

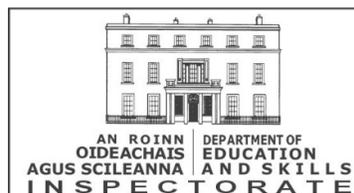
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Early-Years Education-focused Inspection
Report

Little Scholars Preschool
09WH0008

Coolmona
Moydrum
Athlone
County Westmeath

Date of Inspection: 18 May 2017



CONTEXT OF SETTING

Little Scholars Pre-school is a small purpose built, privately owned setting. It was first established in 2003. The pedagogical approach is play based and is underpinned by the principles of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. On the day of inspection, eighteen children were present together with the owner (who is the lead practitioner), and two other practitioners. The setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised in this report, and the response submitted on behalf of the setting can be found in the appendix of this report.

AREA 1

QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the context to support the children's learning and development is excellent.
- The atmosphere is very warm and welcoming. The children and parents are greeted individually by name at the door by one of the practitioners and they informally exchange information about the children.
- Genuine, reciprocal and affirming relationships are evident. These are fostered and developed through the key worker system in operation in the setting.
- The children are happy and eager to commence play on arrival. They are active agents in their play, independently choosing their play areas and play materials.
- Snack time is seen as a social occasion and children are empowered to take on designated organisational roles at this time. Three children have helper jobs, distributing the other children's bags. The practitioners sit with the children and engage in discussions about home life, animals, food, and upcoming events in the child's life.
- Transitions between activities are well signposted with a three-minute countdown. The children and practitioners sing the tidy-up song, 'Are you helping' which prompts all of the children to engage in the activity.
- A healthy eating policy is in place and children bring in their own healthy snack. A healthy lifestyle is discussed and promoted at various times throughout the day including circle time, free play and snack time. Examples of topics discussed are: 'What is health?', 'How do we build muscles?', and 'What is healthy food?' Routines such as hand washing before snack time, and activities and discussions with visitors on topics such as exercise, yoga, hurling, and running, add to the emphasis in the setting on good health and overall well-being.
- The environment supports the identity and belonging of the children through the numerous displays depicting the child's individuality and creativity, the children's own drawings and their descriptions of recent activities such as planting seeds, 'exploring' outer space and baking.
- The setting is very integrated with the community. The practitioners have organised for many visitors to come to the setting. These include a Garda, a farmer, and local hurling team players.
- Parents, children and families regularly come together during the year for celebrations and events. These include a Christmas concert, an end-of-year celebration and the pre-school tour. Great recognition and value is placed on the children's cultural and family backgrounds, as illustrated by the setting when parents and grandparents were invited into the setting to share their skills, occupation and experiences in the community.

AREA 2

QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

- The quality of the processes to support the children's learning and development is excellent.
- The setting has developed a broad based, emergent curriculum that is responsive to the children's evolving interests and learning and is linked to the learning goals of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.
- In their comprehensive planning, the practitioners document short-term, medium-term and long-term goals. The approach to planning is balanced in that it incorporates practitioners' ideas while at the same time being responsive and emergent in light of the children's evolving interests, needs and dispositions.

- Approaches to assessment are excellent. The children's individual learning journals show that the practitioners gather comprehensive information about the children's learning and development. The journals contain samples of the children's art, samples of their free mark making and photographs of their activities. The practitioners document the children's quotes and thoughts about their creativity on the children's pictures. The practitioners also use the *Aistear* learning record observations as a means of assessment. Their very effective use of this assessment document provides a rich picture of each child's individual development and incorporates ideas of how to extend the learning for each child.
- A well-developed group learning journal which is linked to *Aistear; the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* details the emergent interests of the children and the next steps of learning for the group.
- High quality interactions that support and extend children's learning were observed during the inspection. For example, during an activity that involved the children preparing the environment, the practitioner prompted the children to think about the positioning of the table and if it provided enough space for everyone. The children were given autonomy in their play and in their problem solving and the practitioners skilfully knew when to let the children persist and when they needed support.
- The indoor area is very well resourced and arranged in aesthetically pleasing and inviting ways. For example, the nature table prompts interest and discussion with its many real objects such as empty birds' eggs and a real bird's nest. Other stimuli in the setting such as tables with activities set out or displays of photographs of previous events are inviting to the children and promote engagement, discussion and reflection.
- The outdoor area is used daily and provides great opportunity for exploratory open-ended play. The sand area, the digging area, and the water trough facilitated many different role play experiences during the inspection. At the water trough one child was making a river, 'the Shannon' while another group was washing the playhouse. Other outdoor items of particular interest to the children include the mark-making area and materials, a tree house, a slide, and hula hoops.
- Parents are consulted and informed regularly about their child's learning through the sharing of the child's observations each term and through informal chats at arrival and departure times.

