



Office for Standards
in Education

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Inspection report
TreeHouse
Independent special school

Dates of inspection: 4-5 November 2002

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Basic information about the school

Name of school:	TreeHouse
Address of school:	49 Mecklenburgh Square London WC1N 2NY
Type of school:	For pupils with autism and related communication disorders
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	3-11
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Annual fees:	Day: £42,384
Telephone number:	020 7681 9983
Fax number:	020 7419 7714
Headteacher:	Simon Eccles
Proprietor:	The TreeHouse Trust
Chair of governing body:	Lord Tim Clement-Jones
DfES Number:	202 6397
Reporting inspector:	Andrew Littlewood HMI
Dates of inspection:	4-5 November 2002

Part A: Summary of the report

Scope and purpose of the report

1. This inspection was carried out at the request of the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, who has asked for reporting inspections to be undertaken of non-approved independent schools that educate and care for pupils with special educational needs. It was completed by five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), who spent two days in the school. The purpose of the inspection was to advise the Secretary of State about the quality of the school's provision under the Education Act 1996. The report concentrates on those aspects of the school relevant to that purpose.

Information about the school

2. TreeHouse is an independent school with charitable status for pupils with autism and related communication disorders. The school was established by a group of parents in 1998. It is situated in attractive, well maintained premises in the south of the London Borough of Camden. There are seven classes and currently 31 pupils on roll, most with severe learning difficulties. Their ages range between four and ten and there are 26 boys and 5 girls. The pupils come from a diverse range of social, economic and ethnic backgrounds and their places at the school are funded by the family's home local education authority. All the pupils have a statement of special educational need and most displayed significant levels of challenging behaviour on entry to the school.

3. The school's core belief is that children learn most successfully in an atmosphere of positiveness, warmth and understanding and it aims to enable its pupils to fulfil their potential, particularly in communication, independence, social interaction and life skills and participate and function in society as much as they are able. It supports the pupils' behaviour modification and learning through teaching strategies which emphasise detailed behaviour analysis and it continues to review and evaluate its practices to ensure that the provision accurately meets the needs of each pupil. The school provides a high proportion of individual teaching for each pupil, ensuring that their learning is carefully managed and reinforced through the regular interactions with the staff.

How good the school is

4. TreeHouse is a good school with many strengths. Relationships throughout the school are excellent and it provides a very high level of personal care and support for all its pupils.

5. The positive leadership provided by the headteacher has ensured that all the staff have a very good understanding of the school's aims and core beliefs, work in harmony and continue to promote the school's strong ethos. Together with the chief executive, trustees and senior managers, the headteacher has provided clear direction and purpose which has brought the school through considerable changes, including relocation to new premises and a threefold increase in both pupils and staff over the past three years, to its current good position.

6. The quality of teaching throughout the school is always satisfactory and mainly good. All the staff have a detailed knowledge of how to support the pupils in their care, reduce their anxieties and help them to develop and improve the good attitudes to learning they now demonstrate. The pupils themselves respond positively to the assistance provided, show increasing levels of concentration and interest in their work and behave well. However, the range of teaching strategies used to help the pupils consolidate ideas and reinforce and generalise their new skills and understanding needs to continue to be broadened.

7. The school's curriculum is reasonably broad and balanced and the range of activities offered help pupils to develop suitable learning strategies and provide a sound base on which to build subject-specific skills. The school recognises that it now needs to focus on creating a coherent approach to the development of a more subject based curriculum, particularly to support the continuing progression of the pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, and is currently seeking to address this issue.

What the school does well

- It is very successful in reducing the pupils' levels of challenging and self harming behaviour, providing effectively for their continuing care and welfare and establishing a calm and happy working atmosphere throughout the school;
- It provides effectively for the pupil's personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development;
- The school successfully helps the pupils to gain in confidence and independence and celebrates their achievements;
- All staff work very hard to maintain the high quality, close links the school has established with parents;
- There are clear lines of communication within the school which ensure that all the staff are well informed and adopt a consistent approach when supporting each pupil's learning;
- The school has an enthusiastic, energetic, dedicated, committed and well qualified staff who work effectively together as a strong team;
- It has produced good policies and guidelines for all aspects of the school's life;
- It has a detailed system for monitoring and assessing the pupils' progress towards their behaviour targets, which is carefully followed by all staff;
- It provides good quality support, monitoring and training for all staff, is open to new ideas, regularly reviews current practice and is ready to make changes when necessary;

-
- The school's trustees and managers have a clear vision for the school and have produced detailed business and development plans for the next five years.

