

Susan Gregory,
National Director, Inspection Delivery
Ofsted
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Store Street
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Dear Ms Gregory,

- 1.1 I am writing in response to our recent Early Years inspection carried out by Jill Steer on behalf of Tribal, for Ofsted.
- 1.2 Jill Steer assessed the overall quality of the service, care and education we offer to the children at The Montessori Place as 'Good' on the scale of 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Satisfactory' and 'Inadequate'. Since then we have received congratulatory messages from the Head of Children and Family services at Brighton & Hove City Council, and many other professionals who work with children.
- 1.3 Since 'Good' is generally seen as an outcome to celebrate – especially for an inspection in our first term of operation - the obvious thing to do is to nod politely, say thank you, and move on. However, we were very dissatisfied with the quality of the inspection and felt that overall the Inspector was not sufficiently competent in two areas, nor thorough in a third:
 1. Effectively observing the children's behaviour.
 2. Interpreting the children's behaviour in light of the assessment standards.
 3. Seeking information about our leadership and management.

2.0 Effectively observing the children's behaviour.

- 2.1 With regard to the first of these points, we thought that her presence in the children's environments was quite obtrusive. We place a great value on providing consistency and order for the children, to the extent that every single day last term the same adults were with the children. We are also very conscious of our potentially dominant presence as adults in a community of small children. It is of course the case that an Inspector must see all parts of the environment used by the children, and have some interactions with them, but this must be done with an understanding of one's own impact on a room, otherwise what one sees is not the community as it is, but the community as it reacts to one's presence.
- 2.2 In our Infant Community of children from 12 to 36 months, Ms Steer quickly became a significant focus of the children's attention. For example as the children were laying their own places for lunch, their concentration on this complex task was significantly interrupted by Ms Steer choosing to sit, almost around the lunch table, with the bright screen of her lap top open and typing on the keyboard.
- 2.3 In the Children's House where I work with the children aged 3 years and over, she chose to sit at one of the children's tables in the middle of the room again with her laptop open, inputting information. The children have rarely seen an adult they know sitting at one of these tables, let alone a stranger with a computer. It goes without saying that children are inquisitive, so how does the Inspector assess the disturbance such behaviour has on the children? In our practice we seek to be a presence to those that need us, but as invisible as possible to those that are engaged. So, much as they were in the Infant Community, the eyes of the room were often drawn to Ms Steer. Other Inspectors I have met have, as much as possible, sat discreetly on the side of the room and used a pen and paper.
- 2.4 In our Montessori practice we place great emphasis on supporting child-led activity, carefully creating an environment and atmosphere that supports the children to think and act for themselves. Once a child is engaged, we place high value on protecting their emerging concentration from external disturbance and interruption. By unwittingly making herself a dominant feature of the environment, we question what exactly Ms Steer was observing. If she was apparently so unaware of her own presence, we find it unlikely she was able to make objective and authentic observations of the children, thereby undermining her evidence.

3.0 Interpreting the behaviour she did observe in light of the assessment standards.

3.1 The extent to which children develop skills for the future.

During the feedback session Ms Steer asked us a number of questions about different areas of our work. One area she brought up was the use of

computers. At no point in this discussion did she suggest that she would grade The Montessori Place as merely 'satisfactory' under the standard 'The extent to which children develop skills for the future'.

3.1.1 The guidance for Inspectors states the following:

“Inspectors should evaluate:

- *children’s ability to apply skills appropriate to their age in communicating, literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology*
- *the extent to which children are prepared for transition from the setting to school*

Outline guidance

Inspectors should take into account:

- *children’s skills in communicating, literacy, numeracy and progress in developing information and communication technology skills*
- *the extent to which children are active, inquisitive and independent learners*
- *children’s developing ability to solve problems*
- *the extent to which children’s understanding of the wider world is demonstrated through their play”*

3.1.2 The Inspector could and should have observed numerous excellent examples of each of these last four points. Our whole Montessori environment is set up to support and encourage the children, from as young as 12 months old, to solve real-life problems on a moment by moment basis (such as cleaning a dirty mirror). All our materials are laid out on the shelves, prepared in such a way so as to allow the children to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and discovery of the world. In this process there is a constant communication between the children, negotiating and discussing as they go about life in a mediated community. They are both led through, and choose, a range of literacy, numeracy and other problem solving activities on a daily basis, as they did the day Ms Steer came.

3.1.3 Finally, there is the one subsection of a subsection 'information and communication technology'. The children routinely use 'programmable toys' (the phrase used in the Early Years Foundation Stage) in the form a CD player, and use a range of other everyday technology including making electricity circuits and turning light switches on and off, as well as using mechanical technology such as hole punches. Ms Steer asked about technology and we outlined all of these experiences on offer to the children.

