An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Little Acorns Nursery and Montessori Playschool, Acorns Afterschool
Setting address	8-17 Gaelic Park Carndonagh County Donegal F93XDD1
TUSLA registration number	TU2015DL065
DCEDIY number	21DL0283
Date of inspection	05-12-2024
Date of issue of report	24-02-2025

What is an Early Years Education Inspection?

The Early Years Education Inspection model is used to provide evaluative information, advice and support in relation to the education of children aged birth to six years in early learning and care settings. The inspections will affirm good practice and provide advice to support internal quality development processes that optimise children's education experiences and outcomes.

How to read this report

During this inspection, the inspectors evaluated and reported under the following headings or areas of enquiry:

- Quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- Quality of processes to support children's learning and development
- Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
- Quality of management and leadership for learning

Inspectors describe the quality of each of these areas using the Inspectorate's quality continuum which is shown on the final page of this report. The quality continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of the setting's provision in each area.

Early Years Education Inspection

Dates of inspection	05-12-2024

Activities conducted during the Inspection

- Pre-inspection meeting with the setting manager
- Review of setting documentation and records relating to the children's learning and development
- Review of the education resources and facilities
- Observations of interactions during sessions in all learning rooms
- Interaction with babies and young children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting manager and two lead early years educators

Context of setting

Little Acorns Nursery and Montessori Playschool, Acorns Afterschool is a private early learning and care setting, located in Carndonagh, County Donegal. The setting provides full day care, sessional care, part-time care, and a school-aged service. At the time of inspection, the setting had seven rooms in operation with a total of one hundred and thirty-four children registered. A total of twenty-five educators were employed in the setting. 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 was good.
- The atmosphere in the setting was welcoming and caring. An educator welcomed the parents and children at the door of each learning room upon arrival. Some timely conversations occurred between the educators and the parents at this time.
- Each room in the setting had a daily routine in place to establish the activities on offer to the children each day. During the inspection, some children were unaware of the routine and seemed uncertain as to what activity was happening next.
- At times during the inspection, a few educators demonstrated their knowledge of the children's preferences and previous experiences. These educators talked about the babies' sleep patterns and new skills they were developing, and a few educators referred to the children's families and home experiences. The educators used care routines, such as nappy changing, to engage with the children in a warm and sensitive manner. At the time of the inspection, there was no key person approach established in the setting.
- The educators provided the children with opportunities to eat healthy food and to sit with their peers for snack and lunch. At times, a small number of educators provided the children with opportunities to take on helper roles which encouraged their independence and self-help skills. The educators encouraged the babies and young children to clean their own faces after mealtimes. The children in all rooms had access to water bottles during the day.
- The educators used verbal cues to prepare the children for transitions. In a small number of rooms, the educators gave the children a five-minute reminder before tidying up and used songs to facilitate the tidy up time. The educators respectfully informed the babies and young children of the transition to nappy time, which was managed in an unhurried manner and at the children's pace. Sleep time was gentle and relaxing for the children, with appropriately clam and soothing soft music playing to encourage relaxation. In the majority of rooms, transitions occurred too often in the routine, which resulted in the children being unable to sustain engagement in play for prolonged periods.
- The educators were affectionate with the babies and young children. They encouraged positive relationships and gentle interactions between the children during play.
- Each learning room had photographs of many of the children's families, their birthday dates were displayed, there were designated areas for the children's personal belongings, and samples of their crafts were displayed. At times, the educators talked to the children about their personal experiences.

- A few of the learning rooms used varied practices to effectively support the children's sense of identity and belonging. These included a puppet that went home with each child, an outing to the post office to post Christmas letters, and a trip to the local care home.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to establish consistent and balanced daily routines in each learning room. This will support slow pedagogical practices and create time for responsive care practices within the routine activities.
- To build on the relationships that exist amongst the educators and the children, the manager is advised to develop a key person policy and approach in the setting. This approach will include daily opportunities for the educators to engage in small-group activities with their key group of children. Additionally, the manager is also advised to consider introducing a looping system where a key person stays with their key group of children, from year to year.
- It is advised that the educators develop the children's self, group, and community identity consistently across the whole setting. Reflecting the children's interests, their family backgrounds, and the local community, in all learning rooms, will support the children to appreciate their identity and strengthen their sense of belonging.

