

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 relevant criteria set out in “The Guide to the EYFS in Montessori Settings” (2012/14). The second visit sought to assess the progress made on the recommendations set out in the report from the first visit and considered any further findings made during the second visit.

The report does not address the standards and quality issues which are the responsibility of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), which reports separately. Also the report does not provide any assessment of financial aspects of the school.

Receiving accreditation carries the expectation that settings will continue to work on the issues highlighted in this report and will remain committed to the ongoing development of their practice. Furthermore, that they will report to the MEAB office any relevant changes such as to premises address, ownership, hours of operation or to the age range of children attending.

The Montessori Early Years Department at The Elms School

Colwall, Malvern, Worcestershire WR13 6EF

Date of previous MEAB accreditation: November 2013

Date of first re-accreditation visit: 7 October 2016

Date of second re-accreditation visit: 30 January 2017

This accreditation is valid until 31 July 2022

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 3 to 6 years

Description of the school:

The Elms School, established in 1614, is an independent preparatory school situated in the village of Colwall. It has a Montessori Early Years Department which was established in 2008, and this report relates only to this section of the school.

The Early Years Department has a bright and large open-plan classroom, which is subdivided into three smaller areas. Its children have free access to all these areas and to an enclosed outdoor classroom throughout the work cycle. The children also use the school's farm, art and drama rooms, sports facilities, including its swimming pool, and its woodland area.

The Department is open every weekday from 08.30 to 15.45 during term times, and offers an after school club. Those under school age attend a variety of days, most staying mornings and afternoons, and those of school age attend full-time. The school caters for children with additional needs, including those who speak English as an additional language. On the day of the second re-accreditation visit there were 20 children present in the morning and 19 stayed for the afternoon. Of these, five were 5 or 6 years of age, who all stayed for both sessions. All children have school lunches in the main school's dining hall.

The setting has seven members of staff; all but one has a Montessori qualification. Six members of the team work part-time, including the Head of Department (the deputy covers in her absence).

Summary

The Early Years Department at The Elms School offers a true Montessori environment where children are nurtured to become keen, confident and considerate learners. Children are fully engaged in purposeful learning in this calm and peaceful environment.

The excellent resources are arranged into areas of learning, readily accessible to all the children. Following a recommendation from the first re-accreditation visit, the comfort of the children has been enhanced by providing a cosy area for relaxing and reading. The activities are well presented, stimulating and purposeful.

The strong and enthusiastic leadership inspires the committed and well qualified staff team to implement a genuine Montessori environment for all the children. They have an excellent understanding of Montessori practice which they use in their daily routines, such as in their regular observation of the children, and in their maintenance of the learning environment. Following the first visit, the length of the daily work cycle has been extended to further promote the excellent levels of independence that the children enjoy in their learning.

Partnership with parents is outstanding, with regular exchange of information taking place. Since the previous MEAB accreditation The Early Years Department has continued to reflect on its practice in order to ensure that its high standards are maintained.

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 should continue to ensure that The Early Years Department retains its very high standards of Montessori philosophy and practice.

Philosophy:

The Early Years Department offers an outstanding Montessori experience to children, who are free to carry out activities at a calm and unhurried pace. Adults respond to each child's inner needs through their careful observation and planning.

The mixed age group enables children to create a sense of community and to benefit from peer to peer learning. For example, on the day of the first re-accreditation visit, a child was introduced to the Montessori musical bells (which teach discrimination of musical sounds), shown by the adult how to grade them from the highest pitch to the lowest notes, and then left to explore them. A couple of children stopped by to watch and the child patiently explained the activity to the two younger children before inviting them to join in.

Excellent role-modelling by adults helps children learn how to become kind and respectful, and it creates a culture of progression in this stimulating early years' environment.

The setting's philosophy is defined in writing in the prospectus, within policy documents and in pamphlets handed to prospective parents. Its aims and values are evaluated formally during weekly and termly staff meetings. The school's website includes comprehensive information about the Montessori philosophy and curriculum.

Learning and Development:

The bright and welcoming classroom is organised into three clearly separated areas of learning. Children have free flow access to the outdoor classroom throughout the work cycle. Both in and outdoor areas are well planned to suit the developmental needs of all the children, and both provide many opportunities for adult-led and spontaneous learning.

Following a recommendation from the first re-accreditation visit, the team has established a longer work cycle in the morning by starting circle time slightly later. This enables children to explore and learn for an extended period by themselves, in groups, or through presentations offered by adults. Children arrive between 08.30 and 09.00 and continue to freely choose their activities until 11.00, when they gather for group exercise before sitting down for circle time.

All the children go to the school's dining room for a freshly prepared lunch at 12.00, followed by playtime in the fields and woodland area. During this time the children mix with those in school who are up to 8 years of age. They return to their classroom at 13.30 and have timetabled afternoon lessons. These include sports, art, yoga, music, French, cooking, Woodland Challenge, drama and Personal, Social and Health Education. They sit together for tea at 15.00 and gather for circle time at 15.30. Afternoon sessions end at 15.45, with some children staying for after school club.

Planning is thorough and covers all areas of learning within the Montessori curriculum

as well as within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for younger children and those of the National Curriculum for Year 1 children. Planning and assessment for literacy and numeracy for these older children are linked to the schemes used in the main school. Staff members plan weekly projects. The topic of the week on the day of the second visit was North America. Children demonstrated a good knowledge of the USA and Canada during circle time; they identified them using the Montessori map and discussed landmarks, people and food of these countries.

