

INSPECTION REPORT

DOWNHAM SCHOOL

Plymstock

LEA area: Plymouth

Unique reference number: 113645

Headteacher: Martin Maleham

Reporting inspector: Mary Last
17171

Dates of inspection: 2 – 3 July 2002

Inspection number: 197460

Short inspection carried out under Section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Special
School category:	Community
Age range of pupils:	3 to 16 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	Horn Lane Plymstock Plymouth
Postcode:	PL9 9BR
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Appropriate authority:	The governing body
Name of chair of governors:	Mrs A McDonald
Date of previous inspection:	September 1997

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REPORT CONTENTS

	Page
PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT	1
Information about the school	
How good the school is	
What the school does well	
What could be improved	
How the school has improved since its last inspection	
Standards	
Pupils' attitudes and values	
Teaching and learning	
Other aspects of the school	
How well the school is led and managed	
Parents' and carers' views of the school	
PART B: COMMENTARY	
WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL	6
WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED	13
WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?	15
PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS	16

PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Downham School is in Plymstock, a suburb of Plymouth, and caters for up to 83 boys and girls from three to sixteen with severe and complex learning difficulties. There are currently 53 boys and 26 girls on roll, 11 of whom are under five. Since the last inspection the complexity of pupils' needs on admission has increased; about 16 are diagnosed as having autistic spectrum disorders, and there are seven with profound and multiple learning difficulties. There are no pupils with English as an additional language, and all but two are of white UK heritage. Seventeen pupils are entitled to free school meals, a number which is about average for this type of school. In Years 10 and 11, pupils study for a national skills profile certificate linked to their abilities, interests, and future needs. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs with severe learning difficulties or autism defined as their main learning problem. Almost all pupils travel to school by transport arranged by the local authority and live within the Plymouth City boundaries or rural areas of West Devon.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

Downham School is a very good school where the commitment of the staff, the high quality of teaching and the consistent attention to each pupil's educational needs result in high standards. Pupils' behaviour is very good and they are eager to learn and make progress. In relation to their learning difficulties, pupils all make good progress in all subjects. The provision for children under five is a strength of the school and includes very effective part time places for up to eight local children within the normal range of ability. The school makes very good provision for pupils with additional special needs, such as autism and/or profound and multiple learning difficulties. The headteacher and senior staff manage the school with a confidence built on experience and expertise, and the result is a committed staff in a highly successful and happy learning environment. The school spends its money wisely for the benefit of the pupils and provides very good value for money.

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

- Teaching is very good throughout the school. Teachers and assistants meet the increasing complexity of pupils' learning difficulties through activities which are well matched to pupils' individual needs and as a result they make good progress.
- The school includes all pupils in its activities, regardless of their learning difficulties, and has very good procedures for assessing pupils' progress, aptitudes and special needs.
- Children under five in the Foundation Stage benefit from very high quality provision and teaching and the stimulating opportunities for them to learn alongside pupils from the local area are highly valued by parents.
- The curriculum and qualifications available for older pupils prepares them well for their educational choices after they leave school.
- The school makes particularly sensitive, yet challenging, provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders and also for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties.
- The headteacher and senior staff provide excellent leadership and management, which encourages very good teamwork and sets high standards for all the school's work.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

- Planned opportunities for pupils to communicate with each other by speech, sign and symbol or any other appropriate strategies.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the action plan prepared by the appropriate authority.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school has made very good improvements since the last inspection in September 1997. The headteacher and governors have improved provision for all pupils, but particularly those in Years seven to eleven by providing an extra class. Increased monitoring by the headteacher, with excellent identification of areas for improvement, has resulted in higher standards in teaching and learning, with the result that there are no unsatisfactory lessons and teaching is very good overall. In the Foundation Stage and for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder there is particularly effective monitoring of the pupils' communication skills and of their relationships with adults, which are very good. The introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies throughout the school has rekindled the interest of teachers and pupils alike, so that there is an improved focus upon the pupils' individual needs and their use of literacy and numeracy skills in other lessons. The activities in the residential unit are now more closely allied to pupils' learning targets, and pupils increasingly take responsibility in tasks around the unit. Overall, the school has made excellent improvements since the last inspection.

STANDARDS

The table below summarises inspectors' judgements about how well pupils achieve in relation to their individual targets.

