

# Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board

## School Accreditation

This report is prepared following two accreditation visits made on behalf of the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. It considers how far the school follows the criteria set out in "The Guide to the EYFS in Montessori Settings". The second visit sought to assess the progress made following recommendations set out in the report from the first visit.

The report does not address the standards and quality issues which are the responsibility of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which reports separately. Also the report does not provide any assessment of financial aspects of the school.

### **Rigg Farm Montessori School**

Briscoe Rigg Lane, Beckwithshaw, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG3 1QY  
28 June and 26 September 2011

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged two and a half to five years

#### **Description of the school**

Rigg Farm Montessori School, which opened in 1994, is a privately owned nursery located in a rural setting on the outskirts of Beckwithshaw, North Yorkshire. The school consists of a single, open-plan classroom in a purpose built, single storey extension of a farm house. Since the first visit the setting has been extended to provide additional classroom space by creating free-flow access to an adjoining room. There is a separate cloakroom and toilet area, and children have access to extensive grassed and hard-surfaced outdoor play areas, nature gardens and allotment. Other areas house a range of farm animals, including pigs, chickens and goats, which are cared for by the staff and children.

The nursery is open each weekday, during term time, between 09:15 and 16:00. Children may attend on a full or part-time basis. The school is registered for a maximum of 26 children aged between two and a half and five years, with 62 children currently on roll.

The school caters for children from the local community and surrounding villages, and supports children with learning difficulties and disabilities and English as an additional language.

The school employs eight staff, including the owner, three of whom hold recognized Montessori qualifications, with two others working towards a Montessori Diploma.

#### **Summary and conclusion.**

Rigg Farm Montessori School provides a unique experience for children, offering a comprehensive Montessori experience within an environment that offers exceptional access to the outdoor environment and nature. Staff are highly committed to the Montessori philosophy and the principles of freedom of choice and following the child.

Creative thinking is actively encouraged and supported with a focus on first-hand concrete experiences, and well timed focused presentations encourage children to continue to

develop their independence. Observation, assessment and planning are good and have been further improved following a review undertaken as part of the accreditation process. The setting is very well resourced in all areas of the curriculum, both indoors and outside, and recent changes to layout of the classroom have greatly increased children's access to creative activities.

The development of independence is a priority and is promoted extremely well with the two and a half hour work cycle providing ample opportunity for children to follow their own lines of enquiry. However, consideration should be given to maintaining the length of the work cycle for older children when new children join the nursery.

Staff work very well as a team and professional development is greatly encouraged. Learning environments are well organized and carefully maintained to facilitate children's freedom and independence. Partnership with parents is outstanding with many opportunities for staff and parents to share their knowledge and understanding of the children. The principal provides very strong leadership for the well qualified, experienced staff. Regular staff meetings and annual appraisals allow staff to reflect upon, and review, current practice and priorities for development.

***The school provides an education which follows the principles of the Montessori approach and environment. This merits accreditation by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. The school has successfully achieved the points for action recommended on the first visit. Consideration should be given to the following points for further development:***

- Ensure the length of the work cycle is maintained for older children when new children join the nursery.

### **Philosophy**

At Rigg Farm Montessori School staff are highly committed to implementing Montessori philosophy. The main aim is to focus on the uniqueness of each child within an exciting, stimulating, challenging environment allowing them to develop at their own pace. The child's individuality is paramount and staff have an excellent understanding of the need to follow the child. The Montessori materials are seen as a springboard to other activities. The importance of these materials is never underestimated but staff only introduce new activities when they believe the child is ready and interested. The focus is on first hand, concrete experiences developed from children's interests. Staff expertly extend children's experiences by open-questioning and the provision of a rich variety of additional resources. The adult's role is to facilitate, creating an environment that stimulates independence, responsibility and risk taking.

Monthly staff meetings and daily informal conversations provide the basis for an ongoing dialogue about Montessori philosophy, practice, future development of the setting and children's response to the materials. As a result staff have a deep, shared understanding of the school's educational principles, goals and philosophy.

A comprehensive operational handbook outlines classroom procedures, including the fortnightly rotation of staff around curriculum areas, staff development, daily routines and processes for planning, assessment and recording. A recent review, carried out between the two accreditation visits, has removed obsolete policy documents and ensured that all staff are now

aware of, and working from, the most up-to-date versions.

