

Autism Accreditation

Specialist Award 2023

Name of service:

The Holmewood School
London

AUTISM ACCREDITATION SPECIALIST AWARD: Assessment Report

Name of Service	The Holmewood School, London
Reference Number	27763
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Status prior to assessment	Advanced
Committee award	Advanced

About this Assessment

This report states key findings on how well autistic individuals are supported according to our framework of good autism practice. Evidence has been primarily obtained from observation, supplemented by evidence from interviews, a sample of support plans and information provided by the provision. If opportunities to observe has been problematic or limited greater weighting has been given to other sources of evidence. Where appropriate, feedback has been obtained from autistic people supported by the service and/or family members and this feedback has been considered in findings

Autism Accreditation Assessment Report

Key outcomes identified from personal support documents and staff discussions:

- Each student has a pen picture which identify what challenges or barriers each autistic student may experience in understanding and responding to others as well as strategies and approaches that staff can use to support the student. For example, it is identified that A 'may experience difficulty understanding complex and abstract language'. Staff are advised to 'pause in between longer sentences to allow A to catch up' and to regularly 'check he is on track'.
- Each autistic student is set a communication target as part of their IEP (Individual Educational Plan). For example, by the end of the Spring term, W is expected to show 'awareness of his conversation partner by giving his opinion or asking a follow-on question'.
- Behaviour Support Plans (BSPs) will also reference communication and social interaction. T for example is working towards 'being able to communicate to staff in a more positive manner to be able to resolve situations they are upset by'. Staff are expected to use a visual cue as a reminder if T becomes rude to them.
- Speech and Language therapy (SALT) assessments are carried out as part of the annual review process.
- An interview with members of the Speech and Language Therapy team confirmed how they worked with educational staff and other therapists to create bespoke programmes of support.
- Staff were also able to provide evidence of how the school facilitates social connections for students that extends outside and beyond school, including the creation of an alumni network.
- One of the case studies submitted by the school describe how students' confidence in speaking in public situations and expressing their opinion has been developed through The Holmewood Public Speaking and Performance Program both in giving TEDx style talks as well as less formal open mic sessions.

Key outcomes identified from observation/review of key activities

- In all observations, staff were clear and direct in their communication, spoke at an appropriate pace and avoided overloading students with too much extraneous information. Verbal instruction was backed up by written lists shared on the white board or accessible on individual tablets.
- Whole class discussions were a feature of most observed sessions. Staff use appropriate strategies to ensure that each student contributes to discussions at their own pace. Students are encouraged to focus on and comment on what other students are saying or doing. Staff are very skilled at asking probing and challenging questions and presenting complex topics in accessible formats.
- Autistic students were empowered to ask and answer questions and express their views. They demonstrated assertiveness and confidence in doing so.
- In one lesson students were being explicitly taught skills in persuasive speaking. In other sessions students were observed being explicitly taught about how figures of speech work such as inference, metaphor, simile, personification, idioms and rhetorical questions.
- Activities were often designed to enable students to complete them with adapted written requirements, for example by highlighting key words or by pasting cards in different columns on a worksheet. This ensured that students who may have difficulties in writing for example because of co-existing conditions such as dyslexia or dyspraxia were not disadvantaged in demonstrating their understanding of a task.
- There were some occasions where students worked in pairs with minimum staff intervention. However, it is suggested that peer collaborative work could be developed further. This is discussed in more detail when considering the teaching of functional skills and self-reliance.
- At lunchtimes, an atmosphere has been created in which students are encouraged and enabled to socially interact with each other and enjoy each other's company with discrete adult supervision. Students who may find unstructured time challenging have access to social clubs.

Key outcomes identified from personal support documents and staff discussions:

- As part of their Individual Educational Plan, each autistic student is set targets in cognition and learning as well as independence. For example:

C is aiming to increase their resilience in exam conditions by using their access arrangements to their fullest potential and by taking breaks when prompted by a member of staff.

D is working towards achieving their Independence/Travel Training award and being able to go up the local high street by themselves.

H will make sure they put their equipment in their pigeonhole when they go to break.

