

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) and subsequent 2012 revisions. 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.

Wharfedale Montessori School

Strid Cottage, Bolton Abbey, Skipton, North Yorks BD23 6AN
Date of first re-accreditation visit: 3 July 2012
Date of second re-accreditation visit: 19 November 2012

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 3 months to 11 years

Date of previous accreditation visit by MEAB: January 2009

Description of the school

Wharfedale school is situated in an area of outstanding natural beauty and special scientific interest; it has been open for twenty-three years and offers care and education to children from 3 months to 11 years. The school has three departments – the Wharfedale Babies (birth to 3 years), The Children's House with facilities for pre-school children, and the Primary School.

The Children's House comprises two classrooms and square middle hallway. The children have free access all through the ground floor of the residential property. Outside, there are large woodlands and grassed gardens, with a tarmac playground for primary, and a small sports field. The large tarmac driveway with zebra crossing provides for opportunities for ride-on toys. The younger children also have a planting garden, and small tarmac enclosed area which is directly accessible from the Children's House. There is climbing equipment on both parts of the site. Hens and cats wander around the garden.

Fifty yards away there is a purpose built, newly constructed wooden cabin, housing the Primary school and comprising a large lobby area and lavatory facilities leading into a beautiful, light, well-organised room with a kitchen area and small IT area which is used by children attending the school.

Wharfedale babies is situated in a nearby small converted Victorian school with access to one large room plus modern fully equipped kitchen and baby change/toilet area and staff cloakroom. They also have a store room/staff room. The whole building has been fully refurbished to a high standard with under-floor heating. Outside, there is a large outdoor playground and a



smaller grassed play area at the front. A play-house, sandpit and various ride-on toys are available.

Wharfedale Babies is open from 08:00 to 18:00, Monday to Friday, 46 weeks of the year, and is registered for 16 children aged 6 months to 3 years. There are 14 children on roll at present who attend a minimum one day per week day or more. Wharfedale Montessori School is open from 08:30 to 16:30, Monday to Friday, school term times, and is registered for 50 children, from 3 to 11 years. In the primary department the children attend full time. The 29 children on the roll attending the Children's House have a choice of sessions with grant funded sessions for the three to five year olds available in the afternoons. There is provision for children with special educational needs and for those with English as an additional language.

The establishment is efficiently organized and administered by the joint owners, who are also the Principal of the school and the head teacher of the primary unit. Both the owners are Montessori trained and the Principal has a city and guilds adult education qualification, and is a lead practitioner for the local authority. She also runs the MCI Montessori Early Childhood Diploma courses. The majority of the staff hold Montessori qualifications with a further two staff undertaking Montessori training at present.

Summary and conclusion

Wharfedale Montessori School, including Wharfedale Babies, provides a stimulating learning environment in an idyllic setting. It is located in a clearing in the Devonshire estate of Bolton Abbey and offers the children wonderful opportunities to commune with nature on a daily basis, witnessing the changing of the seasons first hand. The three learning areas are very well resourced and are housed in most appropriate rooms for the ages taught. The school is also a Montessori training centre giving the students a first-hand experience of a genuine Montessori learning environment. The parents really appreciate all that the owners and staff have done to provide their children with such a wealth of learning opportunities, and are extremely supportive both pastorally and with fund raising. The staff are a cohesive team sharing their love of teaching with their eager and committed pupils.

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

- continue with development of the outdoor curriculum, taking into account the needs of the children and opportunities for shared learning amongst the children
- establish an annual written reporting system for all children

Philosophy:

The aims and principles of Wharfedale, as clearly stated in all the school's publications, are to enable children to achieve their full potential, to be happy, to grow in knowledge and confidence, to have a good self-image and eventually to be able to go out into a fast changing society confidently with well developed skills, initiative and enthusiasm, able to find their place and do well. These aims are achieved by following the Montessori philosophy across the age



groups. Throughout the two visits there were examples of happy, confident children, eager to learn and to share their knowledge with the assessor. The children who will be leaving the school at the end of the year appeared to be well prepared for the rigours of senior school.

Since the first visit, the year 6 children have left the school and joined their senior schools, and the owners report that two of them asked to return when their new school had a staff INSET day. They confidently addressed the primary school children, telling them that they had nothing to worry about. When a ten year old current pupil asked the past pupils if they felt they had learnt enough when they were at Wharfedale, the answer came back very quickly that they were both well ahead of their peers and had learnt more than enough.

