

Step by Step, A School for Autistic Children Ltd

Independent Special School

Inspection Report

DCSF Registration Number	845/6045
Unique Reference Number	134634
Inspection number	329573
Inspection dates	8 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth

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).

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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 Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

This was a light touch inspection (LTI) which focused principally on the quality of education provided by the school; its provision for the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; the arrangements for safeguarding pupils and the improvements the school has made since its last inspection.

Information about the school

Step by Step school is an independent day special school for pupils aged four to 11 years who have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The pupils have severe social and communication difficulties, moderate to severe learning difficulties and often have a range of other difficulties. There are 16 pupils on roll. One child is of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) age. Most pupils have statements of their special educational needs and those with statements are all funded by their local authorities. The school was founded by a group of parents in 2003 and first opened in 2004. It was last inspected in March 2005. Step by Step runs using the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) approach which uses very detailed tailored programmes for each individual and provides one to one teaching support at all times. Additional advice, support and input are provided by occupational and speech and language therapy services, educational psychologists and other professional consultants as required.

The school is situated in a rural location close to East Grinstead. Its overarching aim is 'to teach autistic children the knowledge, skills and confidence that will enable them to reach their full potential and lead as full and independent a life as possible'.

Evaluation of the school

This is an outstanding school. It provides an excellent quality of education for all pupils, including those of EYFS age. It makes outstanding provision for their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their welfare, health and safety. The achievement and personal development of pupils of all ages are outstanding as a result. The school is successful in meeting its aims. It has made excellent progress since the last inspection. It currently has no vacancies, has developed and improved its curriculum provision, accommodation and resources, and has successfully addressed the recommendations arising from the previous inspection. The school meets all the regulations inspected on this light touch inspection.

Quality of education

The quality of education is outstanding as is the curriculum provided. Questionnaire returns show parents' appreciation of the school's positive impact on their children's personal and academic development. One parent, for example, wrote: 'Step by Step is an exceptional and highly specialised school that provides very high quality and tailored one to one education....it addresses children's needs with flexibility and expert intervention and input. There is excellent school-parent communication...we are overwhelmingly positive about how the school is run.'

Step by Step has successfully developed a unique curriculum that is appropriate to the needs and abilities of its pupils. Minor curricular weaknesses that were identified in the last inspection have been effectively addressed. The result is a meticulously planned and documented, relevant curriculum which derives from the EYFS and national curricula. It also draws upon schemes of work written for pupils with learning difficulties and ASD. The curriculum is mainly taught in the form of topics. It provides a rich, interesting and very enjoyable context in which pupils are supported to improve their behaviour and personal development, enjoy school and learn, and develop a better understanding of society. The community is very well used to support the curriculum and bring it alive, for example by making visits to places of interest and by providing additional facilities such as horse riding and swimming. The curriculum organisation places an appropriate emphasis on speaking, listening, reading and writing, linked closely with the promotion of pupils' personal, social and emotional development. Physical activity is an important part of the curriculum, which meets the pupils' need for activity, and helps them keep healthy. All curriculum planning includes reference to the EYFS curriculum. Consequently, children of this age have their needs very well met alongside their peers.

Every moment of the day, including lunch and playtimes, is planned to promote individuals' skills. Broadly similar subject-based group work is planned for all three classes, and the same member of staff delivers the lesson to each class in turn. This is a very effective strategy as the lessons are adapted to be different in pace, content and delivery-style according to the needs of the group. The school's specialist ABA approach is instrumental in helping pupils access the curriculum. Pupils work intensively and very effectively with their personal tutors to meet the numerous targets on their individual education plans, and to take part in group curricular activities. Outstanding assessment procedures are central to this highly successful provision. Pupils are assessed continually using several different but complementary systems, which also underpin target setting and the one-to-one work. The outcomes are meticulously noted lesson by lesson and contribute towards a longer-term picture of each pupil's progress in curricular subjects, communication, behaviour and personal development. It is clear from a wealth of information that pupils make outstanding progress.

The quality of provision is underpinned by outstanding teaching. This is strongly supported by the school management's commitment to continuous professional development for the staff. Interactions with pupils, whether in a one-to-one or group situation are intense, lively and fun. Pupils clearly enjoy their work and laughter is

often heard coming from classrooms. Staff follow the detailed lesson plans and strategies for pupils very closely. They are highly responsive to individuals' and groups' needs, adjusting their work immediately if necessary. Activities for younger and lower attaining pupils tend to be very short and fast-paced to keep their attention. Higher attaining pupils spend longer on each activity, in order to consolidate and extend their skills. These pupils, for example, are able to talk about and write short sentences relating to visits they make. All group work encourages pupils to interact with one another. This supports their personal and communication development very effectively.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

The pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. This is demonstrated in their close relationships with staff, positive attitudes to work and developing self-awareness. Supporting pupils to develop appropriate behaviour is a prime focus of the school. Pupils respond very well to the strategies used, and to reward, praise and encouragement. Their behaviour is outstanding. Pupils' spiritual and cultural development are effectively supported by the curriculum. Racial, religious and other forms of equality are strongly promoted. Art and music are important elements, and religious education and topic work teach pupils about a number of other cultures, faiths and festivals. For example, pupils listened to Chinese music as part of the current Chinese New Year topic, and were clearly fascinated by the sound. Daily 'thinking time' helps pupils reflect on a variety of matters.