One evening a week, S will prepare a Lunch to bring into school that he can warm up or finish making during his break to build on his cooking ability and take on more responsibility.

- Each autistic student has a pen picture which identifies '5 things that staff who work with me will need to know'. For example:

Prewarn me about any upcoming changes

Make seating clear to me

I find it difficult to generate my own ideas, give me 5 minutes to think, and then offer me options to choose from.

- Where best practice was found, this section provided useful advice to staff on what they need to do to best support a young person, from the perspective of the young person themselves. In a few cases, generic wording was used which was not very specific or personal and did not appear to be written by the student themselves. For example:

Firm boundaries and preempting difficulties, particularly socially

Adult support in lessons, particularly ones that he finds challenging.

- The school should work on ensuring that every pen picture is an authentic and specific expression of how the young person wants to be supported. Maybe this could be reinforced by changing the title of this section to '5 things that I would like staff to do for me'.
- Interviews with staff and documentation confirm that the school has a bespoke life-skills program with the aim of 'promoting independence and enabling students to make decisions without the need for adult intervention'. It addresses a range of topics including independent cooking, budgeting and money management, travel training, independent living and community involvement.
- The life-skills program includes an outdoor education program. THSL (The Holmewood School, London) is a Level 3 forest school with an on-site woodland site. Forest school focusses on social and emotional development; independent life skills; problem solving, self-esteem and confidence. Another initiative is the Occupational Therapy (OT) Café Project which provides an opportunity for students to run cafe services, cook lunch menus, plan and organise for social events and interact with different people.
- A submitted case study describes the school's career programme. It has enabled students to explore a full range of academic and vocational pathways available to them so they are better informed and more confident in pursuing future careers. As such the career programme can be considered a particular strength of the school.
- Over the last three years 100% of Year 14 leavers have left THSL to enter mainstream education or employment. All students have left with a clear career pathway and have followed a range of academic and vocational courses or entered the world of employment.

Key outcomes identified from observation/review of key activities:

- Most lessons observed began by a lesson overview and learning objectives being presented on the white board. Tasks are often broken down into a list. Information was consistently well presented on the white board to support 'readability' in terms of font, minimal distracting visuals and contrast between text and background.
- Where best practice was observed, students had a copy of this information on their own tablet or computer, allowing them to refer back to this information or process it at their own pace. In one lesson, good practice was observed in students being prompted to tick off completed activities on a checklist on their computer screen. The assessment team consider that in some other sessions there may have been missed opportunity to develop independence and executive functioning skills by providing students with a task list or (as their skills develop) students being prompted to devise their own task list.
- On several occasions staff encouraged students to express their own opinion and not to feel pressured to go along with what others said. For example, one teacher told students, 'It is ok not to agree. You can have your own thoughts'. Another teacher said that students come up with different answers as it is 'your opinion' and that was ok if they could give a reason for their answer. The empowerment of students to express opinion and seek answers to their questions is considered a strength of the school.
- Students were also encouraged to make their own decisions about how to complete a task. For example, one student asked if they could prepare a task in a different way. They were told 'Of course you can. Whatever works for you'. Students were also confident in asking appropriately for a learning break.
- In observed sessions, students developed skills in numeracy, reading and writing, speaking and listening and IT as well as academic knowledge and understanding in subjects such as Science.
- Functional life skills are explicitly taught in English and Maths and as an alternative pathway to a GCSE in English Language,
- Students in the 6th Form are supported to achieve an independence award. They are also supported to develop independence in travel training. For example, a functional skills lesson was observed in which students were enabled to travel to a local shop and purchase an item by themselves without direct adult supervision.
- During the assessment some excellent practice was observed of students being empowered to be creative and innovative. However, a number of lessons were observed in which teachers presented a body of knowledge to the students followed by a whole class discussion and then students working by themselves to complete a prescribed task. Whilst this format ensured that lessons were well-structured and predictable, consideration could be given to introducing more student led problem-solving activities especially those that involve collaboration and negotiation with peers or address high order thinking skills. This would help prepare students for the demands that will be placed on them in mainstream educational and vocational settings. This may be an area for staff professional development in ensuring that staff have the skills and confidence to facilitate student led activities and teamwork within an 'autism friendly' structured teaching context.

