learning experiences, achievements, learning dispositions, skills, knowledge or understanding. Many of the assessment approaches in use place a strong emphasis on the tracking of academic content knowledge.
- Some opportunities exist for the children to be independent and competent. This was observed as the children changed from their slippers into their shoes before going outdoors and again when they came back indoors.
- The indoor environment is very spacious, safe and inviting with a variety of play materials available for the children. There are clearly defined areas which are richly resourced. The children’s art work and information on current themes are displayed. The kitchen area is stocked with real materials that support the children in making connections to their home environment.
- Some opportunities are offered to children to plan for, talk about and think about their play experiences. For example, in the weekly ‘Show and tell’ experience, the children bring something from home to share with the group. There is scope for facilitating this activity in a way that stimulates the children’s interest and engagement in it to a greater extent.
- During the time allocated for free play the practitioners engage from time to time with the children through their play. Outside of this time, the practitioners’ style of interaction is predominately directive, less responsive and less interactive.

Actions advised

- The practitioners are advised to use the self-assessment tools in the ‘Curriculum foundations’ section of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide in order to review the principles, values and attitudes that shape their work and that of the setting.
- The practitioners are advised to replace the closed, didactic components of the day (the template art, ‘colouring-in’ pages, and work sheets) with experiences that are more meaningful, relevant and exploratory to the children. For example, the setting’s Montessori materials offer opportunities for children to explore and learn mathematical and literacy concepts and skills. In addition, it will be important for the practitioners to develop and implement a curriculum that is more responsive to the children’s evolving interests and their learning dispositions. Information on developing an emergent and enquiry-based curriculum is available in the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide.
- The practitioners are advised to gather information about the children through observation and notes of those observations in order to arrive at a more rounded picture of the children’s learning and development that reflects their evolving interests, their learning dispositions and their achievements in a range of connected learning contexts. Further information on documenting children’s learning in this way is available in the ‘Planning and assessing’ pillar of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide.
- The practitioners are advised to provide the children with many more opportunities to be independent and to look after the environment and their own personal and care needs. For example, children could be encouraged to wash their own hands, tidy up the environment, and to assist with setting the table in preparation for lunch time.
- To further help the children to listen to each other and to share their thoughts and ideas, the practitioners are advised to consider smaller groupings for circle-time and ‘show and tell’.
- Use of the resources from the ‘Nurturing and extending interactions’ section of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide will assist the practitioners in reflecting on the interactive style needed to facilitate children’s learning so that that learning is enjoyable, motivating and rewarding for all children.
QUALITY OF CHILDREN’S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements is fair.
- The majority of the children demonstrate enjoyment during their self-initiated play experiences indoors and outdoors.
- Some of the children appear disinterested and became disruptive during the formal teaching session.
- Some children make decisions about their learning and are developing the ability to play in pairs and small groups. Some friendships are evident; however some persistent negative social behaviours between the children were observed.
- Some children show increasing confidence and coordination over their gross motor skills. This was especially evident outdoors.
- Information about the children’s learning is inadequate and not reflective of the goals and experiences appropriate to an early years learning context. Most of the information gathered about the children’s learning and development focuses on their writing skills, concentration skills and letter and number recognition. There is a need to gather information about children’s learning in line with the goals and principles of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

Actions advised
- The practitioners are advised to create a culture where positive pro-social behaviours are supported, celebrated and acknowledged. The children need clear boundaries and limits in relation to developing positive social behaviours.
- The children would benefit from having information available to them that reflects their changing and developing abilities so that they can discuss and share their learning experiences with others during the year. For example, the children’s ‘work folders’ could be down at the children’s level where they would be more easily accessible to them.
- There is scope for providing play experiences for the children that are effectively enriched by the practitioners judiciously participating in, leading, and facilitating the children’s activities. In this regard the practitioners are advised to utilise the resources and assessment templates available in the ‘Learning through play’ pillar of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide.
- To support the children’s innate curiosity and to foster their sense of wonder and exploration of the natural world, the practitioners are advised to use the ideas provided in Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework under the theme, ‘Exploring and thinking’.

AREA 4

QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is fair.
- The practitioners are working together for many years and the majority of the discussions about provision in the setting happen informally.
- The practitioners work well together and they share the leadership role in promoting learning.
- A clear mission statement has been developed and is on display for parents and families to read. However, there is a mismatch between this document and the practice observed during the inspection.
- The welcome area clearly presents the monthly theme for the parents and families through photographs and art work and many informal opportunities are availed off at arrival and departure times to talk about the children’s learning.
- The practitioners have no system in place for identifying and prioritising continuous professional development or engaging in ongoing professional reflection.

Actions advised
- The practitioners are advised to hold regular formal meetings to review and reflect on the children’s learning and to plan ahead. It is important that the agreed actions arising from such meetings are documented so that they can be used and revisited to inform and improve planning for the children’s learning experiences.
- The practitioners are advised to revisit their mission statement and to reflect on its practical implementation. Engagement with the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide, in particular the ‘Curriculum
foundations’ section, will assist with this. The accessing of support from Better Start, the National Quality Mentoring Service, is also advised.

- The practitioners are advised to actively seek out continuous professional development opportunities that will support them to remain up to date with the many developments that have happened in the early year’s sector in recent years.
- The practitioners are advised to use the resources in the ‘Partnership with parents’ pillar of the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide in relation to developing a more regular formal communication system with parents about their children’s achievements and their progression in learning.

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE
Based on the professional and open dialogue at the post evaluation meeting, the capacity of the service to implement the actions advised above is good.
Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

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<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>
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<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>
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<td>Fair</td>
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Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provision 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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