Progress in:	by Year R	by Year 6	by Year 9	by Year 11	Key
Speaking and listening	B	B	B	B	
Reading	B	B	B	B	Good B
Writing	B	B	B	B	Satisfactory C
Mathematics	A	A	A	A	Unsatisfactory D
Personal, social and health education	A	A	A	A	Poor E
Other personal targets set at annual reviews or in IEPs*	A	A	A	A	

* IEPs are individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs.

Pupils make immediate and good progress from the time they enter the school. In the Foundation Stage, children quickly learn the importance of waiting their turn and listening to other pupils and adults. Many communicate with sign and language. Throughout the school, all pupils improve their skills and understanding in English and use their literacy skills effectively, for example to read instructions. In mathematics, pupils are developing an understanding of numbers and use them to count in songs and stories. In science and

other practical subjects, pupils enjoy simple experiments, such as discovering that when yeast is added to dough it can be stretched and shaped. All pupils benefit from increasingly well-written targets, which help them to improve their skills incrementally as they move up through the school, so that they grow into mature young people.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Very good. Pupils enter the school ready to work and very keen to do well in all lessons.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Very good. Pupils are very well behaved because activities interest them. In lessons and around the school pupils are polite, considerate and polite.
Personal development and relationships: very good	Throughout the school, all pupils make good gains in their personal development, so that they succeed in work experience placements and part time study at local schools, and are well prepared for college when they leave school.
Attendance	Very good. The unauthorised level of absence is 0.1 per cent; pupils are rarely absent without due cause.

The pupils' positive approach to learning, their friendly disposition and the spirit of friendship which pervades the school are major strengths and contribute strongly to its overall success. If pupils are absent it is generally unavoidable and for medical reasons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	Nursery and Reception	Years 1–6	Years 7–11
Quality of teaching	Very good	Very good	Very good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

The quality of teaching and learning are very good throughout the school, with particular strengths in the provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders, for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties, and for children under five. A constant and very effective feature of teaching is the emphasis on meeting the pupils' particular needs through well-defined educational targets and the high quality support provided by teachers and assistants. Teaching in English is good overall, with many good features. Teachers place a relevant and persistent emphasis on developing the pupils' communication skills, though they do miss opportunities to encourage discussion and interaction between the pupils, concentrating more on communication to and from the teacher. In mathematics and science, teaching and learning are very good, with many opportunities for pupils to put their work into practice. In food technology, for example, pupils weigh and measure and see the practical application of principles such as 'changing materials'.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	Very good. The curriculum meets all requirements and offers all subjects of the National Curriculum and religious education. In the course of each week, pupils experience a good range of subjects and activities.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	Very good. The school makes very good provision for pupils' spiritual, moral and social development. Pupils quickly learn the difference between right and wrong and mix well socially with each other. Cultural activities regularly form part of activities and visits and pupils are helped to reflect on special activities and events. The school emphasises multicultural events but could plan these more considerably to ensure pupils' deeper understanding.
How well the school cares for its pupils	Very good. The staff provides high levels of personal support and respect the pupils' dignity at all times. Assessment procedures are very good and provide parents and pupils with detailed information on progress.

The school has improved the range and quality of pupils' learning opportunities since the last inspection. All pupils are guided well in their learning and their personal development. Pupils' learning is planned and assessed very thoroughly, and the outcomes are gathered to provide ongoing information about pupils' individual achievements and the school's performance overall. The school maintains very good relationships with parents and communicates with them regularly about their children's work and progress.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	Excellent. The headteacher, deputy and assistant headteacher have improved the quality of the school's work with systematic planning, high quality monitoring and exemplary guidance to staff.
How well the appropriate authority fulfils its responsibilities	Very good. The headteacher and governors work co-operatively to promote improvements in the school. The governing body includes members with very good expertise, which they use well to support the school. Several governors take responsibility in specific areas of the school's activities and are developing good procedures for monitoring its work.
The school's evaluation of its performance	Very good. The school has introduced several effective methods of identifying pupils' progress, and other strengths and weaknesses. These procedures are now beginning to provide sufficient data for the school to make decisions about future focus for development.
The strategic use of resources	Very good. The school has good levels of resources, and staff use them well to promote pupils' learning. The accommodation has been steadily improved over time, and the space available is used to best effect. However, there are still some storage problems and the school has no capacity for further expansion.