What could be improved

- curriculum planning, in order to promote a more cohesive overview of several of the subjects, particularly literacy and numeracy and enable staff to reinforce the good features which are already included, identify and rectify omissions and present and develop the pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding more effectively;
- the range of teaching strategies used by the staff, particularly to support paired or group work so that the pupils can have additional opportunities to consolidate ideas and further develop the skills they have already learned;
- the assessment procedures, to reduce the amount of time required to complete each entry and to include a more cohesive assessment of the pupils' progress in the acquisition of subject specific skills and understanding.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the school's action plan.

Part B: Commentary

How high are standards?

The school's results and achievements

8. The pupils make steady progress in English with several making good advances in the development of their reading skills. They recognise their names, enjoy and use books appropriately and listen carefully to stories. They use simple pictures, signs or symbols to communicate their needs and follow instructions well. Some are beginning to learn and recognise initial letter sounds, copy letter shapes and create marks using crayon and pencil as part of their imaginative play. However, opportunities to make links between the range of suitable activities provided are not fully exploited by the staff and, as a result, a few pupils are not achieving their full potential in literacy.

9. The pupils have the opportunity to access a range of mathematical activities and many pupils make good progress in aspects of the subject. They recognise numerals by both their names and shapes and match pairs during simple games or when recording the date during circle time. Several count a few objects with accuracy and identify simple shapes. However, as the pupils progress, this useful work occasionally lacks the co-ordination necessary to enable the pupils to make effective links between their developing mathematical skills.

10. Pupils explore and investigate objects and materials using their senses appropriately and identify similarities and differences. They recognise changes in the weather, match symbols with different climatic conditions and are making satisfactory progress in their understanding of scientific ideas. Construction toys are used effectively by the pupils to create a range of shapes and objects and many use simple tools appropriately. Some pupils use suitable computer programs well to develop hand/eye co-ordination and reinforce their observation and matching skills. The pupils enjoy the good range of musical and artistic activities which are regularly introduced and they are making good progress in following a rhythm and making music using simple percussion instruments.

Pupils' attitudes, values and personal development

11. The pupils show an interest in the activities prepared for them and co-operate very well with the adults with whom they work. They listen carefully, work independently for short periods and all the pupils are making good progress in increasing length of concentration they can sustain. The pupils have positive attitudes to learning, are generally calm and happy, behave very well and enjoy their success. Relationships between pupils and staff are excellent.

12. Pupils make excellent progress in their personal and social development. They increasingly join in a wide range of social activities such as mealtimes or singing games. The school provides a stimulating and safe environment in which the pupils are able, with close adult support, to build their confidence and develop their independence. Their progress is encouraged and rewarded frequently and staff are quick to recognise and respond when the pupils' attention fades or they are distracted by other activities. As a result they are seldom

allowed to fail or reinforce inappropriate responses and should they become distressed, the consistent application of suitable, clear, well-understood and sensitively managed support, quickly restores calm. This practice is a strength of the school.

13. Several of the older pupils are beginning to work collaboratively for short periods with their classmates. Currently, insufficient time is given to extending this aspect of their development, particularly through opportunities to play and be involved in other group activities.

Attendance

14. The school maintains accurate attendance records. All the pupils attend regularly and parents almost always contact the school should their child be ill and unable to attend. Most of the pupils live some distance from the school and lateness because of transport difficulties is not unusual. Nevertheless, staff are waiting to welcome them at the school entrance and quickly settle them into the daily school routines.

How well are pupils or students taught?

15. The inspectors observed each of the seven class groups on three separate occasions over periods of up to an hour and a half and during these times they made notes on 37 different teaching activities including direct subject work and individual support at mealtimes. The quality of teaching overall is good. The majority of the lessons were either good or very good. Teaching was very good in three sessions; good in 22 (three fifths); and satisfactory in the other 12 (one third). The teachers prepare detailed programmes for each pupil, manage the activities well and ensure that each of the teaching assistants is fully briefed concerning their responsibilities. All staff have a very good knowledge of the needs of the pupils and apply the school's agreed teaching strategies effectively, offering plenty of praise and encouragement to the pupils while maintaining their positive progress towards the successful completion of each activity. Work continues at a good pace, good use is made of a range of suitable learning resources and monitoring progress and noting responses that indicate that the pupil is working towards their targets is of a high quality. The current recording process is very detailed but too cumbersome and a working party has been established to seek ways of making it more efficient.

