



# **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 (MEAB). It considers how the setting meets the criteria set out by MEAB. It is registered with the National Education Directory of Albania.

The report does not provide any assessment of financial aspects of the school.

### **International Montessori School of Albania**

Bilal Golemi Street Nr. 16, Tirana 1019, Albania

Date of accreditation visit: Monday 25 May 2015

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 9 months to 6 years of age.

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

The school is located in a renovated villa in a residential area of Tirana. It has a partner International school, The World Academy of Tirana (WAT), on the same campus. Plans are in place for the partner school to move to other premises in September 2015, enabling the International Montessori School of Albania (IMSA) to expand its classrooms, pupil capacity and outdoor area.

At present the IMSA is run from a three storey building with balconies and a basement. The first two floors have one Primary Casa class each, a large art and music room and a children's kitchen. The top floor houses two rooms – the Nido for infants on a mezzanine level and the Infant Community for toddlers. The spacious basement contains an indoor play area and storage. The area at the front of the school has been converted into a secure outdoor space for children's play.

The school was established in 2008 and is under joint family ownership with the WAT. The Business Executive Director is responsible for both schools and works with the Academic Director. They are supported by 13 staff members, three of whom have Montessori Diplomas and one who is studying for a Montessori Diploma, which IMSA is sponsoring. There are three lead teachers who are supported by nine assistants, three of whom are graduates and six are students. There is a full time school nurse who works across both campuses and a full time administrator at IMSA. Most staff work full time in their respective classes. There are 12 staff in attendance on the day of the visit, including the administrator.

The school is registered for 72 children in total: eight children in Nido from 9 months to



2 years, 16 children in Infant Community from 1½ to 3 years and 48 children in Casa from 3 to 5 years. IMSA is open throughout the year and all children attend full day sessions from 8.15am to 3.30pm. Most attend each week day. On the day of the visit there were 19 children in Casa A, 21 children in Casa B, 15 toddlers and six infants. There is provision for children with English as an additional language and some support for those with special needs. Lunch and snacks are provided by the school and freshly prepared on the campus. There is provision for all children to sleep following lunch and visiting teachers attend at regular sessions to teach music and dance.

The Business and Academic Directors are supported by a well qualified team of 13 teachers, assistants and an administrator, most of whom work full time.

## Summary

IMSA is a welcoming and ordered Montessori school. Under the strong and passionate leadership of the Academic Director, the school offers an excellent Montessori environment with beautifully organised, well laid out and prepared classrooms and a committed staff team who demonstrate a strong adherence to Montessori principles. A strength of the school lies in the routines, age appropriate environment and resources in Nido, where even the very youngest infant is offered genuine freedom of choice and independence. This early experience provides a strong foundation for later learning.

In order for the school to move forward, it is recommended that senior management consider strategies to enhance the responsibility and independence of assistant staff. This may require the development of more formal staff appraisals and self reflective systems and a consideration of a more flexible and shared record keeping process as well as the continued commitment to Montessori training.

As the school extends in accordance with its development plan, it is strongly recommended that the staff team start to plan further opportunities to develop children's creative and cultural learning across the school. Developing more planned activities in the outdoor environments will enhance the creativity of children and utilise all areas of the campus. Enhancing further links with the local area and community are to be encouraged.

It is suggested the management team consider ways to enhance positive relations with parents and develop strategies to encourage further parental engagement both in the daily practice of the school and in the wider Montessori community. This should deepen their knowledge of the Montessori approach and children's learning and development.

***The school provides an education which follows the principles of the Montessori approach and environment, and this merits accreditation by the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board. Consideration should be given to the following points for further development:***



- consider strategies to enhance the responsibility of assistant staff.
- plan further opportunities to develop children's creative and cultural learning opportunities across the school.
- develop strategies to encourage further parental engagement at the school and in the wider Montessori community.