There are sufficient staff to meet the needs of the pupils and to ensure they make good progress. Although several long-standing staff members have left, new staff has responded well to the challenge of the high expectations set by the headteacher and deputy headteachers. Regular observation, consistent support and training have been highly successful in raising the standards of teaching and learning.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The progress made by their children. • The friendliness and support of the staff. • The high standards of personal support provided by all the staff. • The happy and positive environment within the school. • Improvements in their children's behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer staff changes. • More speech therapy. • More out of school activities.

Parents are very supportive of the school's work and recognise that their children are making very good progress. Very occasionally, the school does not provide with sufficient speed the necessary information about such issues as staff changes, with the result that parents do not understand the alterations in the school's arrangements. A very small minority of parents appears not to understand the purpose and direction of the school's work, but the majority is able to appreciate the benefit which working to National Curriculum requirements has brought to their children's educational experiences. Inspectors understand that many changes and staff and concerns over speech therapy are worrying to parents but also recognise that most aspects of their issues are outside the school's control. Although some parents would appreciate more extra curricular provision, inspectors feel that the school provides as many activities as it can including day visits and residential experiences.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

Teaching is good throughout the school, and teachers and assistants meet the increasing complexity of pupils' learning difficulties through activities which are well matched to pupils' individual needs, with the result that they make good progress.

1. The quality of teaching and learning is a strength of the school. In the 23 lessons observed, 13 were very good. A further seven were good and covered the range of subjects and classes sampled. No lessons were less than satisfactory. Pupils' learning was very good in 16 of the lessons observed. Because the pupils enter the class ready to work on activities which are well matched to their abilities and interests, they concentrate well and work hard throughout the lesson.

2. Teachers have been well trained in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and use their skills well to manage pupils' learning. In lessons specifically devoted to literacy in and numeracy they challenge the pupils well by setting individually focused tasks. A further strength is the way in which teachers promote the pupils' use of such skills in other subjects of the curriculum, for example encouraging them to read or write more difficult words in such subjects as science or design and technology. As a result of this focus on basic skills, pupils become confident in their use when shopping or undertaking other tasks in the community.

3. All staff pay very good attention to pupils' individual targets in their individual education plans. Lessons are prepared with several levels of difficulty, which enable the lowest attaining to the highest attaining pupils to succeed. For example, in an English lesson about 'Twelfth Night', the pupils were given a summary of the plot written at several levels of reading difficulty. Some pupils had a very simplified version of the narrative, supported by well spaced and clear symbols. Other, higher attaining, pupils had more detail in their text according to their ability. As a result of this very good planning, each student was able to read his own version of the text and thus gain confidence in his abilities. All the pupils in this Year 11 group showed a firm understanding of the plot and discussed the meaning of the text. Even the pupils who had difficulty with reading were able to recall and read such difficult names as 'Malvolio' and 'Orsino'.

4. A major strength in all teaching is the attention paid by teachers to the targets in pupils' individual education plans. Both the teachers and the support assistants know the pupils well and use well-structured targets to help them improve their skills. For example, a teaching assistant gave high quality support to a pupil whose target involved using a tactile approach to understanding three dimensional shapes. He was able to use Playdoh and modeling tools to fit, cover, stack, and thereby construct three dimensional shapes of a triangle and circle. This high level of challenge is a typical aspect of many very good lessons. Teachers are persistent in their expectations that pupils will complete a task successfully. For example, a lesson for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders was affected by the repetitive, stereotypical behaviour and persistent talking caused by the pupils' learning difficulties. Through effective teamwork, the teacher and the assistant managed these distractions very well, with the result that disruption was minimised and pupils were able to carry on working with little interruption to their concentration.

The school includes all pupils in its activities, regardless of their learning difficulties, and has very good procedures for assessing pupils' progress, attitudes and special needs.