A baseline assessment for every child is done by their key person and the Head of Department when a child starts. Following this, the developmental needs of each child are discussed by the whole team. Observations are carried out daily by any member of the team, who records these using a secure electronic system, and they are then evaluated by key persons and next steps determined on an ongoing basis. Comprehensive records of every child's progress, including printouts of observations recorded on the electronic system, are documented in the Children's Progress Books.

Children's additional needs are identified and provided for in collaboration with a child's family and with outside agencies. The setting offers excellent opportunities for all its children to learn; they display high levels of interest and understanding and they are fully supported by the team's diligent observation and thorough planning.

Prepared Environment: resources and materials

Staff members make excellent use of the space to create an environment that is inviting and stimulating. The room is very well laid out. The range of high quality resources – both indoors and out – is outstanding and is suited to the developmental ages and abilities of the children. Low shelves allow children to access materials independently, which they choose to work with outside, or in the main classroom, at tables or on floor mats, independently or in groups.

The room has an area for snack, and another for reading. Following a recommendation from the first re-accreditation visit, the team has created a cosy area where children can relax whilst reading books from the large selection displayed.

The enclosed outdoor classroom is used for free flow activities and includes areas for growing plants and for digging, for printing and mark-making, a Wendy house and a narrow passage for cycling. The children also have daily access to large fields, as well as a woodland area containing a spacious sandpit and climbing and balancing equipment. The Early Years Department at The Elms provides a calm, stimulating and nurturing environment for children to thrive in.

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

Independence is supported extremely well at this setting. Children are encouraged to self-initiate much of their learning, to make their own discoveries and to complete their activities at their own pace. For instance, during the first re-accreditation visit a child used the Montessori leaf cabinet to match its shapes to leaves in the garden and then decided to draw and colour in a leaf using one of the wooden leaf shapes, continuing with this activity for almost an hour, sometimes leaving to talk to friends, then returning to complete it.

The children show a high level of respect for their learning environment and return their resources to the shelves once they have finished their activity. They also demonstrate respect for each other. Many instances were noted during the visits whereby older children provided effective role-modelling for the younger children, who worked alongside and learnt from them. One such example was when a child saw a notice near the fish tank which indicated that the pet fish had not yet been fed. The child was joined by a younger member of the class and the older child patiently showed the younger one how to feed the fish and afterwards explained why they had to wash their hands as they had both touched the fish food.

Children have access to the snack area throughout the morning work cycle, where fresh fruit, milk and water are available. They pour their own drinks and help themselves to snacks, washing up after they have finished.

Staff members work closely with parents to facilitate children's independence. Termly parents events are held where Montessori philosophy is explained and ideas given to promote independent skills at home. Regular face to face contact and written information sent home also support this collaboration.

Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records

Partnership with parents is outstanding, enhanced by the open door policy which ensures continued and excellent communication regarding children's progress. Parents speak very highly of the provision and really appreciate the contribution that the members of staff make to their children's learning and development. Many parents spoken to on the day of the first re-accreditation visit look upon the staff as friendly advisors as well as educators.

The Early Years Department operates an effective key person system and, although any member of staff can contribute to the recorded observations of a child, the key person has responsibility for planning and for communicating the child's progress to their parents. Weekly updates are emailed to parents, these document activities carried out during the week.

Information for parents is displayed on notice boards outside the classroom, one of which contains details about Montessori philosophy, a stock of *Montessori International*

magazines and a copy of “The Guide to the EYFS in Montessori Settings”. The other notice board holds ample information on the weekly and termly plans, along with folders displaying photographs of additional activities carried out.

Parents are invited to information evenings covering topics such as the Montessori curriculum, or managing behaviour. All parents receive a written report of their child’s progress at the end of the autumn and summer terms. In the spring term, parents have consultations with their child’s key person. The EYFS Profile is completed when relevant and children moving on to new schools have a transition report forwarded to the school in question.

The highly effective partnership with parents helps ensure that there is continuity of care and strong nurturing for every child in The Early Years Department.

Staff: qualifications, deployment, and performance management.

Five members of staff hold a Montessori diploma and one has a Foundation Certificate in Montessori. The Head of Department also holds a degree in early years and Early Years Professional Status. Four have INPP training certificates, two have primary Postgraduate Certificates in Education and the deputy has additional relevant early years’ qualifications.

There is a thorough induction process in place. All team members have defined roles and understand their responsibilities, including for daily checks, maintenance of the working environment and for liaising with parents.

Self-evaluation and performance management are evidently very strong aspects of practice. Peer to peer observations and annual appraisals are used to help inform the planning of clear continuing professional development (CPD). The commitment to ongoing CPD, which includes Montessori training opportunities, is a real strength of this setting.

Staff meetings take place weekly and actions are recorded by the Head. Termly meetings include an overview of the curriculum, projects and timetables, and The Department has a development plan to which all staff can contribute. This plan also takes account of the whole school’s development plan. All policies and procedures are reviewed annually by the whole team.

This enthusiastic and extremely capable team are committed to providing very high quality early years care and education for the children attending.

Name of Assessor: Raju Surelia

Date report submitted: First visit – 10 October 2016

Second visit – 30 January 2017