### **Philosophy:**

The IMSA provides an excellent quality of Montessori education across all age groups from the youngest child in Nido to 5 year olds in Casa. This is demonstrated by the commitment and passion of the Academic Director who motivates and inspires the staff team, who in turn ensure the environment is ordered, beautiful and conducive to Montessori practices.

The school's commitment to Montessori principles is clearly defined on the website, in the informative parent handbook, and in an excellent employee handbook. This comprehensive information fully informs the reader about the Montessori approach.

All staff are very well informed about the Montessori approach and give good opportunities to follow the child in their area of interest. Lead teachers work closely with parents ensuring children's personal and social development is very effectively taken into account in the planning process. It is recommended that further opportunities for working collaboratively with parents are developed.

From the moment a child enters the school independence is fostered and classes have been specifically designed in order for this to be enhanced and developed and children are familiar with routines and work independently. Throughout the school, staff demonstrate genuine trust in children by allowing them time to complete their selected activities.

### **Learning and Development:**

Children learn and develop through the careful and detailed planning carried out by the lead teachers and through encouraging and inspiring children to use a wide range of Montessori activities. Each class has a systematically arranged, organised and age-appropriate range of Montessori learning activities available. Lead teachers plan effectively for their individual classrooms and for each child through the Montessori areas of learning, and demonstrate individual presentations to assistant staff with skill and sensitivity. Individual lessons are planned each week, and there is flexibility for the addition of special events or for the consideration of children's social and emotional



development. This works very well across each class and on the day of the visit, a birthday circle was very successfully accommodated. Lead teachers in the Casa classes sometimes introduce themes which are planned together. These stimulate interest and offer good opportunities for children to follow their own interests.

In each of the classes, activities are thoughtfully arranged in age-appropriate areas of learning. These include activities of everyday living and sensorial in the classes for the younger children, and also literacy and numeracy in the two Casa classes. Staff offer opportunities in this internationally-orientated environment to learn about different cultures and explore this through discussion, cultural activities and books. They value peace, respect for others and show pride in the individual differences of children.

The small gated garden area at the side of the building offers good opportunities for planting, digging, watering and creative art work. The larger outdoor area offers fewer learning opportunities. The length of the work cycle differs in each class depending on the age of children. Infants and toddlers are free to explore their environment for about an hour to an hour and a half. This is appropriate for their learning and works very well with staff supporting transitions to different routines very effectively. Many opportunities are also available during the lunch period for independent work both in setting up and clearing away. In the Casa classes children are free to work on their chosen activities in the class, for up to three hours. In this time children are free to work spontaneously, in small groups or in teacher-led activities.

Each lead teacher uses an individual method for recording observations on every child in their class. Individual goals and plans are set weekly. At the end of each term, lead teachers use a comprehensive check list to document progress in Montessori areas and in emotional and social development. These are clear and show progress. The Nido and Infant Community lists include progress in areas such as caring for self, and eye/hand co-ordination. This offers a clear developmental tool.

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

All the classes, kitchen and reception areas are very well designed with appropriate Montessori resources and an excellent range of prints and Montessori quotations. These are at children's height and add to the atmosphere of the school. The main reception area is bright and welcoming. The lead teachers make very good use of each space by planning where shelves, tables, chairs, pictures and wall paintings are used in order to create cosy areas for learning. The purpose-built children's kitchen offers excellent facilities.

Nido is a delightful room with a superb range of age-appropriate activities for little hands. There is a low level sink, a changing area and all furniture is child sized. Exploration is stimulated by the addition of beautiful home-made resources, and routines encouraging freedom and independence are supported. Staff offer genuine



freedom of choice by encouraging infants to do things for themselves, including tidying up. A large rest area provides opportunities for stories, discussion and observation.

