

Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board

School Accreditation

This report is prepared following one accreditation visit made on behalf of the Montessori Evaluation and Accreditation Board

The report does not address the standards and quality issues which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education 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.

Casa dei Bambini

17 Bulgarska Legia str. Sofia Bulgaria 1618

Date of accreditation visit: 28/29 November 2016

This accreditation is valid until 31 December 2020

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 3 to 7 years.

Description of the school/nursery

The Casa dei Bambini nursery is located in Legia, a residential area in the city of Sofia in Bulgaria and is housed in a converted villa with two floors with a large garden. Casa dei Bambini is privately owned by a husband and wife, who is the principal of the nursery, and managed together with the community of parents and teachers. It was established in 2008 and serves the local community.

There are currently 50 children on the roll aged between rising 3 and 7 years. The nursery is open from 8.00 to 18.00 Monday to Friday and all the children attend five days a week. On the days of the accreditation visit, 40 children attended in the morning and 37 of these children stayed for the afternoon. English and Bulgarian are the languages that are used on a daily basis as the school employs both Bulgarian and English speaking teachers. For the majority of the children English is a second language and the school provides support and assistance to help the children settle into the different language environments. The setting also makes comprehensive provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and benefits from twice weekly visits from a psychologist and speech therapist.

The nursery comprises two Montessori classrooms, two cloakrooms, two bathrooms and

two kitchens on the ground floor, and three bedrooms, one pre-school classroom, a role-play area and theatre and sports room and botanical area on the first floor. There is also a large suitably equipped outside area with climbing equipment, swimming pool and tree-house.

All meals including breakfast are provided for the children, who benefit from well-balanced, healthy, seasonal meals with a vegetarian option. The nursery offers extra activities including cooking, music and dance, science and nature as well as Ikedo, yoga, ballet and German.

There are twelve members of staff including the owner/managers, three of whom hold a Montessori International Diploma. All the staff were present on the day of the accreditation visit. Three of them are currently undertaking Montessori training. Six members of staff have degrees in pedagogy and three others have related degrees, such as music and sports. Three further members of staff have undergone International Montessori training for assistants

Summary

The children benefit from excellent opportunities to make progress in their development and learning. Both the indoor and outdoor environments are prepared by staff with great care and attention, and the mixed age range contributes very favorably to the behaviour and learning of all the children at the nursery. The staff team recognises the children's uniqueness, and the high quality of leadership and management ensures that every child receives support for their individual welfare and needs. Self reflection and evaluation are embedded in their everyday practice and the staff show high levels of empathy with the children in their care, which is reciprocated. This is an outstanding feature of the nursery. The children are calm, peaceful and controlled in their actions and follow the adults' excellent role modeling.

The parents are very complimentary about the support that is offered to them by the staff as they have a strong partnership. Daily feedback, the secure web-based digital system employed by the school and regular monthly meetings and reports all ensure that parents are kept up to date with the children's developmental progress and that they are able to understand how the children have been learning in the nursery.

The vision, generosity and energy in promoting Montessori in Bulgaria demonstrated by the team is truly inspirational and is shared by the parents. What they have achieved so far is truly outstanding.

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.

- They should continue to consider giving the children more autonomy during the afternoon programme and extending the weeks the children learn in one classroom.

Philosophy:

The commitment of Casa dei Bambini nursery to the ethos of Montessori is evident in all aspects of their practice. Every child is treated with care, patience and respect, which encourages them to become confident and independent learners.

Staff members provide the children with a beautifully prepared environment where they are free to employ their natural tendency to learn through exploration and play. The children are generally free to work where they choose, and with which activity, and they learn at their own pace according to their individual needs and capabilities while guided by well-informed staff. The mixed age range allows the children to develop a sense of family with their classmates. They become a family of learners who support and care for each other. These bilingual children effortlessly move from one language to another with the support of native speakers in both languages.

