An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre
Setting address	Clonaderg Ballinahown Offaly N37AR00
TUSLA registration number	TU2015OY053
DCEDIY number	23OY0144
Date of inspection	12-09-2024
Date of issue of report	09-01-2025

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 inspector 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	12-09-2024

Activities conducted during the Inspection

- Pre-inspection meeting with the setting owner/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 the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme session
- Interaction with children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting owner/manager and early years educators

Context of setting

Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre is located in the rural village of Ballinahown in Co. Offaly. In September 2022, the setting came under new management. The setting offers care and education to children availing of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the day of the inspection, the owner, three educators and twenty-five children were present in the setting. The early years setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised of the report; a response was not received from the setting.

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 very good.
- The setting had created a very warm and nurturing atmosphere. There was a strong sense of family as parents came into the setting to drop and collect their children. A few parents stayed to help settle their children into the setting and one parent stayed for a period during the morning supporting her child to form relationships and get to know the daily routine.
- Positive relationships had been established between educators and children through the use of the key person approach. The key person knew the children well, comforted them and acted as a secure base for children throughout the day. The key person was responsible for the care and education activities for their group of children.
- The inspection took place in early September and the children already knew the routine very well and most took ownership of their day, making plans for exploration and discovery. At times the educators engaged with the children enquiring about their plans and who they wished to play with. Children could be heard discussing their ideas with each other.
- There were minimal transitions within the daily routine as outdoor child initiated play was the main focus for learning and development. The children enjoyed extended periods of uninterrupted and purposeful play outdoors where they explored their interests and created daily experiences. On the day of the inspection there were a few periods of rain showers and the children freely moved between the open outdoor area and the covered area where they continued their play.
- The main transition period was a move to snack time and this period was very well prepared for the children with verbal notifications and reminders as time drew to a close. This supported all children to be well prepared for tidy-up time and moving indoors to eat their snack.
- The children were actively encouraged to explore their own identity and sense of self. Educators supported children to understand and express their own feelings. They took time to explain scenarios to the children, supported them to solve problems and guided them throughout various resolutions.
- The children were involved in some community events including a Tidy Towns project. They visited the local poly tunnel where they planted flowers, spoke with local people and interacted with some children from the local school.
- Most parents visited the setting during the year and shared their talents and knowledge. Previously a gardener, baker, storyteller and musician had come to the setting and

interacted with the children. The setting shared information with parents about local events and activities in the community.
- There were a few displays in the setting to support children to value themselves as individuals. These included the beginning of family walls and some self-portraits. Names and photographs were displayed on most coat hooks. On the day of the inspection there was a lot of conversation regarding the local Irish dancing classes and soccer club which children from the setting were involved in.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to further explore identity and belonging with the children, especially at this crucial time of year. Representation of all children through displays of themselves, their families and activities relevant to them in the community will begin this process.

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 was very good.
- The setting implemented a play-based curriculum with strong elements of children's emergent interests in the daily experiences. The curriculum offered hands-on learning experiences for the children. A curriculum statement underpinned by *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework outlined the ethos of the setting.
- Medium-term and short-term plans were in place in the setting. The short-term plans focused on children exploring the concept of 'all about me' to support their transition into the setting. The children had also explored caterpillars after finding them in the garden and demonstrating a strong interest in learning about the insect and how it lived. This offered a hands-on, concrete learning experience to the children and the educators supported this. These activities were not documented in the short-term plans.
- The educators used strength-based approaches to gather information and document the children's learning and development including celebratory events and occasions. Each child had a learning journal which was unique to them and recorded their learning story in the setting each year. The learning journals contained lots of photographs, captions of the child's voice and anecdotal notes on children's learning and development.
- The indoor learning environment and outdoor learning environments were open and inviting to all children. The educators had created a free-flow environment between the indoors and outdoors. On the day of the inspection the children spent long periods of time outdoors where they had access to open spaces, creative areas, sensory play, mud kitchens and small world play. The indoor learning environments also offered a variety of interest areas which were well laid out and accessible to the children. The use of loose parts, real life equipment and natural, wooden resources was commendable. The outdoor learning environment had organically grown and developed over the years.
- Play was the main medium for learning with children engaged in a variety of types including sensory play, imaginative play and construction play. The educators were skilled play partners and took time to observe the children in their play, expertly judging when to purposefully interact to enhance the learning experience and when to observe the children allowing them to control their own learning outcomes.
- The educators positively encouraged the children to extend their language, literacy and numeracy skills through play. The educators consistently used open-ended questions and comments to extend children's vocabulary. They repeated key words, introduced new concepts and encouraged children to explore ideas focused on numeracy and maths. The children heard numeracy language throughout the session as educators explored shells with them, counting and discussing size, shape, colour and texture. The children enjoyed categorising the shells and comparing them.
- An inclusive approach was evident in the setting. This ensured all children were afforded the opportunity to learn through their uniqueness and varying stages of development. The setting availed of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) as required and they had their own individualised goals set out in their individual learning plans. At the time of the inspection, the manager had begun the Leadership in Inclusion course, LINC.

