Meet the Practitioner

During the past month we were fortunate to be able to visit Veronica Yeomans Early Years setting in Clontarf, Dublin. Veronica and her partner Joanne Kane own and run two settings, one in Clontarf and the other in Artane. Both go under the name The Montessori Circle with Clontarf and Artane added respectively. The Clontarf centre is run in a community centre which contains another Montessori School. When I arrived Veronica and her staff were in the middle of ‘Happy Feet’ an activity programme that combines dance and music. The music comes from Laurie Berkner and her band. Have a look at the type of songs available and you can visit their site for song lyrics. The children were having lots of fun and so were the teachers.

Afterwards Veronica & I headed across the road for lunch and I bombarded her with questions.

Interviewer: Tell me about you, why you became a Montessori Teacher & start your own business.

Veronica: When my son was born he had additional needs and I used to create experiences for him to help him interact with his environment. I spent time reading and sourcing materials so my son could experience the world sensorially. My daughter started to attend a Montessori School and as she told me about the things she was doing in school I realised she was doing all of the things I had created for my son! I started to find out as much as I could about Montessori and decided it was an approach to education which suited me.

Interviewer: So how did you go about opening your own school?

Veronica: Without my husbands help I don’t think we’d ever have gotten our school up and running. When we originally approached the parish council to seek permission to use the centre one of the members told us that if we wanted the room we’d have to rebuild it to our specifications. We worked really hard and my husband rebuilt the room over 2 weeks in the summer and we even changed the sewerage system.
The treasurer brought the committee members down to see the new and improved room and they said well done and gave us permission to use the room but it cost me a lot financially. We ran the school in that one room and when another room came available we lodged an expression of interest. The room was tired and needed a bit of a revamp. So once again we got stuck in, put down new flooring and painted the walls a nice neutral colour. I felt the net curtains on the windows blocked all the light so we took those down and installed new blinds on the windows and it was soon gorgeous. Unfortunately the rooms are not exclusively ours. Every day we have to tidy away everything, materials, shelves, tables, chairs; the whole lot gets put into our storage room so the room is ready for others to use in the evenings. I come in early to set up the room and I’d love a purpose built place where we don’t have to put stuff away. Joanne in our other setting in Artane is able to leave everything out. Having to re set the room everyday takes time and you’re tired before you even start the day. But the centre has plenty of plus points too; there’s plenty of parking, it’s well heated and has a staffed reception, so although taking apart the classroom is a hassle the benefits outweigh the drawbacks

I: What is your daily schedule like?
V: We have to tailor our schedule to suit the children who are availing of the ECCE scheme and are here for only 3 hours a day and the children who attend for 4 hours per day. It’s a real challenge because we don’t want children to miss out. We use The Complete Daily Curriculum for Early Years by Pam Schiller & Pat Phipps to help structure the programme we have available. We plan our curriculum seasonally, so in August we create the curriculum up to Halloween in October and in October we plan what we are going to do up to Christmas and so on. We have a Daily Schedule displayed where every teacher can see it and we also have a forward planner where we write down items we may need to provide for activities. We also bring in additional classes and teachers to facilitate to add a bit of variety to our setting. In the past we’ve had classes in Irish Sign Language and would highly recommend it as the children still use it in the classroom especially when it’s quiet. We include yoga and meditation in our schedule,
I: What qualities do you look for when recruiting staff and how do you approach CPD?

V: I’ve been very luck in the staff I have working for me; all of them are friends and mums so the hours suit them. Karen and my children went to Montessori together, I met Justine on a course, and Laura just fell on board as did Cara and Yvonne. The high staff ratio means we can cope if one of us can’t make it in. With 4 adults to 20 children none of us are stretched and if a child needs extra support one of the teachers will be assigned to support him/her in whatever way they can. The teacher is alert and able to respond quickly to the child’s needs and redirect the child’s attention. I expect high standards from my staff and so far I haven’t been disappointed. We all dress well for work and model good behaviour when dealing with children or when talking amongst ourselves.

Opportunities to enhance skills and continue in our professional development are crucial to maintaining the high quality service we deliver. But paying for training is difficult. We tend to source courses from the North Side Partnership who offer courses for about €40 which I pay for and then claim back on tax. Although it’s difficult to find the money I’m lucky to be situated in a parish centre where commercial rates are included in my rental agreement. But after paying rent, insurance and wages it’s still a struggle to find the money. The Early Childhood Care and Education scheme doesn’t include any provision for CPD training although it’s a requirement for Síolta and Aistear.

I: How do you communicate with staff/parents?

V: We operate an open door policy; in essence parents are encouraged to spend time exploring the setting. We don’t interview parents but when they visit the setting initially we try to answer their questions honestly and make them feel comfortable. Some parents don’t know what is expected of them and we encourage the children to share with their parents what we do at school and to tell them all their news. At times parents like to chat to you at the door and as we have such a high adult to child ratio that isn’t a problem for us.
We open the door wide so the parents can see their child and see right into the room. I know if I as a parent wasn’t allowed inside the door I’d be very annoyed. And because of our open door policy we find parents are happy.

When it comes to communicating with staff we work as a team, I value their opinions and they value mine. It can be difficult balancing a work relationship with a friendship but somehow we manage to pull it off.

I: What are your hopes for the future?

V: I’d like to create a centre of excellence based on Montessori with complimentary therapies, music, art, primary movement, massage, yoga etc., where the child can come and develop at truly their own level. I think there’s a need for such a facility and that it should be funded by the government because if children get what they need early in life they would need less support later on in life.

As I finished my second cup of coffee I had to admire what Veronica had achieved. She has employed a number of staff and is running a successful business. My last question to her was if she could change anything about herself what would she change? Veronica said she’d like to be more business minded but then again as she noted, if she was more business minded she never would have opened her school because she never expected to make money doing what she loves, she opened her school with her heart.