5. Since the last inspection, the school has made very good improvements in meeting the pupils' needs more specifically. An extra class has been created in Years 7 to 11 so that the class size now averages eight, and no pupils are regularly taught in significantly larger groups. The arrangements for identifying pupils' needs and progress have been improved. There is a consistent method for planning and assessing pupils' gains in learning, which is used across the school and is regularly sampled and monitored by senior staff. Procedures for the annual reviews of pupils' statements, the quality of the pupils' educational targets, and the link to what is learnt in lessons have been considerably strengthened. Analysis of documents show that pupils' learning is now more closely defined in clearer steps, so that gains in learning and progression through subjects are more easily identifiable.

6. Since the last inspection, the complexity of pupils' needs on admission has increased. Many more pupils now have severe learning difficulties, plus additional medical or learning problems, which prevent them from easy access to learning and the curriculum. In order to improve the pupils' opportunities for understanding and participation, the school has developed a very effective range of strategies derived from a clear definition of the pupils' existing knowledge, skills and understanding. Their individual targets are identified with the involvement of parents, therapists and other specialist staff. These targets are then analysed in the light of the pupils' learning skills and aptitudes, and specific teaching methods identified. Specialised approaches are used within the school and soundly based on pupils' needs. These methods include specialist strategies for teaching pupils on the autistic spectrum, a communication system which employs pictures to express needs, signing, the use of symbols, or specialist communication software. Staff are trained by visiting practitioners, or attend training courses which are then discussed with other staff.

7. The school has the weekly equivalent of over six days of support from speech therapists and specially trained assistants. This is a generous amount to meet the needs of the 83 pupils, the majority of whom need some kind of speech/language support – although not all have this requirement included in their statements. Speech therapy is increasingly provided within the classroom setting, so that the teacher and assistant can become familiar with the relevant techniques and deliver the support programme between therapists' visits. This model is also the school's preferred method for providing physiotherapy. It is successful in both disciplines because it sets the therapeutic work within the context of continuing lessons and makes tasks meaningful. Owing to illness there has been some interruption to this service, but the system has now been effectively re-established.

8. The school's response to pupils' individual needs extends far beyond the classroom. Through regular contact with parents, staff establish common practice in managing challenging behaviour. For example, several parents identified significant improvements in children's behaviour after intervention by the school and shared strategies which had been agreed with them. Several staff contribute to parents' workshops and coffee mornings to give information on the management of conditions such as epilepsy or to discuss aspects of the curriculum.

9. The opportunity for some pupils to attend the small residential unit from Monday to Friday is a very high quality feature of the school's work. In the last two years, the school and unit have developed very good procedures for ensuring consistency between targets and activities. Pupils are now better challenged in the unit by expectations that they will contribute to everyday tasks such as laying tables and washing up. The older pupils

appreciate the privilege of using the kitchen to prepare evening snacks and light meals – tasks which promote their independence, confidence and decision making.

Children under five in the Foundation Stage benefit from very high quality teaching. The opportunities for them to learn alongside pupils from the local area are stimulating and highly valued by parents.

10 The provision for children under five in the Foundation Stage is a strength of the school and is enhanced by very good opportunities for children from the local community to work alongside Downham pupils. Whether they have learning difficulties or not, the pupils join in more formal activities, all demonstrating that they understand the requirements to take turns and listen quietly when others are speaking. Relationships between all the staff and pupils are very good, as they work towards individual early learning targets within the Foundation Stage curriculum.

11 Teaching is very good in all aspects of the curriculum. The children benefit from large classrooms which staff use very well to differentiate between noisier activities and more formal sessions. The staff place an important emphasis on the earliest stages of communication and literacy and are highly skilled in signing and the use of symbols. Expectations are high and, as each pupil's turn arrives to answer a question, the level of staff support is adjusted. The higher attaining pupils can answer some questions with complete sentences whilst the lower attaining pupils may need physical help. For example, they may indicate their presence by signing the first letter of their name. The activities are planned in great detail to ensure that all pupils work towards individual targets through challenging activities. For example, a group of pupils worked on linking words to indicate an action, such as 'Jo crawl', 'Jo jump' or 'Jo stand'. This activity helped them recognise their names in print and to respond to the word and symbol for the verb. They joined in enthusiastically, with the teacher also carrying out the instruction with great energy. All the pupils show an interest in books, pictures and writing. One child's interest in the inspector's note taking was predicted by the teacher, who provided him with his own clipboard, pencil and 'Ofsted checklist' with which he armed himself each time an inspector called. There is a good supply of books and other written materials to which pupils refer from time to time, turning pages to recall or rehearse the actions of telling a story.

