



# **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" (2008). The second visit sought to assess the progress made on the 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.

### **St Thomas More Montessori Pre-school**

South Road, Saffron Walden, Essex CB11 3DW

Date of the first accreditation visit: 27 January 2012

Date of the second accreditation visit: 19 April 2012

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged two to five years.

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

St Thomas More Montessori Pre-school is located in the grounds of St Thomas More Catholic Primary School, Essex. The purpose-built premises consists of a single classroom (with carpeted, solid floor) and kitchen areas, toilet facilities for both staff and children, staff kitchen, office and a large storage cupboard. There is a dedicated outside area for the nursery children, who also have access to the main school playgrounds when the primary children are not using them.

The setting is open term time only and runs morning and afternoon sessions, Monday to Friday, with some of the children staying all day. The morning session runs from 8.30 to 13.00 and the afternoon from 12.30 to 15.00. The school is registered for 30 children aged two to five years old. The number of children attending varies from day to day, with a total of 53 currently enrolled. There is provision for children with special educational needs.

The pre-school is one of four run as a charity in conjunction with a board of trustees. The principal is in regular attendance but the day to day running is organized by a manager, with a team of seven part-time staff. The principal and manager both have full Montessori qualifications; the principal also has a degree in Childhood and Youth Studies and Early Years Professional Status. Three other members of staff hold full Montessori diplomas, one member of staff has Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and two others have level 2 childcare qualifications. The QTS and one of the level 2 childcare assistants are working towards their full Montessori qualification.



## Summary and conclusion

St Thomas More Pre-school provides a beautiful, nurturing environment for the children to grow and learn in. The new building and outside area encourage the children to treat both environments with respect and feel they have ownership of the school. The staff are committed to Montessori ideals and are supported by the parents; the staff's work is much appreciated by the parents. Parents all commented on how approachable the staff are and this partnership is a real strength of the school. The setting also has an excellent relationship with the primary school, the head teacher being a member of the pre-school's board of trustees.

St Thomas More Montessori Pre-school provides excellent learning opportunities for the children. They are confident and polite and obviously enjoy their environment, both inside and out. They access the activities under the guidance of staff who record their achievements and encourage them, through shared sustained thinking, to achieve their potential. The staff are always actively developing new ways to support and extend the children's learning, following the principles of Montessori education.

Since the initial visit, the pre-school has introduced a system to monitor children at the snack table and developed its outside space further by improving the music shed. It has also introduced a new system which sees the managers taking responsibility for staff appraisals. All the recommendations in the Action Plan have been implemented and at present there are no further points for development. Activities, resources and procedures in the setting are kept under constant review, as detailed in the school development plan which is regularly updated. The team is managed very efficiently, is highly qualified and experienced and committed to on-going staff development. This, together with the excellent partnership with parents, is a real strength of the setting.

***The school provides an education in accordance with the principles of the Montessori approach and environment and merits accreditation by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board.***

***The school has successfully achieved the points for action recommended on the first visit, and should continue working towards best practice.***

### **Philosophy:**

The pre-school has a clear, written mission statement with aims and objectives that can be found in the prospectus; these are regularly reviewed. The partnership with parents which includes parent forum meetings ensures that parents are actively involved in sharing the setting's goals and philosophy. Regular communication with parents via emails and newsletters extends the children's learning into the home and parents talk informally to the staff on a daily basis regarding their child's progress, creating a shared understanding of the Montessori approach.

The school wants to develop children's independence, instil a joy for learning and assist them to achieve their potential. This was evident from the support and guidance that the knowledgeable staff gave to the children during the visits. The environment is arranged to encourage plenty of opportunities for self-initiated learning and children feel confident to ask for help if needed.



### **Learning and Development:**

The managers of all four nurseries meet at the start of the academic year to discuss planning; staff at St. Thomas More also hold half termly meetings and have informal discussions at the end of each day. The long term planning shows continuous provision for each area of the curriculum.