3.1.4 Ms Steer then asked about computers in particular – ie screens and keyboards. We said we didn't have these available to children in the Early Years age group. We sought to have a professional discussion with Ms Steer about what she thought this additional equipment would bring to the environment and she stated that it was important for the children's experience of 'cause and effect' because they would press a button and see a result. My colleague, Paul Pillai, commented that cause and effect might be

better experienced by young children through seeing a dropped cup break, or a cloth they are holding wipe away a mark. Ms Steer went on to say that the children might not be well prepared for adult life in a computer-literate world if they were not using screens and keyboards at this age (1, 2, 3 and 4 year olds). We do not agree with this position.

3.1.5 It is not, as I understand the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum, a requirement for children to use screens and keyboards at this age. In fact when the Early Years Foundation Stage was launched in 2008 the Government published a guide for parents and the media “Early Years Foundation Stage - Everything you need to know” which included a ‘myth buster’ section which explicitly states:

‘There is no requirement in the EYFS to use computers or any other specific form of technology’.

It is our view that Ms Steer has given insufficient weighting to all the other aspects of this standard. We also believe that she downgraded us largely on the basis of our questioning of the pedagogical basis of keyboards and computers for very young children, rather than on the basis of the technology that the children use and are exposed to at The Montessori Place. I would be grateful to know if an absence of keyboards and screens is a accepted Ofsted criterion for downgrading the whole standard. If it is not, Ms Steer appears to have acted inappropriately.

3.2 The extent to which the children make a positive contribution

During the feedback session another part of the discussion we had with Ms Steer related to the standard ‘The extent to which the children make a positive contribution’.

3.2.1 The guidance for Inspectors states the following

“Inspectors should evaluate:

- *the extent to which children take on responsibilities and play a part in the setting and wider community.*

Outline guidance

Inspectors should take account of the following:

- *children’s enjoyment of and attitudes towards learning, including their desire to participate, willingness to make choices*
- *how well children behave, join in, cooperate and share with each other*
- *how well children make friends, respect each other and accept each other’s differences*
- *the extent to which children respond to the expectations of those who work with them*
- *children’s ability to make appropriate choices and decisions.”*

- 3.3.2 On the morning the Ofsted Inspector visited she could have seen dozens of beautiful moments; in the Infant Community a 1 year old cleaned a table, a 2 year old chopped grapes to share at lunch while another cleaned the painting easel for a friend. In the Children's House a 4-year-old scrubbed three stools, turning each over to make sure all sides were clean. A 3-year-old watered the plants and a 4 year old gave a 3 year old a lesson in how to use the zip frame. All of this carried out with great independence and chosen spontaneously.
- 3.3.3 On the day Ms Steer came, as on most days, at least 50% of the things the children under 5 are doing are explicitly about making a positive contribution; things are returned to the shelf so that are 'ready for our friends' and knowledge and skills are shared rather than possessed. It is just what the children do. In fact any half-decent Montessori school has such an advantage in this area of the Early Years Foundation Stage that something is seriously amiss if they are not deemed 'good' or 'outstanding' in this regard.
- 3.3.4 Ms Steer had graded us as 'Good' in this area so we asked why she had not given the grade of 'Outstanding', and specifically what she would have expected to see that would have merited the highest grade. She made two main points in response. The first was that since we were new, the high standards hadn't been maintained over a period of time. This is not an appropriate criterion for grading this standard. For better or for worse, Ofsted Inspections are explicitly a snapshot. If on that particular day the children's behaviour in relation to making a 'positive contribution' met the Ofsted definition of 'Outstanding' then that must be the grade given.
- 3.3.5 The second point she made came up in a form of a question. She quizzed us as to why we didn't have 'small world' dolls with different skin tones in the environment. These dolls, she said, would have helped the children's understanding of human diversity. There are children who attend The Montessori Place whose origins include Iranian, Cuban, Canadian, First Nation, Sri Lankan, American, Australian, Spanish and British. Our staff nationalities include Indian, Venezuelan, French and English. Numerous languages and customs are shared and experienced. During the feedback discussion we said that we didn't know what 'Small World' dolls were, but later discovered these were a Walt Disney product. They appear to be sweet dolls, but to suggest them as a route to valuing human diversity betrays an extremely superficial understanding of human development.

4.0 Seeking information about our leadership and management.

During her visit very little time was spent exploring our practice in relation to our leadership and management, either in discussion or by looking at paperwork. Perhaps because Ms Steer also inspected us for our pre-registration inspection, she felt she had already seen the paperwork. The standard relating to our 'engagement with parents and carers' illustrates this point.