12 The very good teaching gives pupils many opportunities to think about and develop an understanding of numbers and their use. All children know how old they are and the majority can count up to five and recognise the appropriate printed numeral. Higher attaining children can recognise the number ten and know they have ten fingers and ten toes. Children regularly count up and down in songs and rhymes, and staff give them very good opportunities to use these skills whenever they can, such as when painting and playing with sand and water.

13 Teaching is very good as staff interact well with pupils and help them to manipulate paint or crayons to make marks and patterns on paper. Work on painting and collage is displayed on walls, and pupils use their imagination to construct objects with sand. There is an appropriate range of small equipment for indoor use and larger articles outside in the play area. The children enjoy using their energy to ride tricycles or climb equipment, and they also have very good opportunities for hydrotherapy or swimming. The children are very well taught, and those with physical difficulties benefit from physiotherapy activities. These are planned between the physiotherapist and the early years staff, who ensure that appropriate activities are then followed by each child.

14 The opportunity for pupils to develop their social and personal skills is a major strength. The children know when they should sit quietly and listen and when they can choose their preferred activity. All are polite, and they respond to adults and know how to follow instructions. All children develop a good understanding of the world around them, through a range of well-planned activities. They experiment with toys and equipment, learning how to steer a model car around, rather than into, a piece of furniture.

15 Pupils develop their curiosity and their attention through good questioning by the teacher. In stories, for example, the teacher asks children to think about what might happen next. In numeracy they try to predict which number will appear from behind the board. The children enjoy experimenting with materials such as sand, water, glue and paper. They quickly learn how to keep themselves clean, and matters of hygiene are given high priority. When playing with toys the children show their understanding of balance and construction. One child tried to balance all of his 20 cylinders into a tower. When he realised they were unstable, he stepped back to study which of the cylinders near the bottom needed realignment, before placing the nineteenth successfully on top. Visits to the local shops or work within the school grounds help the children deepen their understanding of the world outside school. They also learn the layout of the school when moving from one part to another, and staff reinforce the children's understanding of place and vocabulary, such as 'office', doorway' or 'hall'.

The curriculum and qualifications available for older pupils prepare them well for their educational choices after they leave school.

10. Older pupils benefit from educational targets which prepare them particularly well for the next stage of their education. The organisation of transitional reviews is very good, with much information provided by the school. Parents do comment, however, that some other adult services are rarely represented, so that despite the school's best efforts they do not receive additional information on services available to them. The school works in good partnership with careers officers to ensure that the joint contribution is useful to parents. Given the wide range of learning needs and abilities, the school does particularly well in its curriculum content, which has an added vocational content as pupils move into the last two years of school.

11. Some students move on to residential placements, but almost all those who leave transfer to local further education colleges, most of which are near their homes. However, the five pupils leaving the school this year will be attending five different colleges, and the school has had to plan in extensive detail to ensure that each pupil is well informed. Preparation for such a move is very good, with information gained by the school used to prepare the students for a move to unfamiliar settings. Where possible, students attend link courses on a part time basis in preparation for mixing with a larger number of older, and probably noisier, students. Where residential college placements are concerned, the pupils also need to be aware of the enormous changes this will bring to their lives. As well as visits to future placements the staff make good use of their tutoring skills to discuss the future and put the pupils at ease.

12. The emphasis within classrooms is placed upon vocational topics, self-help tasks and the types of skills the pupils will need when they leave school. Independence training is a priority, and the pupils benefit from many opportunities to practise their social, mathematical and literacy skills in the nearby shopping centre. Here they manage their money, read menus and generally function with less immediate supervision.

13. The school is also alert to the possibility of returning some higher attaining pupils to mainstream education. It has achieved the very impressive number of 31 pupils who were successfully included in the last ten years. During the inspection, one pupil was in the last stages of preparation for transfer to another school and was observed in a maths lesson. His skills were in line with those of the other pupils and he took a full part in the lesson, knowing correct protocol for asking and answering questions. The preparation for transfer is now finalised and this pupil is looking forward to joining his new school, where he has made several friends.