AREA 3

QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children's learning experiences and achievements is excellent.
- Children display engagement and enjoyment in their learning. They are motivated to learn through active engagement with resources and materials that are of interest to them. They freely choose what materials to play with and where they will play with them.
- The children are very competent and capable in their play; they regularly discuss their play with both their peers and the practitioners in order to develop and extend it. This was illustrated on many occasions throughout the session observed. For example, when a child was making a bus, he discussed with another child the similarities and differences between his bus and the one they went on for the recent pre-school outing.
- The children display self-confidence and are very competent at both making decisions and problem solving together. At circle time children discussed how they would prevent their 'egg' from falling off the spoon in the sports day, with one child presenting the solution that if it did fall it would be on the grass so 'it won't break'.
- The children understand the use of language and print. They express themselves, their feelings, thoughts and ideas both verbally and through their creativity. The children often refer to the signs and displays in their environment and use them in their play, as illustrated when a child referred to the zoo sign, 'No feeding the animals'.
- The children frequently share their success with both their peers and the practitioners.
- The children regularly reflect on their learning and play, informally throughout the day and formally before the end of the day while waiting to go home in a large group discussion facilitated by the practitioners.
- The children understand boundaries and the rules of play. They play co-operatively, negotiating the rules between them as the play progresses.
- The children are developing the capacity to respond to a number of 'I wonder' questions posed by the practitioners such as 'I wonder what will happen when the fire truck arrives?'

- The children have a growing understanding of mathematical concepts and often include mathematical language in their play. For example, during the inspection they used words such as 'big', 'huge', 'How many?' 'How much?' 'tallest' and 'biggest'. They also display some skills in using money concepts and counting. They often count objects and each other and they also count down to the transition periods in both English and Irish.

AREA 4

QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is excellent.
- Team meetings are organised monthly. At these meetings agenda items are agreed and cover matters such as revising policies, curriculum planning and reflections, documenting children's learning, communication with parents, and staff training. Detailed individual personal reflections are documented on the past month's curriculum.
- The team are engaging with the *Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide* to support their quality development.
- The team are committed to continuous professional development and have expressed a wish to attend *Aistear* training in the future.
- There is a professional ethos in the setting. There is clarity around the different roles and responsibilities. Excellent teamwork and shared leadership are evident.
- The team have identified a clear vision of their setting where play is valued and is used as the method of teaching young children.
- Many commendable efforts are made to encourage parents to engage with the setting. They include parents sharing information about their professions or interests, parental involvement in fundraising initiatives, a charity cycle, and parental participation in cultural events in the setting. The latter was particularly evident in the materials documenting *Seachtain na Gaeilge* (Irish Week) events and an Irish music and dancing event.
- Parents are supported to become familiar with the setting through an information day, where they meet the team members and hear about the setting and the curriculum. A handbook is given to parents with a summary of the most relevant policies such as healthy eating, Child Protection, and settling in. Parents are also given an information handout on 'Preparing your child for pre-school'.
- The children's transition from pre-school to primary school is supported through the development of the relationship with the local school. The principal from that school visits the setting in February to chat with the children, and then again in June, when he attends the celebration at the end of the year where he is sometimes joined by the junior infants teacher. The children engage in some activities to familiarise themselves with the school. These include going for a walk up to the primary school, return visits to the setting by past pupils who talk to the children about school, and the availability of old uniforms and tracksuits for the children to look at. Parents are also given a 'Preparing for big school' information leaflet.

CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE

The capacity of the service to continue to provide high quality educational experiences for the children attending it is excellent.

Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

Area	Quality Level
Quality of context to support children's learning and development	Excellent
Quality of processes to support children's learning and development	Excellent
Quality of children's learning experiences and achievements	Excellent
Quality of management and leadership for learning	Excellent

Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

Excellent	Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.
Very good	Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.
Good	Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.
Fair	Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.
Poor	Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.