The application of Montessori philosophy is seamlessly woven through the ethos of the whole nursery and is defined in writing throughout the school's written and verbal communication with the parents. The peaceful and industrious atmosphere in the classrooms is evidence of the excellent partnership the adults have with the children as their role models.

Learning and Development:

The majority of the children arrive between 8.00 and 8.30. When they enter the classroom they are able to help themselves to breakfast and access the learning materials before joining a group activity. On the day of the visit the younger children attended an English lesson group and the older children were working on a numeracy activity, which was appropriate for their age and stage of development. When these groups finished the children joined their class for independent learning for the rest of the morning work cycle. An invitation system allows the children to move from one class to another should they choose to work with a particular piece of material in another room.

At 11.00 both classes join a group activity before getting ready to go out. The use of the outside is exceptionally well managed, especially as it was the first day it had snowed this winter. The children made good use of the snow, building snowmen, climbing and digging and generally enjoying the fresh winter landscape and relishing throwing snowballs. A very high degree of independence is given to the children at lunch as they prepare their tables, help themselves to food and wash their plates before putting them in the dishwasher. This offers the children a real life experience that is good for their self esteem. Literacy in both languages is very well supported with beautifully presented relevant activities.

Staff members are really excellent role models, interacting with their fellow workers as well as with the children in a respectful and courteous manner. They handle the materials with care and engage children in conversation about what they are doing, assisting if they need help and giving them time to complete their activities. Consequently, children interact with each other in a similar and respectful manner and take care when carrying their activities from the shelf to the floor or table. This was again evident at lunchtime with even the young children helping themselves to food and carrying it to the tables. The staff team uses positive language to support children's understanding of the boundaries of expected behaviour.

After lunch the majority of the children sleep. Another outstanding example of good practice is the way the children are settled for their rest. Care is taken to ensure that all the children who need to sleep are able to. During the later afternoon all the children attend different group timetabled activities. On the day of the visit some children were involved in role-play, some doing Ikendo, and others played with the puppet theatre recreating the story of the Three Little Pigs. While the children benefit from knowledgeable staff members, the balance between adult-led and child-initiated activities could be reviewed as they are capable and independent and enjoy working on their own on self-initiated activities.

The teachers plan for their key children with input welcomed from the other teachers. During the two day visit the children made bread (which smelt delicious) and yogurt. The children ate the bread at lunchtime and had the yogurt the following day. Staff members have time in the morning for individual teaching and presentations are relevant and appropriate.

All the staff members are responsible for making observations of the children throughout the day and for recording them both manually and digitally. The key teacher is responsible for compiling their key children's records. This system works well as all the staff work with all the children and therefore comprehensive assessments are made of the effectiveness of learning and development. Staff members have the opportunity for verbal exchanges everyday as they use the time the children sleep for meetings, planning and making new activities, thus making excellent use of their time.

All staff plan the main curriculum offered to the children together. They then differentiate the activities so that they meet the different ages and stages of the children attending. Long term planning is based on themes, activities and events, while individual planning for each child is based on the Montessori curriculum.

The staff team has established firm partnerships with the parents and with external agencies such as speech therapists and psychologists to ensure appropriate interventions for children with additional needs. They work closely with these specialists to ensure the best outcome for each child. One of the outstanding features of this setting is the way the children are supported in their acquisition of both English and Bulgarian in this truly bilingual nursery.

Prepared Environment: resources and materials

The two classrooms downstairs have plenty of materials and resources to support the children's learning and these are accessible and well organised. Both rooms have a comprehensive range and in each class there are different materials that contribute to a broad and interesting curriculum. One of the outstanding features of this nursery is the care the staff members take in making their own version of Montessori materials for the children to use. In particular the materials made to support the acquisition of early numeracy skills are inspiring. The equipment generally used to support the children's learning of fixed numerals and loose quantity has been beautifully re-interpreted and made by hand and proved to be popular with the children. This attention to detail is exceptional.