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 required improvement.
- The educators in each learning room had long, medium, and short-term curriculum plans on display. The plans outlined the weekly activities and some broad interests from the children. An evaluation template was used occasionally in a few learning rooms to review activities. It was unclear how the children's varied interests and learning needs were being supported through the planned activities.
- The educators recorded monthly records of the children's play experiences, which were stored in their individual folders. A settling in report was completed for each child at the end of their first term. A 'parents voice' template was shared with the parents to obtain their views around their children's experiences. The records did not capture information about the children's individual interests, experiences or learning accomplishments.
- At times, the educators used their interactions with the children to respond to their non-verbal expressions, questions, and requests. The educators promoted peer interactions to support the development of relationships. There were missed opportunities for the educators to engage intentionally with the children, be attuned to their needs, and to extend their learning during play.
- The indoor learning environments had some small defined areas of play organised around the edge of the rooms; tables dominated the central area of the majority of the rooms. There was a shop, a kitchen, a book area, and some sensory experiences for the children in most of the rooms. The children had access to large quantities of playdough, when the playdough was available in the rooms. A small number of rooms had physical exercise equipment which encouraged the children to develop strong gross motor skills, such as climbing, balancing, and jumping.
- There was a range of outdoor areas available for use in the setting. A few small outdoor areas were accessible directly from some of the learning rooms and a larger outdoor area was available beside the setting. These areas offered opportunities for the children to play on astro turf, to swing, to run, to dig, to complete obstacle courses and to explore the bark area.
- A few of the educators used counting and singing effectively during their interactions with the children. An educator in one of the rooms read a story to the large group and an educator in another room read a story to an individual child, on their request. Songs were played as background music in the rooms, to familiarise the children with the Christmas theme. At other times, nursery rhymes were played in the background, as the children engaged in activities. Some mark-making materials were available to the children, such as pencils, colour pencils, crayons, and water colours when painting during a planned activity.
- The manager had completed the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) training. The setting had received mentoring support from an Access and Inclusion Model specialist. The manager had completed individual learning plans for some of the children and a sensory room was recently added to the setting. There was a need for whole staff training around diversity, equality, and inclusive practices.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the educators develop observation and planning systems that support the implementation of an emergent curriculum to meet the children's evolving needs and interests. Evaluating the children's learning and experiences each week will support the educators to plan for their progression and plan support for younger children's schematic play.
- The educators are advised to become more responsive and attuned to the children's verbal and non-verbal cues in their interactions with them. Using a wider range of interaction strategies will motivate the children and extend their learning and thinking.
- The educators are advised to develop the indoor and outdoor environments to provide inviting, well-resourced spaces for the children to explore. Providing a wide range of well-equipped learning areas for the children to explore at their own pace will encourage their sustained engagement and play ideas. Developing well-presented, open-ended, authentic, and natural materials in the role play areas, as well accessible sensory play across all rooms, will support the children's holistic learning. Planning purposefully for the outdoors, as well as planning for a covered space to encourage play in all weather for all ages of children, is also advised.
- To support the development of inclusive practices, the educators are advised to attend Diversity Equality and Inclusion training as well as the LINC training. This will develop consistent practices across the team and support each key person to liaise with external professionals to support their key children.

