

The Dharma School

Independent School

Inspection report

DfES Registration Number	8466005
Unique Reference Number	114673
Inspection number	301511
Inspection dates	12-13 June 2007
Reporting inspector	R Kapadia HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

This inspection of the funded nursery education was carried out under Schedule 26 of the School Standards and framework Act 1998.

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

The Dharma School is a small Buddhist school located on the outskirts of Brighton in the large White House on the hill. It has grown over its thirteen years of existence from 4 pupils to 82 pupils, including a number with special educational needs (SEN). All speak English as a first language. It promotes 'mindfulness, wisdom and compassion' as key virtues to enable children to develop sound ethical values with a 'good heart'. Its academic education endeavours to inculcate a love of learning, underpinned by a positive approach to life.

Evaluation of the school

The Dharma School is successful in meeting many of its aims. It provides a good quality of education where pupils enjoy coming to school and become confident and self-aware. Good teaching of the carefully planned curriculum enables pupils to make good academic progress. The school is a very supportive community with a regular and distinctive focus on meditation, producing a calm and productive learning ethos. It promotes outstanding personal and social development, as well as securing spiritual and moral values.

Quality of education

The curriculum is good, enabling pupils to make good progress and achieve high standards. The school's curriculum policy is supported by detailed plans to study a broad and balanced range of subjects, supplemented by a topic-based approach. The interesting topics cover a wide range of areas, particularly the humanities. This enables pupils to acquire good skills in writing, speaking and listening. The curriculum in the Foundation Stage is appropriate but limited by the lack of open access to an outside play area.

The planning and teaching of mathematics and science is reliant on the use of worksheets and this limits opportunities for pupils' to develop investigational skills. However, there is evidence in the pupils' work that they do engage in practical activities both in mathematics and science. Although there is some teaching of information and communication technology (ICT) for older pupils, opportunities to develop these skills across the curriculum are limited. The school provides personal,

social and health education (PSHE) so that all pupils enjoy their time at school and develop into reliable, confident and enthusiastic learners. There are a few after-school clubs, but extra-curricular activities are limited, partly because of the size of the school.

The school admits pupils with a range of prior attainment which is above average. The children are grouped into five small classes of around 20 children: sunflower (Nursery), dragonfly (Reception), mountain (Years 1 and 2), ocean (Years 3 and 4), and lotus (Years 5 and 6). The school uses the National Curriculum and the Early Learning Goals as its basis for medium and long-term planning. Careful records are kept to ensure that children study different topics as they move through the school.

The quality of teaching and assessment are good overall. Carefully planned lessons encourage pupils to think and apply their knowledge. Pupils clearly enjoy school and their work demonstrates the good teaching they experience over time. Teachers' subject knowledge is good; they mark pupils' work carefully and assess their capabilities so that future work can be planned to meet their needs. Classroom resources are adequate.

Teachers know pupils well and offer good guidance so that pupils know how they are progressing. There are good relationships between adults and pupils; teaching assistants are deployed effectively to help pupils in the class, particularly those who find work more difficult.

Some lessons seen were good, including one which was outstanding, and all were at least satisfactory. Pupils are suitably challenged and progress is made in lessons, although the pace at times could be sharper and more focused on learning outcomes. The standards pupils reach is referenced against national standards at the end of Key Stage 2. Pupils achieve high standards by the time they leave the school: three quarters are performing above the national expectations in the core subjects in Year 6. All pupils including those with SEN make good progress. Individual education plans (IEP) are appropriately prepared and outline the support offered. Pupils are gaining knowledge and skills across a wide range of subject areas and this prepares them well for their next stage of learning.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. A Buddhist philosophy permeates the school, with regular opportunities for meditation. There is a daily '*puja*' when children experience silence as a means of promoting self reflection, before discussing issues of personal concern in a very supportive and collaborative environment. This was observed in the nursery, where children thoughtfully welcomed a new entrant; meanwhile, the 'lotus' class provided opportunities to note the transition of Year 6 pupils to their next stage of education in much larger secondary schools, as part of the Buddhist principle of impermanence.

Religious education features in the curriculum and covers other world religions, including Islam and Christianity. There are further opportunities for spiritual development in art and some topic work. Children are taken on outside visits locally, such as to museums and libraries, as well as to London theatres.

Pupils learn to take responsibility for their actions via one of the *'noble truths of Buddha'* and behaviour is outstanding, particularly at break-times where they learn to share and play happily together. Relationships between pupils and teachers are based on mutual respect: virtually all parents strongly agree that all children are treated fairly and with dignity.

Though there are no formal mechanisms like a school council, pupils say that they feel involved in making decisions about their work; for example, each of the older pupils chose a spiritual leader, such as Mother Teresa, to research. They are encouraged to offer ideas and opinions in a context of mutual support. Children noted that bullying is rare and there are effective systems to deal with matters which arise: a box for possible concerns is available and several pupils affirmed that they had used the system to raise concerns which were then addressed. Behaviour is outstanding and managed effectively when minor issues arise. Attendance is near the national average and there is no unauthorised absence.

Pupils walk regularly to facilities for physical education and to play in the nearby park. They have also been involved with external and charitable projects such as singing carols in old people's homes or supporting monks in Tibet and Nepal.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is good. The school gives high priority to pupils' welfare. Pupils feel safe and are extremely comfortable in approaching an adult whenever they have a problem. Achieving good mental and physical health is part of the regular Dharma programme for healthy living. Drinking water is available and a good diet is encouraged. Drug awareness is taught within PSHE.

