An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Early-Years Education-focused Inspection

Report

Field of Dreams Montessori
09LH0066

68 Cypress Gardens
Bay Estate
Dundalk
County Louth

Date of Inspection: 29th November 2017

CONTEXT OF SETTING

Field of Dreams Montessori is a private early-years' service which was established in 2006. It is located in a room in a private dwelling in Dundalk. The service provides a morning sessional pre-school programme for children enrolled on the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the day of inspection, the owner/practitioner and eleven children were present. The setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised in this report, and the response submitted on behalf of the setting can be found in the appendix of this report.

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 good.
- There is a warm atmosphere in this service. The practitioner knows each child and their family well. Parents are greeted at the door at arrival and home times but do not come into the playroom.
- There is a consistent daily routine in place. A brief period is allocated for child-initiated play and the remainder of the session comprises of adult-directed activities and two snack times. This structure does not support the children to be active agents and make decisions and choices about their play and learning. Outdoor play is not listed on the daily routine in the practitioner's diary and on the day of inspection, there was no outdoor play. The routine is not displayed for parents or the children.
- The practitioner knows each child as an individual and displays very positive regard for each child's uniqueness. It was observed that the practitioner, in her sensitive care for the children, often missed opportunities to support the children to develop independence and self-care skills.
- The practitioner demonstrates positive and respectful relationships with the children, using clam and gentle language in her interactions with them.
- The children's personal identity is supported through some personal conversations. There is potential to further nurture the children's developing sense of identity and belonging as an individual, a family member, a member of the pre-school group and a member of the local community.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the daily routine be reviewed to include the following changes; that a substantial period of the session be allocated to child-initiated free play, that a daily outdoor time be included, that adult-initiated activities be brief and that the routine be displayed for parents and children.
- To support the children's developing independence and self-care skills, it is advised that the practitioner encourage the children to do things for themselves and help each other in routine activities such as cleaning-up, snack time, putting on and taking off clothes and personal hygiene.
- It is advised that nurturing of the children's developing sense of identity and belonging be extended by displaying photographs of the children, their achievements and play activities, their families and the local community. Additional suggestions include, activities and discussions to explore and celebrate the children's likes and dislikes, similarities and differences. Also, adding materials and resources that are familiar to the children and represent their families and the local community to the learning environment.

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 is informed by some of the principles of the Montessori Method of education and is aligned to some of the principles of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.*
- Planning for the curriculum is prepared at the beginning of the pre-school year with specific activities and the introduction of Montessori activities and equipment specified for each day of the

year ahead. This highly prescriptive approach to planning is not broad-based and does not support the practitioner to deliver an emergent enquiry-based curriculum which is responsive to the children's developing and changing developmental stages, capabilities and play and learning interests.

- The children's progression in learning and development is recorded using checklists, some narrative observations, photographs and some links are made to *Aistear*. The information currently captured in these observations is narrow: it focuses primarily on rote knowledge such as the recognition of colour, shape, letters and also records the children's use of Montessori equipment. The children's holistic development and learning, their attitudes, values, dispositions, skills, broad knowledge and understanding, their individual achievements and personal understanding of themselves and the world is not captured. A standardised folder of template work and colouring-in sheets is prepared at the beginning of the year for each child and completed throughout the year. The children's individual creative work and their assessments of their own learning and achievements are not included in this portfolio.
- The indoor learning environment is large, bright and very well-maintained. Tables dominate the central space in the room and resources are stored on open shelves against the wall which are accessible to the children. There is potential to restructure the learning space into distinct areas for different types of play to more effectively support the children's learning and development. There is also potential to display the children's achievements and individual creations at their physical level in the room.
- There is a moderate provision of Montessori equipment and activities in the room. The practitioner allocates specific materials to each child to use at specific Montessori times during the session. There is very little provision for other types of play and learning beyond a small selection of books on a wall hanging rack, puzzles, small manipulatives, a tea set, a pirate ship, mega blocks and a train track, all of which are plastic.
- Some support for the children's early language and literacy is provided through conversations between the practitioner and individual children. On the day of inspection, no books were used and children did not engage in mark-making or art. Songs and rhymes were not used.
- The practitioner demonstrated use of some effective interaction strategies as she worked with children individually to support them in their use of the Montessori equipment. She demonstrated how to use the materials and then observed the children's use of the materials, affirming their efforts and acknowledging their achievements.

Actions advised

- To provide a broad-based emergent curriculum, it is advised that the practitioner begin to plan to provide playful learning experiences to support the children's developing dispositions, values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding as outlined in *Aistear*.
- It is advised that the practitioner begin to record narrative observations of the children's current interests, developmental needs and achievements and incorporate this information routinely and explicitly into short-term planning for the next steps in the children learning.
- To ensure that play is the central medium through which children learn and develop, it is advised that that the range and variety of play and learning opportunities be enhanced to ensure that children have daily opportunities in engage in creative, language, physical, imaginative, socio-dramatic, construction and art and mark-making play. Use of the 'Creating and using the learning environment' self-evaluation tool in the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* would greatly support the implementation of this action.
- To promote the children's language and early literacy development, it is advised that increased opportunities be provided for songs, rhymes, chants and word play, storytelling, book reading, art and mark-making.