The school uses the seasons and the children's interests to develop themes throughout the year. At the time of the first visit, the children had just celebrated Chinese New Year and there was a display of dragons that the children had made. There was also an on-going theme looking at skeletons as a result of one child's interest in the book 'Funny Bones'. The use of the school's recently acquired light box has greatly enhanced this topic. During the second and final visit, the displays had changed to once again reflect the season and there were photos and comments from the children on the topic of vegetables. The children had clearly enjoyed making vegetable soup in the classroom. A light box was being used to enhance the topic of colour mixing. Two children were examining small pieces of different coloured plastic on the light box, laying the pieces on top of each other to observe the different colours. A group of children in the art and craft area were making cardboard castles, inspired by a recent donation of turreted cardboard boxes. The class had also been finding out about the flora and fauna of Australasia and one parent had brought in a didgeridoo for the children to see. Rotation of resources in the setting ensure that the children are kept engaged with their environment.

The majority of the learning observed during the visits was spontaneous and child-led. The children move freely between the inside and outside environments and are well supported by staff. All areas of the Montessori curriculum are accessible throughout the work cycle. Presentations are carried out calmly, with staff giving children the time to complete their cycle of activity without interruption.

The school's Keep Track computer system enables staff to make presentations and immediately transfer observations and comments to individual children's records, although staff carry out written observations as well. The system allows staff to easily link Montessori activities to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and to plan individual children's next steps of learning. Photographs can be transferred to this system and key achievements are shared with parents in individual Learning Journey Sharing Books. Longer narrative observations are also carried out and all observations are shared between staff. There is a key person system in place but children are free to work with any member of staff.

Both children with special educational needs and parents are well supported by staff and the school liaises with outside agencies when necessary.

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

The newly built classroom is spacious, light and airy with plenty of room for floor work. The open shelves allow children access from either side of the units and are at a height that even the smallest child can reach. Resources are organized into Montessori curriculum areas of learning and are of excellent quality, with a good range of materials that are regularly rotated.



They are suitable for the age and stage of development of the children attending and include plenty of tactile materials and puzzles for the younger members of the classroom. Art work is displayed at child height, often with quotes from the children on their work. There are sufficient resources for several children to work simultaneously in one area.

The outside area, which the children helped to design, is covered with astroturf, allowing the children to play outside in all weathers without getting muddy. The area contains a slide, large play area, sandpit and a chicken coop with two hens that the children care for. The chicks were incubated by the children and eggs are used in cookery activities. There is also a 'Bundle Barn' – a shed which is used as a soft play area. Unfortunately a leak in the roof meant it was not in use on the day of the first visit. This had been repaired by the time the second visit took place and the children enjoyed safe, energetic play here.

A covered area contains activities from each Montessori curriculum area, bringing the inside environment to the outside. During the course of the first visit, the school received a delivery of a new tricycle and rickshaw which gave both staff and children the opportunity to develop their practical skills while putting the pieces together. The children were able to use this equipment and other bikes and trikes later on in the main school playground. In the time between the initial and final visits the setting had improved the 'Harmony House,' (music shed) in the garden by adding astroturf to the floor, more musical instruments and a couple of chairs, making the shed a lot cosier and more inviting.

There is a small 'Forest School' that the children have the option to attend during the week. The principal and manager want to continue to develop the outdoor area further as part of their ongoing commitment to providing activities that will engage the children's interest.

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

The work cycle which is a minimum of three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon gives children plenty of opportunity to work independently either as individuals, pairs or small groups. They are able to move freely between the inside and outside environments during the course of the day; older children can manage their personal care and put on their coats with younger children supported and encouraged by staff. They are able to complete a cycle of activity and return work to the shelves. Children help to prepare the snack and are free to access the snack table whenever they choose. The children happily assist each other at the snack table and during activities. They take turns while waiting for an activity to become available and help to keep the classroom clean by sweeping, washing up their plates and cups after snack and generally tidying away.

Children staying all day and the few children coming for just the afternoon session, join the primary school children for lunch. As almost half the children at the pre-school eventually move on to the primary school, this gives them an opportunity to become familiar with the routine of school lunches. They manage their crockery and cutlery well and clear up after themselves and staff sit and chat to the children whilst they have lunch.