Area 3: Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was good.
- The children enjoyed activities such as playing with playdough, farm animals, the sensory tuft trays and constructing with blocks. Across all learning rooms, there were few opportunities for the children to engage in well-resourced role play, creative activities, and process art.
- In a small number of rooms, the educators encouraged the children to develop self-help skills by putting on their coats, hanging them up, and taking off their shoes at sleep time. A few of the educators used helper roles to support the children to develop independence and responsibility.
- The children liked to share aspects of their learning with the educators, for example, showing their completed gingerbread men, their structures made with blocks, and their pride in zipping their coats. At times, the expectations from the educators did not support the children's sense of achievement, particularly in relation to arts and crafts activities and when using stickers as rewards.
- Some strong friendships were developing in the setting and many of the young children showed a growing capacity to resolve conflict independently during play. Some children, across the majority of rooms, liked to share elements of their personal experiences and their creations during the session. They described their transformers, portraits of their families on their Christmas cards, and described a 'plan' for posting a letter to Santa.
- Each child had an individual folder that was stored in their learning room. The folders contained photographs, records of the children's play experiences, and samples of template arts and crafts. In each learning room, the content of the folders followed the same sequence and similar information was used for each children's learning experiences.
- The babies and young children used varying communication skills to reflect their needs and wants. Some of the babies and young children used gestures, vocalisations, and words to convey meaning. Some children talked about their creations of a 'zombie gingerbread man' and a 'canon' that they made from connecting construction pieces.
- The children had the opportunity to listen to music and songs in various rooms. A small number of children sang and danced to the Christmas themed songs as they played in the background during the table-top activities. In one of the rooms, the educators used a puppet during a whole-group circle-time story, which amused the children.
- The planning in one of the rooms highlighted the opportunities that the children had to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world by exploring topics such as transport and making passports and boarding passes. In some rooms, the children explored pumpkins and some natural materials, such as leaves, during autumn themed activities. In a small number of rooms, sensory play encouraged the children to experience and explore textures, such as cotton wool, sand, water, and oats.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to provide the children with opportunities to extend and develop their creativity. Providing the children with more choice around role play and creating in an individualised way with paints and junk art, will encourage them to develop creative and imaginative dispositions.
- It is advised that the educators use the children's individual folders to reflect their unique journey of learning, development, and achievements. Providing meaningful information about each child's personal interests, evolving learning needs, and cultural backgrounds will support the children's awareness of their developing abilities.
- The educators are advised to provide rich and regular opportunities for the children to explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language throughout the day. Regular and consistent use of storytelling, puppets, visuals, singing songs and rhyming with children in all rooms will support the development of their language and communication.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning required improvement.
- At the time of the inspection, the manager had contacted Better Start Quality Development Service to express an interest in availing of onsite mentoring support.
- The manager had started to conduct monthly meetings with the staff team. She recorded the minutes of the meetings and focused on the general matters arising in the setting. There were no opportunities for the educators to engage in self-evaluation and review.
- The manager had previously conducted supervision with the staff and had completed annual appraisals. An induction process was established for new staff.
- At the time of the inspection, the organisation and managerial structure of the setting did not support the smooth facilitation of systems and a shared vision across the team was not established.
- The transition into the setting was supported by inviting the child and their parents into the setting for a visit. A staggered approach to settling in was in place to support the children to settle into the setting. An electronic application was used to inform the parents about the policies and procedures and general matters related to the setting.
- Daily informal communication occurred between the educators and the parents at arrival and collection. The children's individual folders were shared with the parents each term. Monthly newsletters were provided to the parents with brief updates on the monthly theme and activities relating to each room.
- The transition between rooms in the setting was managed by organising visits so that the children could get to know the educators, the other children, and become familiar with the room. Parents were informed about this process.
- The transition to primary school was managed by discussing it with the children and by adding resources associated with school to the pre-school rooms. The manager collaborated with ten local primary schools that the children transition to, to record video footage to support the children's familiarity with their school. Visits were arranged for the children to go to their primary school with the manager prior to them leaving the setting to transition to school.
- The educators completed the *Mo Scéal* transition report and shared it with the parents to obtain consent before sharing with their child's primary school.

Actions advised

- It is advised that the manager organises an external review of the management structure and organisation of the setting to support the smooth facilitation of educational activities and to develop a vision that represents the practices in the setting. This will promote the establishment of appropriate and effective systems to support the development of quality practices across the setting.
- The manager is advised to develop strong pedagogical leadership in the setting. This will enhance quality pedagogical practices by promoting leadership roles and cascading the expertise throughout the setting. Engaging in mentoring support from Better Start and ongoing continuing professional development will promote this pedagogical leadership approach.
- It is advised that the manager strengthens the partnerships with parents in the setting. Welcoming parents into their child's learning room on a daily basis, at arrival and collection,

will enhance the development of relationships. Establishing formal opportunities for the key educators to discuss the children's learning and development in a professional capacity with the parents, will support two-way exchanges of information.

- To build on the transition practices established when the children are transitioning to primary school, it is advised that the manager adopts similar practices when the children are transitioning into the setting and between learning rooms. Obtaining valuable information about each child and sharing accessible information about the setting with the parents and children, will establish effective transition practices.

Summary of overall inspection

Area	Quality level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	Good
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	Requires Improvement
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	Good
Quality of management and leadership for learning	Requires Improvement

Language used in Early Years Education Inspection Reports

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in the setting using the language which is shown below.

Level	Description	Examples of descriptive terms
Excellent	**Provision that is excellent** is exemplary in meeting the needs of learners. This provision provides an example for other schools and settings of exceptionally high standards of provision.	Excellent; exemplary; outstanding; exceptionally high standard; with very significant strengths
Very good	**Provision that is very good** is very effective in meeting the needs of learners and is of a very high standard. There is potential to build on existing strengths to achieve an excellent standard.	Very good; of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful
Good	**Provision that is good** is effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to build on existing strengths in order to address the aspects to be developed and achieve a very good standard.	Good; of good quality; effective practice; competent; useful; commendable; good standard; strengths outweigh the shortcomings; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist
Requires improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires improvement to achieve a good standard** is not sufficiently effective in meeting the needs of learners. There is need to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is good or better.	Fair; less than effective; less than sufficient; evident weaknesses that are impacting on learning; experiencing difficulty; shortcomings outweigh strengths; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve
Requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard	**Provision that requires significant improvement to achieve a good standard** is not meeting the needs of learners. There is immediate need for significant action to address the areas of concern.	Weak; poor; ineffective; insufficient; unacceptable; experiencing significant difficulties; serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated; requiring significant change, development and improvement to be effective

The following resources can be used by ELC settings in their quality improvement:

Aistear Siolta Practice Guide

Department of Education Insights – Quality in Early Years Education webinars

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