

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 nor provides 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 Montessori

2222/M Leopards Hill Road, 10101 Lusaka, Zambia

Date of the accreditation visit: 21 November 2016

This accreditation is valid until 31 December 2020

This accreditation report relates to the provision for children aged 18 months to 5 years of age

Description of the school/nursery

Casa dei Bambini is located in a residential suburb south of Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, and is situated within fenced boundaries. The large plot, originally a farm, also hosts an established fitness centre and has planning permission for a new gym (under construction) and another Montessori school featuring five toddler and two pre-school classrooms (construction will start in January 2017).

The pre-school classroom for 2½ to 5 year olds is housed in an L-shaped room in the original building which also includes the staff's resource library, the kitchen, the children's toilet facilities, two adults' toilets – one with a nappy changing facility – and a stock room; the classroom benefits from direct access to a spacious outdoor area which is well equipped with both stationary and movable playground equipment.

The adjacent open plan toddler classroom for 18 months to 2½ year olds is housed in a purpose-built part of the house and comprises a separate kitchen and a children's toilet with nappy changing facilities; there is direct access to a smaller but equally well equipped outdoor area. Free flow for all the school's children is available. Air conditioning and natural light are features in almost all the rooms.

The school was established in 2014 by its current owners who are actively involved daily in the life of the setting. There are currently 39 children attending between the ages of 18 months and 5 years: 26 children are enrolled in the pre-school program while 13 are in the toddler program, which runs either on a part time (Tuesday to Thursday) or full time basis. The school day starts at 08:00 with an early drop off from 07:15 am; the day ends at 12:30; the management is organising an after school program starting in January 2017.

There are 11 members of staff: three have a Montessori qualification; two have a local pre-school teaching certification which grants them the role of assistants; one has a Special Educational Needs specialisation; two have obtained a BA in arts; and two members of staff hold no specific teaching or academic qualification. One of the two owners, who is also the Head of the School, has a BA in Early Childhood Education and a stage 1 MCI diploma. The school is open 40 weeks a year and operates term times in line with the nearby American school which many of the children's siblings attend. English is the language spoken throughout the day with one of the teachers communicating only in French to provide a more integral experience of this second language. Children bring their own snack from home.

Summary

Casa dei Bambini was born out of the owners' desire to bring the Montessori method of education to Zambia; their commitment, expertise and hard work, together with a dedicated team, ensure that this self-governing school is a welcoming and happy learning environment for the children where each child's uniqueness is valued and celebrated.

Casa dei Bambini is an ordered, well organized and loving environment where the children's holistic development is facilitated through freedom, respect, positive role modelling and copious learning resources; particular focus is placed on the development of independence, confidence and positive social skills. Throughout the prolonged daily work cycle children are encouraged to make their own choices of activities and work companions, this freedom of choice is extended also to any adult-led and extracurricular lessons the school organizes. The outdoor space is used extensively providing an effective free-flow learning environment.

All members of staff show great care and concern for each child's wellbeing and development, and for the needs of their families; the open-door policy enables parents and teachers to establish a friendly rapport built on professionalism and trust. The staff work as a coherent team ensuring that information on children's progress, resources and planning are shared.

Parents are very complimentary about the provision their children receive and have been very supportive of this accreditation process. They particularly appreciate the availability of the teaching team, the flexibility of school hours and the positive impact the Montessori approach has made on their children's behaviour and life.

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:

- Further training for more members of staff to work towards a Montessori qualification
- Consolidation of observation and planning techniques with planning to be more relevant to children's abilities, ages and interests and shared with parents

Philosophy:

Casa dei Bambini offers an excellent quality of Montessori education across all age groups: the younger children are allowed to establish and follow their own internal routines while the older children are also trusted with more responsibilities and to manage their own behaviour. This is further facilitated by the vertical grouping for toddlers and the pre-school children.

The Head of School's guidance and support ensures that all staff, even those not holding a relevant qualification, are aware of the main principles of the Montessori approach and are committed to their application. The mission and vision statements are included in many of the school documents; for instance, the school prospectus includes this inspirational quote "Our care of the child should be governed not by the desire to make him learn things but the endeavor always to keep burning within him that light which is called intelligence".

Comprehensive Montessori training resources are added to the library and mentoring is always available. This enables each member of staff to further develop personal knowledge and understanding of Montessori philosophy.