The school's website and supporting documentation provide parents with a detailed overview of Montessori.

### **Learning and Development**

Staff actively encourage creative thinking, exploration and experimentation through excellent sustained shared thinking and open questioning, extending and developing children's ideas and providing additional resources as necessary. Children are free to follow their own lines of inquiry, with adults providing support only when necessary to extend or develop children's learning. Adult-initiated activities are kept to a minimum, but when used are focused and well-chosen to match the child's developmental needs and interests. Adult interactions are supportive and well timed to extend children's learning. They are brief and focused encouraging children to continue independently. Teacher-led activities are clear, well-paced and engaging. First hand, concrete experiences are expertly used to extend children's knowledge and understanding, for example encouraging them to use reference books to identify meadow flowers picked from the garden.

All staff contribute to planning, using their knowledge of individual children to guide them. Planning acts as a guide to next steps, with adults adapting their plans in response to children's spontaneous interests. Outstanding provision of activities and resources allows each child to follow their own interest and needs, indoors or outside. The indoor environment contains a wide range of Montessori activities, sequentially arranged on open shelving allowing ease of access. Staff rotation ensures fresh eyes assess the provision within each area every fortnight.

The outdoor area is outstanding and provides an extremely flexible learning environment that can be adapted to meet the children's spontaneous interests. Resources are generally open-ended, facilitating exploration and experimentation whilst presenting ample opportunity for children to develop in all areas of learning.

Current assessment procedures result in informative and personalised books, and contribute to 'On Track' summative assessment sheets provided by the local authority. Since the first accreditation visit these systems have been streamlined to avoid unnecessary duplication and staff are now beginning to work well with the new formats.

Provision for children with additional needs is well-managed through individual education plans, knowledgeable support from the SENCO and close co-operation and communication within the staff team. The outstanding facilities, and excellent support provided by staff, ensure the needs of every child are met.

### **Prepared Environment: resources and materials**

Since the first accreditation visit the setting has been extended to provide additional classroom space by creating free-flow access to an adjoining room, allowing easier access to the materials and greater freedom and independence. More space is now available for floor activities and it is easier to move around the environment, particularly for younger children.

An extensive range of practical life activities both indoors and outside provide for children's needs across the full two and a half to five years age range and promote high levels of independence and self-help skills.

Rigg Farm Montessori School is extremely well resourced. The classroom is well planned with open shelves allowing easy access to the wide range of materials available in each curriculum area.

Changes to the layout of the classroom since the first accreditation visit have increased the provision for creative activities, and access to a far wider range of creative materials, including musical instruments. The introduction of an atelier (art studio) in the style of the Reggio Emilia method has greatly enhanced the opportunity for children to express themselves creatively.

The excellent range of sensorial materials are in very good condition, laid out sequentially and suitable for the age range. Children are actively encouraged to use the materials creatively. A good range of Montessori cultural materials is available, although the children appear to prefer the first hand, concrete experiences afforded by the garden, farm and natural areas. Children have many opportunities to explore the natural world, for example using pond viewers and reference cards to observe and identify frogs, tadpoles, beetles and water boatmen. An appropriate range of maths and literacy materials, with additional resources to complement the Montessori activities are available, laying the foundations for later learning. The outdoor area is outstanding, offering access to a wide range of resources across all areas of the curriculum, leading to a rich variety of child-initiated activities.

**Montessori practice: independence, including independence at home, freedom, respect**

Promoting the development of independence is a priority at Rigg Farm. Children are able to follow and develop their own lines of enquiry, with staff providing additional resources in response to children's requests and interests. Staff work very hard to create an orderly, accessible environment, whilst maintaining a natural, spontaneous atmosphere that stimulates rather than stifles exploration, experimentation and risk-taking.

The structure of the work cycle, together with the adults' commitment to following the child, ensures children are free to choose whether to work alone or in groups. Free flow access throughout much of the session further enhances the children's opportunities to choose freely. Large-scale practical life activities encourage co-operation and independence, allowing younger children to access a wider range of activities at an appropriate level. Practical life activities outside are based on real tasks, e.g. feeding the pigs and collecting eggs from the chickens. Staff deployment is excellent with teachers responsible for specific areas, but free to move if necessary providing excellent support and supervision.