Work experience placements are a popular choice for older pupils. The school works in partnership with the local careers specialist to provide advice, support and placements for those pupils who can cope with such challenges. During the inspection one pupil was working at a residential home near the school. He was well thought of by his line manager, who spoke highly of his hard work and the confidence he displayed in his work with senior citizens. The pupil communicated well with the residents and carried out small errands for them carefully and reliably.

14. When they leave the school the pupils have studied successfully for nationally accredited modules in basic skills. The results are very good. In the most recent year, five pupils studied for the awards, and four of them gained more than seven modules in areas such as catering, numeracy skills and ICT. The school's focus upon such general certification is sensible, given the pupils' range of future placements. Their success provides confirmation of their progress in school and a useful platform on which future teachers may build.

The school makes particularly sensitive yet challenging provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder and also for those with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

15. Where pupils are grouped according to shared needs, such as in the class for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, they benefit from specific teaching methods which enable them to learn at an individual pace and in their own preferred style. Teachers have been well trained in a range of techniques for meeting the needs of such pupils. They select from established methods which are known to be successful, sometimes mixing and matching approaches and with one or more pupils. For example, where pupils need a protective space, quiet, and a set routine to accomplish the tasks which lead to achieving their targets, they are provided with suitable facilities such as individual workstations. In contrast, where they need more space, stimulation and encouragement to begin or maintain their concentration on work, they receive very good individual support and encouragement from the staff. The level of challenge is invariably high and pupils understand what is expected of them. This important principle applies to their behaviour as well as their work. For example, one pupil with challenging behaviour who is repeatedly reluctant to move away from the playground at the end of break now understands precisely how many times she can refuse and maintain her reluctance to move before the teacher insists in a good natured way that she return to work. The teacher and the pupil are experiencing success in reducing the 'take-up' time, as she now responds more readily and consistently to the teachers' requests.

16. Work with pupils on the autistic spectrum is of consistently high quality. The importance of routine and familiarity are major factors in the planning of activities and the success of all the teaching. Staff speak clearly and calmly to pupils at all times, securing their attention to their work, and sometimes use photographs to focus the pupils' thoughts and ensure their understanding. A peaceful learning environment is a feature at all times, and any disruption caused by inappropriate behaviour or excessive talking, for example, is dealt with quickly and with minimum disruption. The pupils show their pleasure at

completing the tasks set for them. For example, they work methodically through their individual, daily, tray activities. These activities are well planned and supported by a member of staff, so that by the end of the lesson it is possible to see that the pupils have become more accurate in their response.

17. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties are also well supported and very well taught by teachers and assistants. Whilst these pupils are placed in a mixed age class, they are also given relevant opportunities to mix with other pupils in the school so that they form part of the overall community. Each pupil has an individual programme with clear targets for small steps of learning, so that they are able to achieve improvements over time. Although some such achievements may be small, they are acknowledged by staff and are systematically recorded to form the basis of future learning. Staff ensure that communication to parents is regular. They are informed about the improvements in their children's learning and skills, whether these are major achievements or the important repetition, or reinforcement, of a previously learnt response.

18. Pupils are provided with maximum opportunities to express their wishes and make choices. Staff know the pupils well and understand the slightest nuances of their communication. For example, they understand when a pupil uses his or her eyes to choose between items by looking at the one preferred. Responding to such preferences is a regular feature of teaching, and pupils are frequently asked such questions as 'Do you like...?' for 'What would you like?' Such techniques help the pupils to understand that they can influence their immediate environment and that staff are responsive to their preferences.

19. The teachers plan very well matched activities which are changed frequently so that pupils are continually stimulated throughout the day. For example, when one pupil had been working diligently for some time he was given a break to listen to music for a few minutes so that he was relaxed and ready to start sorting some shapes with the learning support assistant. This sensitivity to the pupils' individual needs or learning styles is a major factor in the success of the teaching, much of which is based on a sensory approach. In a food technology lesson a pupil showed quite clear and enjoyable responses to investigating materials such as wheat, flower and, subsequently, dough. As she moved her fingers within the warm dough she laughed and giggled wholeheartedly. Her gestures became larger and she showed genuine awe at the texture and elasticity of the material.