The Infant Community is a spacious, irregularly shaped room. There is a good snack area with many real resources at child height and a spacious area for the care of self. The quiet area contains a good range of interesting books, and activities for everyday living are presented in an attractive, sequential and organized manner to encourage exploration and the maintenance of order. Some items are made by the teachers. The indoor playroom is available in inclement weather. It is used for physical development and has many appropriate resources for music and dance.

Casa A is a light and spacious room on two levels. The area at the front of the room is very well resourced with a wide and unusual range of activities for everyday living. The lower area of the room is appropriately resourced for reading and rest with a good selection of books. The main room is very well organized with a wide range of activities in very good order and condition.

Casa B is a spacious room and the main area has an appropriate range of sensorial and mathematics activities. There are a good range of activities for everyday living and independent snack preparation. The language area is very well resourced, with many home-made materials which are attractively displayed.

There are many cultural templates in the classes, however it is recommended that all staff consider how children may be offered further opportunities to explore actual cultural artifacts as this will enhance children's learning.

The paved and matted outdoor area is accessed by steps from the front door. The area is linked to the WAT and many people move between campuses. Gates and fences are used effectively to separate smaller areas for groups of younger children. The area contains some opportunities for play and staff work effectively to plan for each class to use the space in turn. There is a small fenced vegetable and creative garden at the side of the building which offers good opportunities for learning about nature. It is recommended that the team start to plan ways in which the whole area may be enhanced to provide further opportunities for physical and creative development and exploration of the natural world.

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

The whole team strongly encourages independence. The length of the work cycle in each class is age-appropriate and children are given time to complete work. Staff members sensitively direct children to more appropriate or constructive choices and there are good opportunities for tidying up work. Older children are adept at assisting in maintaining and restoring the environment throughout the day and help put away nap



cots following the rest period. Staff encourage children to assist in the preparation of the environment by adding resources to follow their interests.

The school has an excellent and informative parent handbook and the website contains good information about the importance of independence in the Montessori approach. It hosts three parent education evenings each year, which have a mixed level of attendance and some parents are unaware they occur. The Academic Director writes weekly emails, sharing information about what each class is working on and how parents may support independence at home. Daily individual conversations provide opportunity to educate parents about independence.

Throughout each class staff give children the freedom to choose their own work, work undisturbed, and repeat the activity as they wish. They are genuinely free to work individually or in small or large groups so long as it is constructive, respectful of others, and respectful of the environment.

Respect for others is an expectation and very evident throughout the school. Staff sensitively encourage this through individual interaction, circle time lessons, and modelling appropriate behaviour. They use respectful language towards one another and remind children not to interfere in others' work. Children clearly respect others by interrupting politely and staff show respect for children, each other and for parents.

In each class, children are responsible for caring for the environment by putting away materials after they have finished their work. In the Nido class templates are used as guides for infants to put away dishes. There is an excellent selection in each room of materials designed for the care of the environment and children are taught how to use these in a respectful way and how to care for them. Staff are diligent and committed in preparing a beautiful and ordered environment and the children clearly know how the environment should be and actively assist in restoring it.

### **Montessori practice: Classroom management**

The school is well managed by the efficient and organised Academic Director. She prepares detailed policy documentation and procedures and is the lead teacher in Casa A. Along with the other lead teachers and the administrator they present a strong and committed team. Lead teachers work collaboratively to ensure the work cycle in the Casa classrooms is at least three hours. Nido class has a one hour work cycle, and the Infant Community have about a two hour work cycle. These are appropriate for the ages of children and the time is genuinely uninterrupted and centered around free work choice with good opportunities for spontaneous and planned learning. Music and dance teachers visit in the afternoon on regular days in the week, and children are given an option to join the session or not.

Lead teachers are responsible for ensuring ratios of children to staff are maintained (1:8



in Casa, 1:4 in infants and toddlers) and this is done seamlessly as staff sensitively follow children from one area to another and offer individual support. There are children with varying needs and staff members work effectively as a team to alter routines and develop procedures to ensure a high quality Montessori care and education is provided. In Nido, successful one to one teacher support is provided for a child with a particular need. Lead teachers communicate with parents and have support from the school nurse and psychologist, and they successfully contact other professionals, such as a speech therapist, to create individual developmental plans. This works effectively by creating a level of consistency across the classes in children's interventions.