The morning starts with circle time which includes registration, a brief 'show and tell' session and welcome song. Not all children arrive at the same time, so some are sitting for several minutes before circle time starts and consideration should be given to the introduction of independent registration and starting work cycle as soon as children arrive.

Older children act as guides, teachers and role-models for younger children, supporting the development of respect for themselves, for others and for the environment. Children are encouraged to think about what they would like to do and are guided towards those activities.

Staff at the nursery work hard to promote parental understanding of the importance of developing independence in children by explaining the Montessori philosophy during parent information evenings and celebrating children's achievements at the end of each day.

### **Montessori practice: classroom management**

The environment and the resources within it are well prepared and maintained, ensuring children have access to a wide range of appropriate and challenging activities. The emphasis at Rigg Farm is on children learning spontaneously through self-selected activities and therefore flexibility is an important feature of planning, with staff collaborating effectively to ensure all areas of the curriculum are covered.

A two and a half hour work cycle provides ample opportunity for the children to follow their own lines of enquiry and staff are expert at supporting this. Children benefit from the freedom to move from inside to outside throughout the work cycle and staff work exceptionally well as a team, moving readily from one part of the setting to another to provide appropriate supervision. Children move freely from one activity to the next, completing each cycle of activity before moving on. Adults facilitate children's choices without imposing their own ideas.

The allocation of responsibility for curriculum areas to different staff on a rotational basis allows fresh ideas and original resources to be brought in and ensures every member of staff is able to work with every child. A key worker system is used but this is not unnecessarily conspicuous: adults are there to support children's emotional needs, and to facilitate their activities, but do not impose their presence upon the children.

When there are new children in the school the work cycle is shortened for all children. Consideration should be given to maintaining the length of the work cycle at all times for older children.

### **Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records**

Children's safety and well-being are seen as a priority and regular checks are carried out to maintain a hazard-free environment. A comprehensive review of all policies has been carried out during the accreditation process to ensure they reflect current practice. Overall responsibility for the management of the setting and staff deployment rests with the principal, but staff members are allocated additional responsibilities (such as health and safety management and SENCO). Regular staff meetings provide an effective forum for discussion, reflection and self-evaluation.

Staff work very hard to create an orderly, accessible environment, whilst maintaining a natural, spontaneous atmosphere that stimulates rather than stifles exploration, experimentation and risk-taking. Observation forms an integral part of the daily routine with all staff making regular observations on key children and others and making excellent use of photographs to record children's achievements.

Close liaison with parents is fostered through informal conversation as children arrive. The principal makes herself available at this time, and parents know that they can speak to their child's key worker at any time. Information for parents is outstanding and staff actively encourage the promotion of independence at home. The informative website, regular newsletters, open door policy and daily slide shows in the cloakroom area keep parents up to date with events and developments within the setting and provide an overview of the day's activities.

Reports are provided at the end of each term, and give a brief overview of children's learning and development, linked to the six areas of the Foundation Stage curriculum. A recently introduced format also includes an indication of next steps.

### **Staffing**

The proprietor provides strong leadership to the excellent team of experienced practitioners. Staff are very well qualified, with three holding formal Montessori qualifications and a further two currently studying for the Montessori diploma. Staff understanding of Montessori principles and practice is outstanding, and there are many opportunities for staff to discuss, develop and update their knowledge through ongoing professional development and training.

Following a recent review, the staff induction pack now contains an introduction to Montessori to ensure new staff are provided with a sound grounding in the philosophy, aims and goals of the school.

A written staffing structure clearly identifies the roles of individual staff members, and a thorough review – carried out during the accreditation process – has ensured that all policy documents reflect current practice.

Annual staff appraisals encourage reflective practice and accurately identify training needs, with staff encouraged to attend a wide range of Montessori and other training throughout the year. Staff report that they greatly value and appreciate the training opportunities, and the impact it has on their practice.

Agendas and minutes for the monthly staff meetings show that a wide range of issues – provision, planning, assessment, training, administration, regulations, liaison with parents and social events – are discussed and well documented, providing a clear and accessible record of ideas, decisions and responsibilities.

Reflective practice and ongoing self-evaluation lay the foundations for continuous improvement, and the proprietor has identified several areas for future development, including working with professional artists to develop the creative curriculum.

Name of Assessor: Chris Manville

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