Action advised

- The educators are advised to focus on including each child's unique and individual interests, learning needs and the overall emergent curriculum within the planning, assessment and observation documentation in the setting.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was excellent.
- All the children appeared as very happy, content and confident in their learning environment.
- Children were encouraged to be creative and invitations to explore art activities were purposefully planned for. The children expressed themselves very well through art and craft experiences exploring a variety of resources, materials and loose parts.
- On the day of the inspection the children enjoyed free movement between the indoor and outdoor learning environments. The outdoor area was created with the children as the main focus, and offered hiding spaces, natural sensorial exploration and risk taking opportunities for the children. An 'enchanted forest' provided the children with space to pick apples, explore animals and feel hidden from the rest of the world.
- The children enjoyed playing with water. They initiated the activity and a responsive educator supported them to create their play space. The children were busy using trays and tunnels to scoop and pour water. They problem solved how to create flow and pressure using the water at different heights. They added small world animals and other loose parts to the experience to extend their learning and provoke further discussion.
- Children learned through hands on, concrete learning experiences. The children had recently found a large amount of caterpillars in their outdoor garden and were keen to find out more about these creatures. To support this interest and further extend the learning the educators provided resources for the children including books, art materials and utensils ensuring the children could fully explore and discover new information about caterpillars. Art displays and photographs captured this learning experience.
- The children demonstrated a strong love for STEM. The educators supported this learning through meaningful and creative activities and ideas. These included construction play, science exploration, cooking and baking. Children expressed their interest in baking apple crumble for autumn and this was acknowledged by the educator. During the inspection a small group of children were observed making a 'walking beam'. They discussed how to make it longer, how to fix broken parts and how to ensure it was 'sturdy'. They sang and whistled while they worked and figured out the best way to transport various sized bricks and blocks.
- The children heard affirmations throughout the day. The children were encouraged to believe in themselves, persevere with difficult tasks and to problem solve and ask questions. Children were also encouraged to take risks. Some children could be heard confidently informing educators of their ability to walk on beams and climb the wooden frame.
- All children were developing their social skills, as was age and stage appropriate to them. They were very aware of their important place in the group and were establishing strong friendships early in their ECCE year. The educators further supported this skill development through modelling turn taking and independent problem solving. They offered reassurance to younger children and named their feelings for them, assisting and guiding them through overwhelming scenarios. Time for regulation, alone or guided was available to all children. This supported a calm and child-centred approach at all times.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was excellent.
- The educators were very committed and dedicated to the setting, the children and their families. They were very professional as they carried out their work.
- There was a strong sense of teamwork in the setting as educators complete their daily work. They communicated throughout the day and shared key information and reflections with each other. The role of the key person was crucial in ensuring all educators supported the children and it was very well executed throughout the day.
- The new owner/ manager was highly skilful in her role as leader in the setting. She was focused on maintaining a high standard of practice and encouraged her staff to reach this

standard also. An ethos of respect and growth were evident as educators' upskilled and engaged in continued professional development.

- The owner provided all educators with non-contact time. Educators effectively used this time to reflect, plan and complete paperwork.
- The new owner was focused on supporting staff wellbeing and developing the outdoor play environment. The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* steered her in developing these goals for the setting.
- The owner has created excellent relationships with the local school. The principal and teachers from the local primary school visited the setting to begin building relationships with the children. The educators completed the *Mo Scéal* template and shared it with parents to assist this transition period. The educators and children visited the primary school to familiarise children with their new setting.
- The educators communicated with parents using a range of strategies. Parents reported how much they enjoyed the open door policy and the daily conversations with educators. These occasions were nourished and cherished by all. The setting also used social media, a website and messaging applications to offer parents an insight into the daily activities and the curriculum in action.
- The transition into the setting had been very successful for all children, parents and families. This highly commendable practice involved encouraging parents to spend time in the setting with their child to settle them into the daily routine and ensure they felt settled and comfortable with their friends and educators. Open days, visiting periods, staggered drop offs and the use of key information regarding each individual child contributed to a successful settle-in period.

Summary of overall inspection

Area	Quality level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	Very good
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	Very good
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	Excellent
Quality of management and leadership for learning	Excellent

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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