The staff model positive behaviour that encourages the children to treat each other and the environment with respect.

Ideas on how to promote independence at home are given to parents either verbally or via the



Learning Journey Sharing Book. One parent reported that her daughter had begun to dress herself in the morning. These positive achievements are always shared and enhance the child's feelings of self esteem.

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

The long work cycle allows the children plenty of free movement between both environments. Staff move around the classroom or outside as they are needed, working with any of the children, not necessarily just those in their key person group, and the children enjoy the benefits of vertical grouping. All areas are well managed and maintained. After the initial visit, the setting put in place a system to monitor the snack table. Name tags are available for the children to post into a small 'post box' so that staff can see immediately who has had snack and who has not. Younger children or those who cannot yet recognise their name are supported by staff and older children, and helped to find their name tag.

The setting offers a variety of extracurricular activities that includes French, yoga, music and the Forest School. During the first visit, the children were invited to go to a French lesson; they had complete choice as to whether or not to attend and the group that chose to go did so with the minimum of fuss and without disruption to the work cycle of their peers.

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

All staff have had safeguarding, first aid and risk assessment training with risk assessments being carried out both inside and out on a daily basis. Staff share the responsibility of looking after the classroom, making sure that materials are clean and tidy before the start of each session.

It is the key person's responsibility to maintain the records of individual children and ensure that observations carried out by other members of staff are added to the records. The key person and manager both liaise with parents, who are very satisfied with the feedback they receive on their child's progress. Links with home are good: for example, fathers in particular are encouraged to sign up to take part in reading sessions. The school organises two drop-in sessions a year, in October and February/March with a more structured parents' evening in the summer term especially for children moving on to school. These are timed to coincide with the primary school's parents' evenings.

The Learning Journey Sharing Book provides a means of two way communication between the school and parents. Parents are encouraged to add photos and significant achievements are shared with the parents via the book. The school issues a half-termly newsletter detailing upcoming events and the manager also sends out a weekly email.

Parents receive detailed written reports at the end of the year and when the child leaves for school. The next setting also receives this, together with a Transition Grid showing relevant planning. This helps the next setting to see what the pre-school considers to be the next steps in the child's development.

**Staffing:**

The manager has responsibility for the day to day running of the setting but the principal is actively involved and was included as a member of staff on the day of the initial visit. She feels it important to allow the managers to develop their own leadership qualities, so does not interfere in the daily running of the setting. The principal and manager both have full Montessori qualifications with the principal also holding a degree in Childhood and Youth Studies. Three other members of staff have just completed their Montessori Level 4 diplomas and two more are about to embark on their Montessori studies. The principal runs Montessori training courses and, as well as members of her staff, several parents are also participating in the training. She is also planning to run parenting classes in the near future. The manager is SENCO trained.

All staff are first aiders and have safeguarding children training. The principal and manager recently attended a developmental movement play workshop; this led to the introduction of the soft play area in the 'Bundle Barn'.

There is a thorough induction process and job descriptions are presently under review. All staff receive a handbook as part of their induction which includes school policies and procedures. Staff meetings are minuted and include any significant point of action that comes up during the informal end of day discussions. There is a system of peer observations that feeds into the staff appraisals. Since the initial visit the setting has, together with the other nurseries in the group, radically overhauled the appraisal system, re-drafting the documentation on several occasions to the satisfaction of all concerned. Appraisals are now carried out by the manager although staff have the option to talk to the owner as well if they wish. So far the system appears to be working well, staff are happy with the changes, and it will encourage reflective practice in the future.

The school is run as a charity and the board of trustees has responsibility for agreeing the budget for major items of equipment with no reasonable request turned down.

This dedicated team of practitioners is committed to the ethos and philosophy of Montessori and their practice is helping the children at St Thomas More Pre-school grow and develop into independent, caring learners.

Name of Assessor: Margot Best

Dates of reports:      First visit – 28 January 2012  
                                    Second visit – 21 April 2012