The school has carefully devised procedures in its effective discipline and anti-bullying policies. Health and safety are taken seriously: the relevant policies are in place and implemented systematically. There has been recent training in child protection on a multi-agency course and also for first aid. Written policies deal with fire and emergency procedures. Risk assessments are undertaken with actions taken to correct deficiencies where necessary. The admissions book and attendance registers are maintained carefully. The school has devised a careful plan to address disability discrimination legislation.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

All staff (and directors) in the school have been subject to satisfactory clearance at an enhanced level with the Criminal Records Bureau. Prior to confirmation of any

appointment, references are sought, and there are checks to ensure an applicant's proof of identity, qualifications and medical fitness. Records are kept in a single register, following the latest guidance. The head undertakes systematic self-evaluation regularly and has instituted opportunities for in-service training, which have effectively improved provision in aspects such as the use of the Foundation Stage Profile. At present, there is only one full-time teacher and the school recognises the need to increase this in the future.

School's premises and accommodation

The school's premises and accommodation are adequate. The building is in an acceptable state of repair. All classrooms are reasonably well decorated and allow effective teaching. The flooring is in a reasonable condition but is tired and worn in some places. Fire and emergency access points are available from classrooms and all pupils can enter the building easily and safely. While there are sufficient washrooms for pupils there are insufficient washrooms for members of staff. The facilities for pupils who fall ill are also inadequate

The playground is not large but use is made of a local park at lunchtimes to ease possible congestion. However, there are some hazards, such as uneven surfaces as well as old and splintery wood which need to be improved to ensure safe play. The lack of an easily accessible outside area for some nursery pupils hampers independent learning.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school has a prospectus, supplemented by a good range of information for parents, covering all necessary aspects. Parents receive extremely detailed annual reports regarding their child's progress and there are also regular opportunities to discuss progress. The written reports make reference to performance against National Curriculum levels in the core subjects for the oldest pupils. There was a high return rate (over 80%) for the parental questionnaire. The responses were overwhelmingly positive, with over four fifths of parents strongly agreeing on most questions. A few noted their great faith in the school, their only concern being the time of transition when pupils have to move on to secondary school.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has a clear policy relating to informal and formal complaints. These are handled effectively, with few formal complaints last year. Though there are procedures for a panel hearing, this does not allow for an independent person to be on the panel.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005, with the exception of those listed below.

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- provide sufficient washrooms for staff (paragraph 5(k))
- provide appropriate facilities for pupils who are ill (paragraph 5(l))
- improve the outside space to enable pupils to play safely (paragraph 5(t)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of procedures for handling complaints (standard 7) and must:

- ensure that where there is a panel hearing of a complaint, one person on the panel is independent of the management and running of the school (paragraph 7(g)).

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- improve the use of ICT across the curriculum to further enhance the quality of pupils' work.

Inspection of funded nursery education

Effectiveness of the funded nursery education

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Staff plan and provide children with a broad range of fun and interesting activities, which fully support their learning across all curriculum areas. There is a strong emphasis on supporting children's spirituality and their personal, social and emotional development; the '*puja*' is used to discuss issues, such as feelings and fears, in a supportive way. Staff monitor children's progress towards the early learning goals and records indicate that children are making very good progress. Staff identify children's individual needs and interests and feed these into daily planning, although the systems for recording this are rather informal.

Staff use very good questioning techniques to support children's communication and language skills. Children listen attentively at story times and contribute

enthusiastically to discussions, such as sharing ideas about what they hear while holding a large shell to their ear. Children learn how to sort and match patterns, understand shape and measure and count beyond 10. Children use a wide variety of tools with confidence although they do not currently access information technology as part of their daily routine.

Children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is fostered. They are well behaved, learn to negotiate and play co-operatively. Children enjoy learning about the world around them and celebrate a range of cultural festivals. Their physical development is good and outdoor play is thoroughly enjoyed by all. Children are motivated to select activities and resources for themselves and express their creativity and imagination with access to a good range of resources.

The leadership and management of the nursery are good. Staff have a positive attitude to improvement, attending training to further develop their skills. The partnership with parents and carers is outstanding, with extremely successful links built between home and the nursery. Parents are positively encouraged to be involved in their children's learning; they are given good information about the Foundation Stage and how to support their children's learning at home. In discussion with parents, they particularly enthuse about the strong community feeling and how happy their children are. The needs of all children are being met.

Recommendations or actions to improve the funded nursery education

To improve the quality and standards of the nursery education the registered person should take account of the following recommendations:

- further develop opportunities for children to increase their knowledge and understanding of technology
- further develop systems to clearly show how children's individual needs and interests feed into the planning.

School details

Name of school	Dharma School		
DfES number	8466005		
Unique reference number	114673		
Unique reference number (funded nursery education)	EY291460		
Type of school	Buddhist		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1994		
Age range of pupils	3-11		
Gender of pupils	MI		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 36	Girls: 32	Total: 68
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 7	Girls: 7	Total: 14
Number of children receiving funded nursery education	Boys: 7	Girls: 7	Total: 14
Annual fees (day pupils)	£4066		
Address of school	The White House Ladies Mile Road Patcham Brighton East Sussex BN1 8TB		
Telephone number	(01273) 502 055		
Fax number	(01273) 556 580		
Email address	office@dharmaschool.f9.co.uk		
Headteacher	P Murdock		
Proprietor	Jeannette Adair (Chair of Governors)		
Childcare inspector	Lisa Toole		
Reporting inspector	R Kapadia HMI		
Dates of inspection	12-13 June 2007		