Pupils clearly enjoy school very much and attendance is good. Absence is almost always due to illness and professional appointments. The ethos and work of the school helps pupils develop the skills they need for the next step in their educational and future adult lives. Pupils are provided with suitable opportunities to take the initiative, think and act for themselves. They learn to co-operate and communicate with one another, and carry out simple tasks and instructions. There is a strong sense of community within the school and each class. As their challenging behaviours decrease, pupils are increasingly able to take part in, and enjoy, group activities in school and in the community.

Safeguarding pupils' welfare, health and safety

The school makes outstanding provision for the care, welfare, safety and well-being of its pupils. They are very well safeguarded by robust health and safety, staff recruitment and child protection practices. Staff training in fire safety, first aid, child protection and physical restraint is fully up to date and regularly repeated. Appropriate risk assessments are made for all activities. The necessary checks are carried out before staff appointments are confirmed, and details are kept according to requirements. Since the school has recently expanded to three classes, the senior managers are developing a system to centralise the various staff records for ease of access and review. This is an appropriate development. The school has made suitable improvements to increase accessibility in compliance with the Disability

Discrimination Act, and is currently revising its three year plan to increase accessibility further.

The school effectively promotes safe and healthy lifestyles by encouraging physical activity and outdoor play. Staff help pupils to widen the range of foods they will eat, and emphasise healthy foods wherever possible. Support for developing appropriate behaviours and self-care skills are of prime importance. Many opportunities are given for pupils to relax and calm down, which reduces their anxiety levels and the likelihood of potentially unsafe behaviour. There is no bullying or racist behaviour.

The support for pupils' personal, social, emotional, communication and academic development is exemplary. The school sets a range of targets in these areas, together with highly detailed strategies to help pupils achieve them. These help pupils achieve the long term aims set out in their statements and to learn and develop. This process is outstanding.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Provision for this age group is outstanding. Close liaison between parents and school via phone calls, daily home-school communication book, monthly progress reports and the open door policy, ensures that children have a smooth entry into school. Parents are pleased to see their children settle quickly and enjoy the fun-filled, welcoming class. The children's welfare and well-being are given very high priority. Consequently, they feel safe and respond very well to the structured teaching and support. They make excellent progress in relation to their starting points and capabilities. Children are encouraged to develop positive relationships and enjoy being part of a group. Initially, this is a considerable challenge for them. However, the exceptional curriculum and outstanding teaching that recognise each child's uniqueness help them blossom and develop interests outside themselves. Their personal development is outstanding. Group curriculum work is topic-based and designed to be interesting and relevant to the children's learning and development needs. For example, in a whole-school physical education session, an exuberant 'hokey cokey' supported each individual's physical development, body awareness and understanding. They also had a really enjoyable time.

All requirements for the EYFS are met, although the school has yet to produce a written policy to explain and underpin its outstanding practice. Leadership and management are outstanding. Children in the EYFS are in a mixed age class, but a careful watch is kept to ensure that the requirements for the age group are met, and that they receive an education in a manner and environment appropriate to their age and needs. The quality of provision is carefully monitored and an emphasis is placed on staff development, support and enjoyment of their work. This makes a strong contribution to the effectiveness of the provision.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005.

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:

- write a policy that underpins the practice and provision for children of EYFS age
- organise the school's document storage and management systems to make access and review easier.

Inspection Judgement Recording Form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education	✓			
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils	✓			
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs	✓			
How well pupils make progress in their learning	✓			

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils	✓			
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The quality of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision

How effectively are children in the Early Years Foundation Stage helped to learn and develop?	✓			
How well do children achieve in the Early Years Foundation Stage relative to their starting points and capabilities?	✓			
How good are the personal development and well-being of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage?	✓			
What is the quality of welfare, health and safety of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage?	✓			
How effectively is the provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage led and managed?	✓			
What is the overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage including, where relevant, the quality of childcare?	✓			

School details

Name of school	Step by Step, School for Autistic Children Ltd		
DCSF number	845/6045		
Unique reference number	134634		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	April 2004		
Age range of pupils	4-11		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 11	Girls: 4	Total: 15
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 11	Girls: 3	Total: 14
Annual fees (day pupils)	£46638		
Address of school	Neylands Farm Grinstead Lane Sharpthorne East Sussex RH19 4HP		
Telephone number	01342 811 852		
Fax number	01342 811 270		
Email address	dfidler@stepbystepschool.org.uk		
Headteacher	Mrs D Fidler		
Proprietor	Step by Step: School for Autistic Children Ltd.		
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth		
Dates of inspection	8 January 2009		