4.1 The guidance for Inspectors states the following

“Inspectors should evaluate:

- *the quality of the setting’s communication with parents/carers*
- *the extent to which the setting takes account of parents’/carers’ and children’s views and how well they are involved in contributing to decision making about the provision*
- *the extent to which the setting enables parents/carers to support and make decisions about their own children’s learning, well-being and development.*

Outline guidance

Inspectors should take account of the following:

- *the extent to which parents/carers and children’s views are sought and acted on*
- *the extent to which parents/carers are provided with good quality information about the early years provision*
- *how parents/carers are informed about their children’s achievements and progress*
- *the extent in which parents/carers are encouraged to share what they know about their child, particularly when the child first starts to attend*
- *opportunities to encourage parents/carers to be involved in supporting their children’s learning and development.”*

4.2 Ms Steer could have seen the children’s views being acted on the day she visited. Amongst other moments, she was present during a discussion about the Christmas play that had been chosen and adapted by the children - and written by the older children. I could list numerous examples of how the children’s views are routinely sought and acted on; certainly it was not my choice to call the guinea pigs ‘Terry’ and ‘Pebbles’. But it is clearer under this standard to give examples for which there is documentation to back up my assertions, rather than focus on what she did or didn’t see with the children.

4.3 Below is a list of some of the things we have done in this area since we opened our doors just 13 weeks prior to the Inspection:

- Distributed questionnaires for parents to complete before their child starts, asking for a range of information about their child
- Carried out home visits for all the children in the Infant Community before they start, lasting on average 90 minutes. On many occasions there were two or three visits before they started to get to know the family and the child.
- Arranged ‘Tea-party’ events for groups of parents to come in before their child starts to discuss the content of the parent handbook and become familiar with the setting.
- Arranged for one or more visits for each child before they started so that they could further get to know us and the environment.

- Gave each family a bespoke and extensive parent handbook (a copy of which is enclosed).
- Held telephone conversations with parents at the end of the child's first day.
- Gave regular feedback to parents at pick-up time.
- Engaged in routine email correspondence with parents taking onboard their views about aspects of our provision.
- Held individual meetings with the parents of every child during the Autumn term lasting between 1 and 2.5 hours each, discussing all aspects of their child's progress and development.
- Made available a library of books on Montessori education and general child development that is freely available to parents in the family room.
- Prepared a large room with a kitchen table and chairs, and tea and coffee making facilities, given over to use by parents and carers to encourage them to play a full part in the life of The Montessori Place.
- Freely distributed a booklet about communication with children that was produced in-house.
- Hosted a poetry-themed social evening at the beginning of the Autumn term
- Held a talk and discussion evening on child development
- Held a series of small discussion groups focussing on practical responsibilities young children can take on.
- Held a talk and discussion about language development with practical games that parents can play with their children.
- Hosted a pot-luck lunch party after the Christmas Play.

Documented evidence of all of the above was available including notes and minutes from meetings, but the Inspector did not ask any questions relating to this standard. It is not clear how she came to the judgement of 'Good' if she was unaware of all of these facilities, activities and materials.

5.0 Early Years Register Inspection Survey

In the letter that accompanied the inspection report we were requested to complete the following survey questions about the inspection. I have outlined out main views above but for completeness, have included the survey question responses below.

Communication	
The arrangements were explained clearly by the Inspector at the start of the inspection	Agree
Inspection practice	
The Inspectors conduct was of a high standard	Strongly disagree
Clear formal feedback was provided at the end of	Disagree
Clear formal feedback was provided at the end of the inspection	Disagree

Evidence	
I am satisfied that the views of children were accurately explored by Inspectors	Disagree
I am satisfied that the views of parents were accurately explored by parents	Disagree
The Inspector challenged constructively the judgements and evidence provided in my self evaluation	Don't know (she didn't look at it during the visit)
Judgements	
Inspection judgements were fair and accurate	Strongly disagree
The oral feedback and the final report were consistent	Disagree
The findings in the written report were clearly stated	Disagree
The inspection identified clear actions or recommendations for improvement	Agree
Impact	
The outcome of the inspection process will help improve my early years provision	Disagree
The benefits of the inspection outweigh the negative aspects	Strongly disagree
Overall I am satisfied with the way the inspection was carried out	Strongly disagree
Which aspects of your provision, if any, are most likely to be improved as a result of this inspection. Please give examples	

6.0 Lastly I would be grateful to see all the evidence she gathered under each of the 17 standards, as this might give us a better understanding of the basis of her assessment, and help us to further understand her reasoning.

Overall we feel that the inspection was extremely superficial and does not represent a fair assessment of The Montessori Place.

I look forward to hearing your response to these concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Rob Gueterbock
The Montessori Place

C.C. Karen Bielby, DoE
Mary Ellinger, Children and Families, Brighton & Hove CC