There is strong evidence throughout the establishment that the baby, nursery and school environments are managed on the principle of 'following the child'. Rich learning opportunities were introduced and reflected in all activities as was evident in the toddler room where fascination with mini-beasts sparked an interest which took over all the activities for some weeks. In the Children's House one child had a keen interest in the constructive triangles and this was extended by the teacher spending a considerable amount of time exploring the materials with the boy. There were also many examples in the primary room of children being encouraged to follow their interest and to extend their knowledge in a range of aspects of the curriculum. Children were certainly fulfilling their individual potential, for example one primary pupil used several exercise books for her own creative story writing and was very keen to share her writings with the assessor. In each room the children and staff have a mutual respect for each other which shines through in all activities. There was evidence of self-discipline across the whole school.

Learning and Development:

The areas of learning were clearly defined in all three departments and the children had access to a very broad range of activities. The school is situated in wonderful grounds that are well used by the Children's House and Wharfedale Babies; however the Primary School would benefit from establishing independent access to the outside. The Children's House pupils' learning would be further enhanced by facilitating access between the outside and the inside to maximize contact between the age groups.

Since the first visit, the Children's House has made great progress to introduce free flow taking into account staff ratio issues. During the second visit, a group from the Children's House was observed working outside as part of the work cycle, making their own woodland faces on the floor of the woods. There were many examples in this activity of independence, freedom, self initiated activity, and creativity in the final results where they tried to emulate Andy Goldsworthy, the environmental artist whose works had inspired the children.

During the summer the Primary School staff undertook a complete review of their outdoor curriculum and have developed activities which offer independent access to the outdoor learning opportunities during the work cycle. For example, during the second visit the children were weaving wattle fencing that was to provide shelter for the gardens they are designing. The gardens were based around geometric shapes, which they are planning outside with very large compasses. The children are very enthusiastic about their outdoor involvement. Staff visited the RHS gardens at Harlow Carr where they received training and inspiration for the outdoors.

The activities outside were very appropriate for the age range in the Children's House and the



children enjoyed problem-solving activities whilst making a construction from crates and drainpipes to make a run which they could use to test speed and movement of different objects. They questioned why some items went very fast and others much slower, with very little staff intervention.

The nursery children have a three hour work cycle and babies and toddlers have a two and a half hour work cycle. All the staff ensure that the activities meet each age group's appropriate developmental needs. Continual assessment takes place in all departments of the school ensuring that each child's individual needs are being addressed at all times. The adults in the different rooms work towards meeting the needs of each child, creating harmony and empathy between the staff and children.

Both long term and short term planning is carried out separately by pre-school teaching staff and by the team in the primary classroom, and each primary child has their own weekly plan on which the teacher works with the child basing the new plan on previous assessments. In the pre-school the planning is carried out with reference to both Montessori areas of learning and the EYFS learning goals. The individual interests of each of the children are taken into account when planning. For example, during the first visit a group of children were observed whilst they gathered around the wormery. They were discussing why the worms appear during the day. One little boy wanted to know why this happened, so he went off to find books about worms. The teacher decided to focus on worms rather than invertebrates in general, which she had originally planned to study in the weeks to come.

Prepared Environment: resources and materials

All the rooms are inviting to the child. They are well organized with the materials required for each of the different Montessori areas of learning being grouped together. The materials are well maintained and are all in good condition, they are appealing and attractive and offer children opportunities to follow their interests and to extend their knowledge in their chosen areas of learning. There is an excellent range of resources in each room and the space is adequate for the children to either work at the child-sized tables or on mats on the floor. There are enough resources for the number of children in each room to be able to choose what they would like to work with ensuring that the developmental needs of a mixed age group are met.

The teachers in the rooms do not interfere but are there to observe and intervene as and when necessary. All the children relate to the adults in their rooms with a very relaxed and informal approach; they have total confidence and trust in their teachers

Following recommendations made during the first visit outdoor learning opportunities have been introduced and free flow between the indoor and outdoor learning environments has been established.

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

Throughout the whole establishment the children are encouraged to be independent, from the little babies to the oldest pupils. They are self-assured, confident and independent individuals ready to take their place in the world in which they live. They move easily from activity to activity during the work cycle, including having a snack and inviting others to share in this social



event of the morning. They organize themselves independently in the outside environment and engage in a variety of tasks and games. Although the staff are aware of each child there appears to be little need for intervention. All children and staff demonstrate respect for each other. I watched several pupils repeat the same exercise again and again until they suddenly finished their work and put the activity away, satisfying their need for repetition.