16. The staff work excellently in partnership with each other. The teachers and teaching assistants spend about three quarters of each day working with individuals. During this time they consolidate and build on previously learned skills and understanding, rehearse and improve good behaviour and work to reduce inappropriate habits. These sessions are composed of several different activities, each lasting only as long as the pupil is able to concentrate and sustain progress. In order to keep the pupil's interest the activities vary and as a result it is difficult to establish and reinforce the links between activities and skills in which the pupils have been involved. The good progress many of the older pupils, who are now able to demonstrate good levels of independence and work collaboratively with each other, now needs to be consolidated more effectively. During current group activities work is planned and presented but in most examples the teaching strategies that would make best use of these occasions are not fully understood by the staff. Some good ideas are currently being discussed and tested in one class. For example, the pupils group together to complete their own jigsaw puzzles in preparation for the time when they can all work together to complete

one puzzle. The school hopes to introduce teaching strategies such as these throughout the school when all the staff have been fully trained.

How good are the curricular and other opportunities offered to pupils or students?

17. The school's curriculum provides a reasonably broad, balanced and relevant range of activities and an adequate amount of time is allocated to each subject. The activities have been carefully selected for the pupils to ensure that they are well motivated and can successfully complete the work required during the often short periods in which they are able to give the activity their full attention. During these sessions, the pupils work individually with a teacher or teaching assistant, make very good progress and are encouraged to feel proud of their achievements. As a result, they generally enjoy their studies, take an increased interest in their work and their levels of concentration and behaviour improve.

18. This strategy provides a good basis for further study, has helped the pupils to develop good attitudes to learning and has done much to reduce inappropriate behaviour and sustain the calm, confident and accepting manner in which the pupils approach new work. For the pupils to make further advances in their studies the school recognises the value of consolidating and building on the pupils' learning by drawing together the many brief, relevant experiences already provided into a systematic scheme for each subject. Details identifying this initiative as a priority are described in the school's development plan but it has yet to be introduced and, for certain pupils, the school currently pays insufficient attention to the sequential development of their subject specific skills and understanding, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

19. Currently, the senior managers have direct responsibility for curriculum planning. This enables the teachers to give more attention to supporting and monitoring the pupils' progress, liaising with parents and teaching assistants and maintaining the day-to-day classroom organisation. However, it is important that all the teachers are involved in planning for the more focused literacy and numeracy work as they will be expected to prepare suitable activities to match the needs of their pupils and aid their progress.

20. The school has detailed and useful procedures for assessing and recording the pupils' behavioural progress, which are currently being simplified. The arrangements for monitoring the pupils' academic progress, especially in literacy and numeracy, are less detailed and will need to be reviewed in the light of the curriculum planning shortly to be introduced. It would be useful to combine the two systems to enable staff to monitor and record the pupils overall progress at the end of each lesson.

21. The school's provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very good. It values each pupil's progress, celebrates their successes and works hard to raise their self confidence and independence. Opportunities to share and take turns are carefully planned and good use is made of stories, music and art to develop the pupils' cultural understanding. The school is very successful in supporting the pupils' personal development. Staff work closely with parents to ensure that a common and co-ordinated approach is adopted. There are clear policies to support this good practice but further thought needs to be given to addressing issues of sex and relationships as pupils develop.

How well does the school care for its pupils?

22. The school provides a very high standard of personal support and care for its pupils. All the staff have a thorough knowledge of the pupils' needs and a conscientious approach to their welfare, which is reflected in the positive, shared ethos and ensures that the pupils are able to work in a safe, secure and watchful environment. It fulfils its health and safety responsibilities, ensures staff are properly trained and carry out risk assessments, deal with accidents, first aid, challenging behaviour and fire precaution and prevention matters effectively and keep appropriate records. The designated person responsible for dealing with child protection issues monitors this aspect effectively throughout the school and ensures that all staff are kept up to date. The pupils' care and welfare is a priority of all who are involved with the school.

How well does the school work in partnership with parents?

23. The school has established excellent links with all parents and works closely with them to support their children's progress. There are working groups comprising: staff and parents to seek ways of improving home school links even more; consider suitable educational provision for the pupils at secondary age; further develop the use of information and communication technology for the pupils; and a quality assurance group to have oversight of the working groups and establish consensus on future initiatives. The parents themselves also have their own group which meets regularly.

24. The school has a clear policy for reporting to parents which ensures that daily communication is maintained through a home/school book in which information of a more pastoral nature than details of academic progress are recorded. Parents respond regularly with comments on their child's sleeping or eating habits and behaviour. Each parent receives a weekly report detailing progress in learning and there are termly meetings during which past progress is discussed and new targets set. In addition, should it be necessary, home visits are arranged and daily contact maintained if the school and parents are tackling a particularly sensitive aspect of behaviour such as toilet training. The dedication and commitment of all the staff to do the best for the pupils at all times, often giving up evenings and weekends to provide additional support, is outstanding and much appreciated by parents.