In addition to the comprehensive sets of materials there are also creative materials, plants and books in each area of learning; providing the children with larger brushes and bigger sheets of paper would further enhance this area. There are also extensive resources to promote the children's understanding of their own and other cultures. Currently the children spend two weeks at a time in each classroom, which is not long enough for the younger children to become fully absorbed in their learning environment. It is therefore recommended that this is extended to at least a month to give the children the time to repeat any activities they need to and experience a sense of belonging. The nursery already has an invitation system in place and some children can change rooms when they choose, which works well. All the children use the upstairs rooms for different small group activities in the morning. The oldest children use a school room for lessons to meet their developmental needs and the expectations of the Bulgarian early years curriculum, and others have an English group session. In the afternoon the children participate in a range of activities in the theatre, role-play area and the room for physical activities.

The large outdoor area has also been imaginatively resourced giving the children many opportunities to climb, garden, role-play and experiment with sand and water. A tree house is an exciting addition. This is equipped with sensory activities and is well used by the children. A small outside classroom is used during the summer months and a large covered area at the back of the nursery is used for painting and riding bikes. The children have the opportunity to grow and eat the vegetables they plant. It was observed that the children were encouraged to make connections between the outside and inside when they made a wormery and then went out to look for worms. The children take responsibility for keeping their environment safe and clean and the activities offered to them meet all their developmental needs comprehensively.

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

The children's independence is fostered as an integral part of their day and this aspect of the setting's practice is excellent. On arrival the children help prepare the breakfast and choose which table they want to eat at. The older children have a written activity to complete and some of the younger children join a group activity and then return to their

friends in the classroom where they self select activities .The children then have freedom to choose which area of their classroom they wish to work in. The children are trusted to access learning spontaneously and they showed great respect for their environment, friends, and materials. They are capable and independent and are ready to take on more responsibility for choosing which extra activity they participate in.

Snack is available to the children throughout the work cycle and they prepare the fruit themselves. They have real opportunities to wash dishes after their meals and all value this purposeful activity. The teachers are always ready to assist the children. Their consistency of approach and the predictability of the routines encourage the child's independence.

The staff team works with the families to help ensure that the level of independence that is established during the day at nursery is carried on when the child is at home. The parents have the opportunity to discuss their children's developmental progress very regularly.

Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records

Before the children start at the nursery the parents are given an opportunity to understand the purpose of Montessori education and therefore are able to decide if it will be a suitable environment for their family. The contact and information the nursery provides for the parents and the wider community is another outstanding feature of the way this nursery is run by the management team

Each child has a key person who is responsible for their record keeping, assessment, planning next steps and liaising with the parents. Staff members assimilate the information and write monthly reports on their key children so that the parents are able to follow their progress easily. Parents can also access specific aspects of their digital recording system. Newsletters and email correspondence augment this. Parents are able to talk to teachers every day if they choose and feel very involved in their children's routines.

The parents are very supportive of the work the staff members do for their children. As the parents are so well informed about the Montessori philosophy they are very comfortable in following the principles at home. Their knowledge and enthusiasm is a credit to the management team who work hard to promote the ideas behind their children's comprehensive learning programme.

Staff: qualifications, deployment, and performance management.

The management team support the staff exceptionally well at Casa dei Bambini. The owner/principals are truly committed to promoting the Montessori philosophy in Bulgaria and act as extremely diligent, competent and excellent role-models for their staff. There are twelve members of staff including the two owners. Three of these hold a Montessori diploma and the others have a variety of suitable qualifications.

An excellent induction procedure is in place. New staff members attend in-house training with the management and are supported by a peer mentor with regular supervision meetings. The whole staff team provides further support during the probation period and after if necessary. This is a very empathetic team. The regular staff meetings and staff observations, as well as continued professional development, ensure that the principal supports all her staff members comprehensively.

Casa dei Bambini places the children at the centre of everything it does and its staff should be highly commended for delivering an authentic Montessori environment across the whole setting.

Name of Assessor: Charlotte White (supported by Barbara Isaacs)

Date report submitted: 3 December 2016