20. The teachers keep detailed records of the pupils' progress throughout the school curriculum. The individual educational plans are well written, especially the targets for the pupils. These targets are clearly based on the pupils' previous learning and experience. The teachers' evaluations of the targets over time show quite clearly that the pupils are making at least satisfactory and often very good progress, particularly in their ability to interact with adults. The accounts of the pupils' progress, in terms of what they have experienced and learnt, provide detailed and interesting facts in annual reports to parents.

21. Since the last inspection the school has made very good progress in its provision for those pupils with autistic spectrum disorders or profound and multiple learning difficulties. Despite several changes of staff, the headteacher and senior teachers have ensured that all work with these pupils reflects the most recent research and techniques for teaching pupils with such additional special needs. Training has been comprehensive, and the high quality skills that teachers have acquired as a result are used very effectively to promote the pupils' learning.

The headteacher and senior staff provide excellent leadership and management which encourages very good teamwork and sets high standards for all the school's work.

The headteacher, deputy headteacher and, more recently, the assistant headteacher provide excellent leadership and management, which enable the school to operate in a highly efficient manner. Routines are very well established so that no time is wasted during the day, and all staff are clear about their duties and responsibilities. Staff and pupils move quickly and purposefully around the school and an atmosphere of calm and happiness pervades all aspects of school life. This outstanding leadership emanates from a headteacher who is a quietly confident, experienced and highly competent manager who also knows each pupil and member of staff very well. He uses this knowledge very effectively to monitor on an informal basis during each day, as he takes part in school activities. On a formal basis, the headteacher has recognised the need to introduce systems for identifying the school's strengths and weaknesses. With his senior team he has carefully evaluated the several new procedures before deciding whether they will be of use to the school. Once the procedures are adopted, the school uses them well. For example, the details of pupils' achievements are now easier to identify since the introduction of the nationally recognised P scales. This information is then used to further refine the pupils' individual targets, so that secure and logical steps of learning are planned.

22. Since the last inspection, there has been a significant improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, even though the departure of several experienced staff has made it necessary to increase induction and support for new teachers. Much of this improvement is a direct result of the headteacher's highly skilled monitoring of teachers' performance. Particular strengths of his monitoring are the details he records about specific pupils' involvement during the lesson and his recognition and appreciation of the teachers' skilled work. This level of detail then enables him to couch as a very useful, tactful piece of advice what might otherwise be described as a weakness. For example, 'Look after your team; they are your greatest asset', a comment which instigated a discussion between headteacher and teacher about staff deployment. Subsequently, the teacher and assistant also discussed the issue, with the result that more effective use was made of their skills in this classroom. Similarly, a comment on a pupil's reaction in the sensory room stimulated a discussion on the nature of learning in such an environment, resulting in clearer direction for staff and also for pupils' learning.

23. The very good relationships and teamwork enjoyed by all staff ensure that they are all committed to raising standards. The school's delegation of responsibilities has helped share the task of identifying strengths and weaknesses, and subject co-ordinators are increasingly expected to monitor the planning and delivery of their subjects. Time limitations prevent all co-ordinators from observing lessons, but the deputy headteacher regularly shares this task with the headteacher. There are also very high quality procedures for monitoring teachers' planning, assessment and records. Pupils' individual education plans are sampled termly and the effectiveness of the match between targets past and present is judged. These details are then also monitored against what has been taught in lessons. The link between curriculum, teachers' planning, pupils' targets and what has been learnt is made clear in the final report to parents. The governing body is also involved in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Its members visit regularly, and there are nominated governors who report back to the full governing body on such aspects as literacy and numeracy. Many governors are long serving, some for over 20 years, and they use this experience and expertise well to ensure that the school continues to improve. Because they have experienced so many changes, they are not afraid of challenges and have confidence that the school will continue to build upon its high standards.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

The teachers' planning of lessons, to create opportunities for pupils to communicate with each other by speech, sign and symbol or any other appropriate strategies.

