An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)

Final Report

Setting name	Stepping Stones Crèche and Montessori
Setting address	30 Belfry Crescent Citywest Tallaght Dublin 24 D24YW63
TUSLA registration number	TU2015DS076
DCEDIY number	09DS0086
Date of inspection	03-04-2025
Date of issue of report	01-09-2025

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	02-04-2025 & 03-04-2025

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 six Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme sessions
- Interaction with children
- Interaction with early years educators
- Feedback meeting with the setting owner, the setting manager and three early years educators

Context of setting

Stepping Stones Crèche and Montessori is a privately operated Early Learning and Care (ELC) setting located in Dublin city. Established in 2006, the setting provides four morning and two afternoon ECCE sessions. Sixty-four children, ten early years educators, the setting owner and setting manager were present. 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.
- There was a very friendly and inviting atmosphere in the setting. The parents and children were warmly greeted on arrival.
- The daily routines were flexible to best meet the needs of the children. There was a very good balance between educator and child-led play and learning experiences.
- Transition times during the sessions were purposefully used to support the children's learning and development. The educators used verbal announcements and reminders, and visual schedules.
- The children enjoyed sitting together during snack times. Where effective educational practice was evident, educators sat with the children and engaged in conversations with them. Some rooms used a helper system to give out the lunches and the educators encouraged the children to tidy up once they were finished.
- The educators nurtured warm and positive relationships with the children and their families, with secure and close bonds forming between them. They skilfully adapted their practice to respond to each child's emotional needs, temperament, likes and dislikes.
- The educators used commendable strategies to value and celebrate the rich family heritages of both the children and the educator team, as well as the cultural diversity of the local community. These included storybooks, wall displays and celebrating events such as Diwali.
- There were many photographs on display of the children engaged in their play and learning experiences that helped to support the children's sense of belonging. Birthday, family and community displays were developed to support the children's sense of personal, group, family and community identity. Some of these learning strategies were not inclusive of all children and were not easily accessible for them to engage with.

Actions advised

- The educators are advised to place more learning value on snack times, by providing more opportunities for the children to develop their self-help, peer-help and care of environment

skills. Snack times can also be used more as social occasions and times to engage in conversations, thereby supporting the children's communication and language skills.
- Each key educator is advised to ensure that all children are represented on the family displays, and to ensure all visual learning aids used to support the children's sense of identity and belonging are continuously and easily accessible for the children to interact with and learn from. The use of group learning journals is encouraged.

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 good.
- The educators implemented a play-based curriculum that was informed by *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Particular emphases was placed on inclusive practice and supporting the children's language development.
- There was a curriculum statement that set out the overarching intent of the curriculum. The medium and short-term curriculum plans were informed by educator-initiated seasonal themes and events, and some of the children's emerging interests.
- Descriptive observation records were used to record some of the children's learning experiences. Learning journals were also used and included samples of the children's art work and some had photographs of the children engaged in play and learning experiences.
- The educators used playful and language-rich interactions with the children that were authentic, encouraging and added learning value, including early language acquisition and early mathematic skills.
- The indoor learning environments were well maintained and organised into interest areas that included sand trays, home areas and libraries. Some mark-making resources were accessible to the children.
- The outdoor learning environment complemented the indoor learning rooms. The various climbing apparatus provided risk-rich whole-body physical activity.
- Play was used as the main medium for the children to interact with, explore and make sense of the world. A variety of play experiences were available to the children that included manipulative, creative, construction, socio-dramatic, symbolic and multi-sensory play.
- Commendable strategies were in place to support the inclusion of all children in the daily activities. In partnership with parents, they optimised support for children with additional needs through their engagement with external agencies that included an Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) specialist.