AREA 3

QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children's learning experiences and achievements is good.
- The children are well-settled and secure in the service.
- There are some positive relationships between the children and many of them have formed close friendships in the group.
- The children are very respectful of the environment, the practitioner and of each other.

- During the Montessori activity times, the children enjoyed using the equipment. They attended very positively as the practitioner introduced new materials and demonstrated their correct use. Some children had successfully mastered the use of the materials presented to them and so would have benefited from Montessori materials and non-Montessori materials and activities that would provoke more challenge and thought so ensuring their continued progression in learning and development.
- Many of the children were focused and imaginative in their use of the resources available to create socio-dramatic play situations. A wider variety, range and quantity of play resources and materials would greatly enrich the children's play and learning opportunities.
- Many children displayed persistence in their use of puzzles, taking time to try many different pieces to find the one that fitted without frustration. Some children made and remade puzzles that presented no challenge or difficulty to them.
- Most of the children participated in animated discussion at snack times, sharing information and engaging in turn taking conversations with their peers.

Actions advised

- It is advised that increased opportunities be provided for the children to communicate their experiences, thoughts and ideas through group discussion facilitated by the practitioner and through engagement in expressive arts, such as music, movement, dance, role play, storytelling and art.
- To support the development of the children's exploration and thinking, it is advised that they be provided with interesting, challenging materials and activities to promote investigation, exploration, experimentation and invention.

AREA 4

QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

- The quality of the management and leadership for learning is fair.
- The service is organised and managed well and the environment is attractive and prepared.
- The practitioner holds a qualification in the Montessori Method of education and maintains continuous professional development in areas such as, First Aid. The practitioner has not yet availed of training or practice support in *Aistear*, *Síolta* or in pedagogical skills development.
- The practitioner engages in professional networking through online professional forums.
- Information about the week's topics and planned activities are displayed for parents on the door into the playroom. The practitioner uses a social media application to regularly share photographs of the children's activities with parents.
- Information about the children's progression in learning and development is shared with the parents informally in conversation. The children's folders are sent home each month.
- At the time of inspection, the service did not have links with the local primary schools that the children transition to.

Action advised

- As a first next step in developing management and leadership for learning, it is advised that the practitioner avail of training and support to maintain continuous professional development in both the Montessori curriculum and best pedagogical practice. Engagement with the Better Start Quality Development Support Service and the use of the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* will provide support for developing and improving practices within the setting.

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE

The owner/practitioner engaged professionally in the co-professional feedback discussion following the inspection and expressed a strong commitment to pursuing quality development in the service. The capacity of the service to implement the actions advised above is good.

Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

Area	Quality Level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	**Good**
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	**Fair**
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	**Good**
Quality of management and leadership for learning	**Fair**

Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.
Very good	Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.
Fair	Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.
Poor	Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.

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APPENDIX

SETTING RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF THE SETTING

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report.

On the day of the inspection this report was accurate however each day is unpredictable and routine, plans and timing don't always go according to plan. Certain areas of this report did dishearten me. We run a small homely setting where we pride ourselves on keeping close relationships with parents, guardians and childminders. All are welcome into our classroom. We talk on a professional and personal level with all people involved in our children's lives. On the day of the inspection it was noted that our children did not partake in any songs and dance. This is part of our daily routine before going home however on the day we just did not have time to fully complete our planned activities. Although my report highlights other areas to improve on, these mentioned above were disappointing to read as they were just not fulfilled on the day.

Area 2 Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection **activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.**

This report highlighted many areas that simply went under my radar. I have already made many changes to better my service.

- I have purchased, a kitchen, dolls house, role play clothing and a road mat with cars to facilitate the children's free play.
- Our daily routine is displayed in picture form for children and adults to view.
- Parents have been given a copy of our new 'Outdoor Play Policy' which states children will engage in 15mins outdoor play daily.
- Since the inspection I have become aware of what I do for the children. I now encourage each child to open their own lunch boxes and food. I encourage the children to put on their own coats and accessories. If I see a child struggling I now invite a friend to help before I get involved.
- I have redecorated the classroom, removing posters from the walls. We now have a family tree displaying photographs from the people involved in our children's lives. Each month we continue to focus on an educational theme but instead of sending this artwork home we now display it in our classroom.
- A smaller portion of our day is now adult lead learning. I continue to use monthly themes such as 'Fire Safety', 'Healthy Eating', but I now let the children lead the way for learning. I listen to their questions and gather information for them day to day, week by week, rather than the yearly planning I previously done.
- Our book corner is a new addition to the classroom. With cuddly toys and mini sofas to snuggle on. Our Library now contains age appropriate books, such as trains, dinosaurs, toy catalogs and Barbie books. We have also purchased a more diverse range of books, including ones on cultures, disabilities and families.
- After lunch we relax by gathering together for circle time. This gets the children talking, singing and show off some dancing skills.
- Finally, I have been in contact with my County Childcare Committee to help me better my service. I now get involved in workshops and training sessions. Since attending these I have made contact with other services providers, talking about experiences and activities. I then implement some of these ideas into my setting.