How well is the school led and managed?

25. The school is well led and the positive and friendly style adopted by the headteacher has ensured that all the staff have a very good understanding of the school's aims and core beliefs and work in harmony together. The assistant headteacher, who joined the staff in September, has a well defined role and responsibilities and is already contributing effectively to the school's management and particularly curriculum development. With the headteacher and a team of experienced senior staff, day-to-day monitoring, organisation and planning are effectively addressed. The school makes good use of independent consultants, professionals and specialists to advise and train staff in aspects directly associated with the support of pupils with autism and keep up to date of current research in this field. The headteacher, chief executive and trustees provide the direction and sense of purpose which have brought the school through considerable changes, including relocation to new premises and a threefold increase in both pupils and staff over the past two years, to its current good position.

The school's trustees and managers have a clear vision for the school and have produced detailed business and development plans for the next five years.

What should the school do to improve further?

26. In order to improve further the quality of education provided and the progress made by the pupils the school should:

- continue to develop the curriculum to ensure a coherent approach, especially to the development of the pupils' numeracy and literacy skills;
- continue to improve the quality of teaching to include a broader range of teaching styles and strategies;
- review the current assessment procedures to include more detail concerning the pupils' progression in learning as well as their improvements in behaviour.

School data and indicators

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	37
Total number of hours	17.5
Number of discussions with staff, other adults and pupils	19

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
0	8	60	32	0	0	0

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

Information about the school's pupils

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
N	0	1	1
R	4	1	5
1	4	1	5
2	4	0	4
3	4	1	5
4	5	1	6
5	5	0	4
6	1	0	1

Number of pupils with English as an additional language	Number of pupils with statements of SEN
7	31

Ethnic background of pupils

	No. of pupils
Black Caribbean heritage	0
Black African heritage	3
Black other	0
Indian	1
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	2
Chinese	0
White	15
Other minority ethnic group	9

This table refers to pupils of compulsory school age only.

The school has never excluded a pupil

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No. of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	1
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	1

Teachers and classes

Number of qualified teachers (FTE*)	8
Number of unqualified teachers (FTE*)	5
Number of pupils per teacher	2.2
Average class size	5

**FTE means full-time equivalent.*

Deployment of teachers

Percentage of time teachers spend in contact with classes	90%
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Average teaching group size

Key Stage 1	5
Key Stage 2	5

Teaching assistants

Total number of teaching assistants	27
Total aggregate hours worked per week	982.5

Placing arrangements

Private/LEA/Social Services Department	No of pupils
Private	0
Barnet LEA	6
Brent LEA	2
Camden LEA	12
Haringey LEA	4
Islington LEA	2
Kensington and Chelsea LEA	1
Tower Hamlets LEA	2
Westminster LEA	1
Southwark	1

Financial Data

Income	Last financial year (£)	Forecast this financial year (£)
Basic budget	1,118,684	1,463,556
Grants	0	0
Income from facilities and services	3,076	0
Donations/private funds	407,433	504,000
Other income	2,545	4,709
Total income	1,531,738	1,972,265
Income per pupil	40,950	42,384

Fees

Day: £42,384

Survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	30
Number of questionnaires returned	16

Number of responses in each category

	Agree	Disagree
I am happy with the school my child attends.	16	0
I think this school meets my child's special educational needs.	16	0
I believe that the school helps me to understand what my child is taught.	16	0
I think that the school keeps me well informed about my child's progress.	16	0
I am happy with the standards of behaviour at this school.	16	0
I believe that this school helps my child have positive attitudes to school work.	16	0
I believe that this school helps my child to mix well with other children.	16	0
I believe that this school promotes the personal and social development of my child.	16	0
I think that this school prepares my child for the next stage of education and training.	16	0
I feel supported by the school.	16	0
I feel that my child is safe at this school.	16	0
I believe my child likes this school.	16	0

Summary of responses

27. In addition to the 16 replies received , two parents met and discussed their views with one of the inspection team during the inspection. They too were very pleased with the work of the school and the progress their children were making. Aspects which drew particular praise were the regular daily and weekly reports, meetings, home visits and other contacts the school arranged with parents, the levels of support they received in the management and

overall development of their children and level of support which enables their children to want to attend and look forward to enjoy the opportunities provided.

Issues that concerned parents

28. One reply requested more one-to-one teaching and another increased opportunities for speech therapy.

Notes

Notes