Casa dei Bambini is a multicultural setting welcoming and employing people of all cultures and walks of life; festivals and cultural celebrations are an integral aspect of its life and respect for everything and everyone enriches practice. In order to actively live these principles the staff, children and their parents are involved in projects which reach out to the local community. Teachers are also committed to challenge gender stereotypes.

The nursery demonstrates a commitment to and belief that the Montessori philosophy is not only an educational approach but a way of life which focuses on the development of each person's full potential.

Learning and Development:

Both the toddler and the pre-school classrooms are organized by areas of learning and with activities and materials that are appealing and appropriate to the children's level of development. The toddler environment offers selected but ample opportunities for gross and fine motor control and for sensorial exploration both indoors and outdoors. Exciting sensorial opportunities are created regularly: toddlers have explored painting and created art work using the whole of their bodies. On the day of the visit they were offered a 'sensorial bin' filled with white maize kernels and hidden objects, large enough for them to climb into. Particular emphasis is placed on guiding children to establish routines such as the choosing and putting away of activities, painting and snack.

The pre-school environment offers more academic opportunities such as Literacy and Numeracy, which are regularly assessed for relevance and suitability. The outdoor environments are fully used by all children, thanks to well established 'free flow' and suitable equipment. Outdoor learning opportunities are maximized by spontaneous discoveries of the natural world: a sudden thunderstorm is safely observed from a shaded area while the popular native millipede is sensitively handled and then observed through a 'scientist box' equipped with magnifying glass.

Montessori trained staff are responsible for overseeing practice and assessing observations carried out by assistants, planning topics and modelling presentations. Children are allowed to independently explore the materials before, during and/or after presentations as long as the ground rules are respected. The school is currently considering integrating the key person system into their practice.

The staff members know all children well. Individual check-list records and planning is detailed; however, informative daily observations followed by insightful evaluations would complement these records and would help with medium and long term planning reflecting the children's interests, life experiences and skills. Records are paper based.

When a concern or special education need is highlighted, the Head of School endeavours that relevant support is given either by the school's specialized staff or by external agencies.

During the three and half hour work cycle, learning opportunities are chosen freely by the children who can also decide to participate or not in weekly adult-led lessons such as Music, Art, French and Physical Education and in group routines such as circle time. The majority of the above mentioned extracurricular classes have a lesson plan that states learning objectives, includes differentiation for appropriate modifications according to age and level of development, and has a brief evaluation, mainly focused on the effectiveness of the lesson. French is also well integrated in the life of the setting. These lessons are skillfully integrated into the morning.

Provision in general is not only in line with the Montessori approach but also with the 2012 National Curriculum Framework stipulated by the Zambian Ministry of Education which, despite not being statutory, provides guidelines and Learning Outcomes for the Early Years.

Prepared Environment: resources and materials

In both classrooms the Montessori materials are organized in the areas of learning within an open plan environment where free flow between areas and with the outdoors is facilitated. The older children benefit from a wide range of activities that are appealing, well maintained and accessible, with only a few items of the large equipment needing help from an adult. The toddler program focuses on AEL and sensorial.

The Montessori learning resources available on the shelves are well selected to meet the current children's abilities and reflect the principles of the approach being functional, child-sized and show meticulous attention to detail. There is ample floor space and appropriate seating arrangements.

The traditional Montessori materials are complemented by a range of art and crafts, physical apparatus, traditional music instruments, book corner, dressing up area, interest table and construction blocks; the older children are also offered a peace corner and a well presented 'home corner' equipped with real fruits and vegetables and useful utensils. The snack table is a very social place: from the moment the children arrive they are free to unpack their own snack to which they can return during the day. All children can also access a movable cot if they feel tired or are unwell.

The outdoor environments in both programs are well equipped and maintained and feature a popular shaded sand pit; in view of the high temperatures, it is also recommended that a paddling pool is added. The lengthy paved path offers opportunity to use bicycles and tricycles and to mark-make with chalk.

The older children access the outdoors in small numbers – seven at a time; this is managed by children wearing necklaces when they go outside. This helps even the younger children to understand and follow this routine with ease.

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

Children's independence is highly valued and encouraged: children are only helped if needed to take off/put on their own shoes, apply sunscreen before going outside, blow their noses, set up and eat their snack and take care of their personal hygiene needs.

Emotional independence is encouraged by sensitively helping children to manage their own feelings, challenges and disappointments while promoting self-esteem, resilience and altruism.

Cognitive independence is fostered through exploration, experimentation and personal discovery; time and experience will enable staff to integrate sharing of learning with the children (Sustained Shared Thinking) into their practice.