The whole establishment has a very good relationship with their parent body, who appreciate the importance of continuing independent activities at home. The primary group children take home the tea towels which they wash and iron themselves during the weekend. The children are proud to share this information with visitors commenting that they enjoy the responsibility. The babies and toddlers work hard putting on their slippers and hanging up coats on their own pegs.

During the second visit the assessor observed the baby's lunch time routine where each little person from one year old upwards, helped themselves to their individual minced meat pie, then spooned potatoes on to their plates, used tongs to serve themselves with carrots and finally, very carefully, poured the gravy over their food. When they had finished they put their plates into a tray and helped themselves to fruit. When they had finished their meal, they wiped their faces and hands with their own flannel, and put their bibs into the laundry basket for washing. A complete cycle of activity which every toddler proudly carried out.

Montessori practice: classroom management

Spontaneous and planned learning takes place in all the areas of the school and the baby and toddler unit. The staff are extremely flexible and often change their planning after events have taken place showing that the children wish to follow a project that has come about from either a particular pupil's interest or of some event that may have taken place outside or within the school, such as a Jubilee visit from the school land owner to make presentations.

A key person is allocated to each child and all the staff are well aware of their specific duties within the classroom. There was a good mix of adult-led and child-initiated activities. In the primary classroom one member of staff is allocated a day per week (without teaching commitments) to match each child's completed work diary with their own records and the next week's work is planned for the child, taking into consideration the work completed and any additional help that might be needed. This record-keeping and planning system works well, ensuring that each child is working towards fulfilling their potential.

The planning in the Children's House takes into account the Montessori curriculum and the EYFS areas of learning. All three classes are vertically grouped and there were many examples of younger pupils learning from older children and older pupils helping the younger ones. There is a wide range of additional activities offered, including swimming, sports and woodland activities, and food technology, which all take place in the afternoons or at the end of the school day. Sometimes activities such as French are incorporated into the work cycle as and when appropriate.

The recent introduction of spontaneous access to the outdoors has resulted in the review of adult-child ratios to provide effective support the learning in the outdoor classroom.



Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records

Each adult in the three departments plays a pivotal role in the organization and administration of the classroom. Each staff member is well aware of their specific responsibilities and the key persons are responsible for a specific number of children. All staff contribute to observations of individual children, and these are included in the children's records by the key person. The parents are kept well informed of the progress of their own child or children and the staff are always available at the beginning or end of the day to discuss any concerns a parent or carer may have. If a parent has a specific worry a longer appointment can be arranged.

The primary class have a system where parents can book themselves in to see the head on Thursday afternoons. Since the original visit this has been introduced in the Children's House. Parents are welcome to sit in the class and observe one morning a week.

At present there are only written reports for leavers. Following recommendations from the initial visit, it has been decided to provide a termly report for each child and offer a detailed written report to the parents of all the children from 2 years upwards at the end of the Summer term. Education evenings are organized regularly by the joint owners of the school.

Staffing:

The whole establishment is well staffed with suitably qualified personnel. The Children's House is managed by a qualified early years teacher who also has the Montessori International Diploma, and the manager of the babies has a Foundation Degree and a Montessori qualification. The head of the Primary has both the International Montessori Diploma and the Montessori Primary qualification. Five other staff have Montessori qualifications, two are Montessori trainees and the baby unit staff hold diplomas in child care and education (NNEB), with three staff having degrees in addition to their Montessori qualifications. The joint owners take the role of principal and primary head and they are supported by an excellent school secretary who acts as a registrar/administrator, which greatly assists with their work load.

There is a very good induction process in place and regular staff meetings are held and minuted. There are now staff appraisals in place and the head and the room managers carry out staff observations. The school has introduced peer assessment and although this is in its early stages, it has proved to be a positive experience. Regular professional development training takes place on relevant and requested topics. All the staff in each of the units work very much as a complete team showing respect and consideration towards each other, and their rapport is excellent.

Every staff member shows a total commitment to Montessori practice and thereby acts as valuable role models for the children in their care.

Name of Assessor: Wendy E S Compson

Date of reports: First visit – Monday – July 23rd 2012

Second visit – Tuesday – November 20th 2012