The staff group children by age, with children from 9 months to about 2 years in Nido and 2 to 3 years in the Infant Community and 3 to 6 years in the Casa classes. Preparations for transition to the Casa class are very good. Lead teachers are adept at balancing age, gender, and languages spoken by the children across each class before a child moves. Individual time lines, created by lead teachers and discussed with parents, ensure everyone is fully informed about the dates and lengths of transitions. These demonstrate a good understanding and consideration of child development.

The Academic Director has put in place effective routines and procedures to ensure children are supervised appropriately throughout the day both inside and out, and during transition periods such as lunch or preparation for rest time. Lead teachers are aware of their responsibilities and work collaboratively to prepare the environment, write observations and plan for each child. It is recommended that they start to consider ways that assistants may be more involved in planning and observing so senior staff may have more time for other tasks. Further opportunities for the training of assistants may be considered in view of the school's development plan.

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

The school is very welcoming and friendly. There is excellent information regarding Montessori education in the parent handbook and on the website. The school uses an informative weekly email as the primary form of communication with parents. Parents are encouraged to email the school about school issues.

There is an online school management system which is designed for teachers to update records and record observations; however, it was not in use on the day of the visit.

It is recommended that the senior team start to consider ways in which the recording of observations could become more consistent and shared more equally across the staff team. This will provide information on the effectiveness of learning and create links with planning and evaluation. It may also enable lead teachers to have time to enhance ideas to ameliorate communication and positive relations with families and the wider local community.

Formal individual conferences and parent education evenings are scheduled two or



three times a year with lead teachers; however, these are not always at appropriate times and attendance varies. Good dialogue on daily routines in Nido and Infant Community is provided by communication books between home and school. There is a Parent Teacher Community which aims to support the efforts of the school, build community and to facilitate open communication between the school and parents. This is well attended but actual offers of support to the school are limited. As the school moves forward, it is recommended that the senior team consider ways to promote the further involvement of families at the school.

### **Staffing:**

The Academic Director and the other two lead teachers hold International Montessori Diplomas. There are nine assistant staff, three of whom are psychology graduates and six are students studying for degrees. One assistant is undertaking an International Montessori Diploma with MCI through the school sponsorship. On-going staff education is very important at IMSA and staff are given the opportunity to train through school sponsorship. Continued professional development is offered through very effective service training days. Staff have a good knowledge of the Montessori approach and are committed to their positions. Webinars have been arranged through the American Montessori Society with content such as 'Children's Misbehaviour and How to Respond'. The head assistant in Nido has a specific 0-3 AMI diploma; The lead teacher in the toddler community also holds an AMI 0-3 diploma and is now undertaking the MCI training for 3-6.

The Induction process is robust with a formal interview, a tour of the school and an excellent and informative staff handbook. This clearly outlines the school's commitment to Montessori principles and specifies exactly what is expected of a candidate. It also includes helpful information about the stages of child development and how it is supported at the school. The school has good staff retention.

Job descriptions for the Academic Director, lead teachers and assistants are comprehensive, specific and commit staff to the Montessori approach and prepared environment. Senior staff team meetings are held regularly and briefly recorded, however, it may be prudent to extend these to whole team meetings. This will provide a forum for the development of self-evaluative methods and the sharing of good practice, and will provide a useful tool for senior management. This could be very helpful considering the school's plan for expansion.

The entire staff team at IMSA – under the Academic Director's excellent leadership and passion for Montessori – offer enthusiastic, knowledgeable and sensitive teaching and they are all clearly deeply committed to ensuring children learn and develop under the approach.



Name of Assessor: Carolyn O J McNeill

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