Freedom is another highly valued aspect of the children's lives at Casa dei Bambini: they are encouraged and trusted to organise their day according to their needs and interests. They can choose what and whom to engage with, how long for, where and how; the two brief daily circle times take place every morning, to start the day welcoming each other, and just before pick-up time to say goodbye. Only the children who wish to take part in this routine.

All at Casa dei Bambini have the utmost respect for the nature of the child, the materials and each other; children are listened to, choices and opinions are valued, activities are well looked after by both staff and children.

Celebration of different cultures is a strong aspect of the life of the setting; much planning revolves around celebration of different festivals and holidays showing eagerness to expose young children to the interesting variety of cultures and beliefs; however, it is recommended that the staff consider the suitability of such topics for the age range of the children. Parents co-operate well with the school's requests to enhance independence: they ensure that their children's clothing is easy to wear, personal items are labeled and snack is ready to be eaten without much help required from the teachers.

Montessori Practice: links with parents, including reports and records

The school is proud of the professional yet friendly relationship it has built with all families; the open door policy to the head's office ensures that parents have access to advice, clarifications and support while daily communication with teachers ensures a continued update about their children's progress. Other means of communication include monthly newsletters, regular e-mails, WhatsApp and SMS messaging and invitations to evening meetings or 'sundowners'. A parent has suggested that more regular and frequent feedback on children's progress, their favourite activities and the topics covered in class is made available for working parents who cannot come to school on a daily basis.

A 'Listening Conference' is organised when a new child starts school for parents to inform the school of any relevant facts about their child, enabling a smoother settling in period and more relevant individual planning. Parents' conferences are organised twice a year, where updates on the children's home life and their school progress are discussed.

A comprehensive and detailed 'Policies and Procedures Parents' Handbook' and the Prospectus inform parents of every detail of the school's administrative and regulatory practices.

Parents are invited to participate in the life of the setting by joining in on special days and celebrations such as Zambia Independence Day and Thanksgiving; parents' support is also encouraged to help ease transitions such as settling in and during routines such as potty training. Some parents' professional expertise (e.g. medical) are

also sought in exceptional circumstances.

The school is considering the possibility of implementing the key person system into its practice; this will simplify record keeping and planning and communication with parents. Staff members are currently reviewing the children's Learning Journey compilation in order to make it more reflective of the child's holistic progress and a more meaningful reminder of the child's experience at the setting.

Staff: qualifications, deployment, and performance management.

Classroom management is exemplary in ensuring that each member of staff is aware of their roles and responsibilities; daily discussions, regular staff meetings, rotas, a clear managerial structure and frequent mentoring are all present to support enthusiastic teaching and the desire to implement the Montessori principles. Deployment is effective as the teachers' personal interests, passions and qualifications are considered when assigning roles.

Overseeing the wider environment and observations are shared by all: staff members move around confidently to supervise all areas and to record children's activities using cameras and checklists. Role modelling is an essential part of practice; for instance, staff eat their own snack with the children, modelling table manners, social skills and ground rules which are reinforced with positive language when needed.

The team is deeply committed to the care, well-being and education of the children and they enjoy their role within it; they said "The trust, love and openness that young children bring to the classroom is so unique and requires my complete attention and devotion.", and "I love to see the world through their eyes and know that every day is filled with wonder and discovery. Teaching is never boring and is stimulating. We laugh, we cry, we learn, we grow and we are here together building tomorrow".

Each classroom has a qualified staff member whose leadership and guidance support practice; however, all input from staff members is equally taken into account when planning. Local professional development facilities are scarce, especially regarding Montessori practice; the Head of School provides some in-house training and a workshop on observation and planning is organized for the start of the new term; this is in line with this report's recommendations. However, it is also recommended that the staff engage more directly with online training and consider studying towards a Montessori qualification.

Induction procedures, a detailed staff handbook and a supportive probationary period ensure that all new members of staff settle in well; peer observation and appraisal procedures have been recently put in place.

All parties working at Casa dei Bambini strive to provide excellent education for their children; commitment, enthusiasm, care, sensitivity and reflective practice ensure that the school is indeed The Children's Home. A particularly nice touch is the weekly

Montessori quotation which is written on a board outside each classroom's entrance door; on the day of the visit the one selected said: "One test of the correctness of educational procedure is the happiness of the child".

Name of Assessor: Michela Castellarin

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