

What happens during the accreditation visit?

In the third part of a series of articles, **Barbara Isaacs** examines what happens when the assessor visits your school.

Preparation

Once the MEAB office has received your self-assessment form, a date will be arranged with you and the appointed assessor. In preparation for the visit the assessor will contact you to introduce him/herself and to finalize the details of the accreditation visit. They will also transfer all the relevant information from your self assessment form to their A8 Assessor form. It is important that the information is received electronically so that much of the detail can be transferred by cutting and pasting rather than retyping your document.

The assessor will have been given a web link to your Ofsted report and will prepare a list of issues to check, observe or discuss with you during the visit. It should not be necessary for you to have to send them any further information but having the required documentation ready for the accreditation visit would be helpful. (A required list is available under the MSA section of www.montessori.org.uk). It is very likely that most assessors will use their computer to document their visit - some will record their observations manually whilst others will type them directly into their computer.

The Visit

During the visit the assessors will want to see your prepared environment, both inside and outside and speak to the teachers, parents and children. They will make observations of the children engaged in the work-cycle and will want to see how:

- the prepared environment supports the children's freedom of movement and choice
- the materials and activities inside and outside meet the developmental



Toddlers enjoying activities in the 'Eagles' room

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- needs of all the children working within vertical grouping
- the children engage with the prepared environment – are they independent and able to concentrate in a harmonious learning environment, do they have opportunities for individual as well as small group activities, are they given help when needed, are they extended in their learning, are they given opportunities to express and share their ideas with peers as well as staff?
- the staff demonstrate their trust and respect in the individual child - are they supportive of children's independence and learning during the work-cycle
- they document children's learning and use their records to plan for the individual needs and how they share these documents with colleagues as

well as parents and children

- they work as a team for the well-being of the children
- they communicate with the children, with parents and amongst themselves
- they model positive behaviour for the children

The assessors will also want to see evidence of the statements regarding your practice, administration and management of your setting which you have made in your self-evaluation form, and this is where your documents will come very useful. Having them available and organised as per the given checklist will be a bonus and it will mean that they will be able to spend longer observing the children in your setting.

Generally speaking, they will spend most of the morning observing both classroom and outdoor learning and talking to children, staff and parents. They might participate in your lunch time, as they will be keen to see how the children's practical life skills transfer to everyday life. They will then peruse your documents and prepare to feed back to the management at the end of the afternoon session. The feedback will be

Case Study

Phoenix Montessori Nursery

Clare Harris of Phoenix Montessori Nursery, Kings Lynn, Norfolk describes the day of the accreditation visit.

Just before 08.00 a.m. our assessor arrived and immediately put us at our ease with her friendly yet professional manner. We are a day nursery with three different rooms, accommodating children from three months to five years old. I was unsure how our assessor would want to plan her day, so we began by showing her round the nursery and introducing her to the staff in each of the rooms. During initial discussion, we invited the assessor to join us for lunch and she accepted. She decided to base



Staff and Children at Phoenix Montessori

herself and her laptop at a spare station in our office. She felt she would like complete freedom to move from one room to another at her leisure after she had initially spoken to some of the parents as they arrived. She selected one parent who had three children with us right through the age groups, one after the other, so she knew us very well. The other was a new parent on her child's first day, who was able to talk the assessor through our induction procedure.

Our Under Threes staff are attending in-house Montessori Theory and Practice Training, but some of them still felt apprehensive about being assessed. Christine, our Manager, says she reassured the staff by telling them to just run their rooms as they usually do. She also reminded them how well Montessori fits into the EYFS framework. The Room Leader of Fledglings, (our baby room) said: 'I felt very proud at how well the Montessori assessment went. The assessor asked me numerous questions about the running of the room and was very impressed with our heuristic play – the look on her face said it all!'

Charlene, who runs Owls, our nursery school room says, 'My team were feeling very nervous, because they all felt that accreditation would be a fantastic achievement for us and they were anxious to do well. Our assessor's warm and approachable manner soon dispelled our worries. In fact the whole day turned to be relaxed for us as we went about our normal activities. Our assessor pointed out some of our strengths along the way, which reassured us.

'At the end of the day during feedback our smiles grew and grew and our heads were held high as we were told how high our standards are.'

During feedback, both strengths and weaknesses are mentioned. We had plans to improve the activities and resources in the garden, but as this was an area highlighted for improvement, we have now extended our plan considerably and we will soon have a truly superb garden. We believe that the pursuit of excellence is a continuous process of evaluation and improvement and this is why we were keen to try for accreditation. It was very rewarding that someone quite independent assessed our practice and found it to be of a very high standard. All the staff agreed it was a worthwhile experience.

The Fledglings (babies) classroom



Children enjoying the outside space.

the basis for the report they will prepare following the visit. They will also make suggestions for possible changes to your practice, and these will be incorporated into your report.

Hints and tips

Most settings are anxious about the accreditation visit and strive to show their nursery or school in the best possible light. Do make sure that your environment is well organised and that all the equipment is complete and ready for use. However, my advice is – do not change your routine for the sake of the visit – it will be evident from the children's behaviours because their sense of order will be disturbed. As you know only too well, all changes to the environment and routines have to be carefully considered and undertaken at times to cause the least disruption to the children and to the setting. And do remember to involve all the children in your plans, once all staff have considered and discussed the proposed changes extensively.

The accreditation visit should be viewed as an opportunity to have your setting evaluated by a peer who will make suggestions on improvements to your practice. The improvements should be discussed and considered by all staff and should be viewed as part of the setting's ongoing endeavours to provide the best possible learning environment for the children attending. They should also serve as a basis for consideration for continued professional development for the nursery/school team. ■

Barbara Isaacs, Senior Accreditation Officer and Academic Director, MCI