24. Teachers' planning throughout the school is thorough and well linked to the pupils' targets in their individual education plans. There is, however, one common element which is overlooked during the planning and the delivery of lessons, and this is the opportunity to promote pupils' communication with each other. In all lessons, the emphasis on literacy is strong, and from the earliest stage the pupils are learning that words have meaning and that they can communicate in other ways such as by sign and symbol. Teachers are skilled in promoting such early communication, and the two-way interaction between adults and pupils is very good. Staff sign regularly and accurately to those pupils who need such help but expect speech from those with sufficient skill or level of development. In lessons, it is exceedingly rare to see pupils talking or signing to each other. For example, in a French lesson, the pupils all demonstrated that they could use basic French vocabulary to identify countries, pets and colours, but all the questions were asked by and answered to the teacher. During the lesson, no pupil actually spoke French to another. Similarly, in an English lesson, whilst two staff worked with individual pupils, another adult supported the remaining pupils in a group activity. None of the pupils talked or spoke to each other, and opportunities for them to gain experience of a collaborative, shared, but independent activity were not provided.

25. So used are some pupils to working alone that, in another lesson, when a pupil asked another to play a game with her, he instantly refused and carried on playing independently. The promotion of individual learning, through appropriate levels of work, is a very good feature of most lessons. What is also required is the expectation that pupils will reinforce their learning by interaction between them, and a commitment to planning this interaction. Otherwise, pupils are likely to develop the perception that learning is only about working with an adult.

26. There is no doubt that during breaks and lunchtimes pupils do communicate with each other, and observation of activity in the playground produced several such examples of pupils laughing, talking and playing together. In lessons, however, opportunities for such dialogue are too often missed. One such example was a numeracy lesson, where pupils working on shape and colour did not interact throughout the group activity, even though they communicated well with adults. In all lessons signing is used very precisely to ensure understanding and communication. Pupils sign back to the teacher but rarely to each other.

27. Staff make good use of questions to stimulate pupils' thinking, often asking 'how' or 'why' questions about a task. They do not, however, encourage the pupils to ask each other similar questions. The youngest children in the Foundation Stage read the words of instruction from the teacher, such as 'Jo jump', but they do not then choose the words of instruction for another pupil to follow.

28. The school is now aware of this weakness and has already engaged in debate about how interaction and communication between pupils could be better used to reinforce and extend learning.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

29. In order to build on the existing high standards and to maximise pupils' achievements, the headteacher, staff and governors should:

- instigate a whole school audit of communication between pupils in lessons;
- identify increased opportunities for such activity within each scheme of work;
- gather advice from external staff, such as the speech and language therapist, and provide school staff with any training if necessary;
- review the design of planning documentation so that opportunities for pupils to talk together and enter into discussion with each other are included in lesson planning whenever appropriate;
- monitor the outcome of innovations whenever possible.

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	23
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	31

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
Number	1	13	7	2	0	0	0
Percentage	4	57	30	9	0	0	0

The table gives the number and percentage of lessons observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about teaching] Care should be taken when interpreting these percentages as each lesson represents more than four percentage points.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	No of pupils
Number of pupils on the school's roll	80
Number of full-time pupils known to be eligible for free school meals	17

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	0

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	2
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	0

Attendance

Authorised absence	%	Unauthorised absence	%
School data	3	School data	0.1

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	0
Black – African heritage	0
Black – other	0
Indian	0
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	0
Chinese	0
White	77
Any other minority ethnic group	3

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	0	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	0	0
Other minority ethnic groups	0	0

This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes**Qualified teachers and classes:****YR – Y11**

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	11.6
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	7.3
Average class size	8

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Education support staff:**YR – Y11**

Total number of education support staff	25
Total aggregate hours worked per week	616

Financial information

Financial year	2001-2002
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	£
Total income	933831.00
Total expenditure	948566.00
Expenditure per pupil	12161.00
Balance brought forward from previous year	23064.00
Balance carried forward to next year	8329.00

Recruitment of teachers

Number of teachers who left the school during the last two years	6
Number of teachers appointed to the school during the last two years	6
Total number of vacant teaching posts (FTE)	3
Number of vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of a term or more (FTE)	3
Number of unfilled vacancies or vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of less than one term (FTE)	0

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out
Number of questionnaires returned

83
43

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	74	23	2	0	0
My child is making good progress in school.	71	29	0	0	0
Behaviour in the school is good.	67	26	0	0	7
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	34	49	9	0	9
The teaching is good.	72	28	0	0	0
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	81	16	2	0	0
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	79	19	0	0	2
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	67	31	2	0	0
The school works closely with parents.	72	23	5	0	0
The school is well led and managed.	77	19	2	0	2
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	70	25	2	0	2
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	60	21	7	5	7