Actions advised

- The management team and educators are advised to review the curriculum policy, and to include a set of procedures for the curriculum planning and assessment is encouraged. Each key educator is further advised to record their key child's play interests and strengths and ensure these periodically inform the short-term curriculum plans.
- Each key educator is advised to extend the content of the learning records to include plans to support the children's next steps in learning. The content of the learning journals needs to be more representative of each child's unique learning journey; include the children's observations/learning records and their 'Wow' moments.
- The educators are advised to include more real and natural resources in the learning environments, including some that represent the cultural-diversity of the groups. They are further advised to make additional art and craft materials freely accessible to the children.

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

- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements was very good.
- The children demonstrated a positive sense of wellbeing and displayed much enjoyment. This was most evident during child-led and outdoor play, and during optional educator-led whole-body action songs.
- The children's voices were captured through the educators' use of anecdotal notetaking and the inclusion of the children's quotations on the children's artwork and in some of their learning journals.
- The children were highly motivated and displayed many positive learning dispositions. While small groups of children played in the sand trays, they were displaying sustained engagement, imagination, co-operation, experimentation and problem-solving skills. Some

of the children's assessment records did not include the many dispositions they were developing during their open-ended play and learning experiences.
- The children experienced success through their informal conversations with the educators and viewing their displayed artwork and the content of their learning journals. The children were not afforded formal opportunities to comment on their past learning experiences.
- The children were developing appropriate social skills, including the ability to listen to one another, express empathy and to share with one another.
- The children expressed themselves creatively through their body language, mark-making, action songs, dancing, playdough modelling and storytelling, and used language to interpret experiences, ask questions, make requests and problem solve.
- The children were making sense of their world through playful exploration of the carefully prepared learning environments. Some children explored their schematic play interests of transporting, connecting/disconnecting, sorting, containment and orientation.

Actions advised

- The key educators are advised to highlight the learning power of the children's play and engagement in creative projects by including the many dispositions and skills they are developing during these experiences as descriptive narratives in the children's learning journals. They are further advised to share this rich information with parents.
- To further support the children's sense of identity as competent and confident learners, each key educator is advised to provide formal opportunities for children to revisit and comment on their past learning experiences. The children's reflective comments could be included in their learning journals and participate in implementing the plans to support the next steps in their learning journey. In addition, recap and recall sessions could be used.

Area 4: Quality of management and leadership for learning

- The quality of management and leadership for learning was very good.
- There was a very strong ethos of teamwork. The owner and manager established formal and informal strategies to support the educators. In addition, there was a supervisor appointed to support the team daily.
- Non-contact time was flexibly built into each day's schedule to enable the educators to carry out their planning and assessment tasks.
- The educator team were highly committed to engaging with continuing professional development opportunities. Topics covered in recently attended courses included resilience, supporting children with additional needs, diversity, inclusion, sensory processing and promoting physical activity.
- Formal staff meetings were conducted monthly and included general information sharing and were used to support group reflections.
- The setting had engaged with Better Start Quality Development service to support their internal evaluation for quality development. They had yet to establish a formal approach to continuing this internal review work into the future.
- Information was shared with parents by management and educators through a software application, parent evenings, meetings, and optimising drop off and collection times. The majority of the children's observation/learning records were shared with parents at the end of the school year.
- Parents' handbooks and child-centred induction phases were among the strategies used by educators to support the children's transition into the setting.
- The children's transition to primary school was supported through visits by the local primary school principal, and use of storybooks, and play props including uniforms. The management team were exploring the use of transition forms to support parents to share information about their children's learning progress with primary school personnel.

Actions advised

- To build on the review work for quality development achieved to date, the management team and educators are advised to establish a more robust, re-occurring approach to internal evaluations. The use of the full suite of self-evaluation tools of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is encouraged. They are further advised to re-instate a key person approach, and to establish procedures for greater oversight of the setting's pedagogical practices.

- The educators are advised to share the children's learning progress information more frequently with all parents. They are further advised to progress their plans to share information with parents to support the children's transition to primary school. The use of the *Mo Scéal* resources from National Council for Curriculum and Assessment are encouraged.

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	Good
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	Very good
Quality of management and leadership for learning	Very good

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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