Key outcomes identified from personal support documents and staff discussions

- Each student has a pen picture which where appropriate include reference to sensory experiences which the student finds relaxing or enjoyable as well as those that cause challenge or discomfort. For example J sometimes finds 'the noise in the class overwhelming so I use ear defenders'. On the other hand, P is developing his 'understanding of how to manage his energy levels' and staff are advised to 'remind him to take time to recharge'.
- Strengths, motivators and rewards are identified in BSPs which often relate to sensory experiences. For example it is recognised that 'B is very creative and likes to build gadgets with Lego'. It is also acknowledged that having access to Lego characters can help B cope with times of stress.
- The pen picture also contains a summary of SALT and OT recommendations which can relate to supporting autistic students in regulating sensory input. For example:

J may 'benefit from a fidget or sensory item to help him regulate' and J also 'responds to deep pressure, e.g. adult putting their hands on his shoulders'.

Staff should 'ensure that the environment and adults interacting with T remain as calm as possible, supporting T to learn how to be less reactive to challenges as they come up'.

S is 'developing his understanding of how to manage his energy levels or 'spoons' and still requires remaindered 'to take time to recharge if needed'. This includes the 'use of regulation breaks to calm down before coming back to lessons to help focus'.

It is recommended that L access 'physical activities at least once a day' such as 'walking up the hill, riding a bike, running, etc'.

- In an interview, the Occupation Therapist explained the tiered approach used by the school to address sensory issues This begins with a universal whole school approach which will include a combination of the following approaches and strategies: . OT Cafe Project, Wellbeing clubs, Staff training, Parent workshops and Sensory boxes/tools/regulation/ resources. Students who present with more complex needs will receive more personalised and specialist support.
- Staff were able to give examples of activities which helped to expose students to a range of sensory experiences such as the food tasting event and forest school.

Key outcomes identified from observation/review of key activities:

- Autistic students were observed to independently access a range of tools to help them regulate sensory input such as ear defenders, squeezies and wobble cushions. They were also provided with the option to take short learning breaks on request or when promoted by staff.
- Teaching spaces on both the Lower School and Upper School sites are very small. Within these constraints staff work hard to minimise visual distractions in how rooms are decorated and maintained. Staff on the whole also employ a low arousal approach in interacting with students.
- The effectiveness of strategies to support students in their sensory regulation is evident in that despite the challenges presented by the small size of some classrooms no student was observed as experiencing sensory overload.
- The Lower School has a small play area with access to equipment to help with sensory regulation such as a climbing frame, trampolines, and a punch bag. The Upper School has the advantage of being located within attractive natural surroundings and splendid views which help reinforce a sense of calm and tranquillity. There is also immediate access to woodlands which are used for a range of activities including Forest School.
- There may be opportunities to make activities more multisensory in order both to support different learning styles but also to build up tolerance to a range of sensory experiences.

Key outcomes identified from personal support documents and staff discussions

- Each student has a pen picture which identify what challenges or barriers the student may experience in emotional regulation as well as strategies and approaches that staff can use to support the student. For example:
Support B to build language around his physical feelings and his emotions so he can more effectively label his own and others' feelings. Talk through cues you notice to help him develop this skill (e.g. nonverbal cues from others).
- As part of their Individual Educational Plan, each autistic student is set a target in Social, Emotional & Mental Health. For example, H will identify when 'he is feeling overwhelmed and use a regulation tool to support him to remain as calm as possible so that he can focus on passing Science and History in the summer term'.
- BSPs identify 'Overarching proactive strategies/stress management specific to the student' as well as proactive and reactive strategies to address specific behaviours. The student's strengths and motivators are identified as well as areas that need improvement and sanctions.
- The assessment team recommend that BSPs are reviewed to ensure that proactive and reactive strategies are consistently identified for any specific behaviour identified as requiring support. Consideration could also be given to how the Behaviour Support Plans could be reframed to be consistent with the school's holistic, therapeutic approach and commitment to the neurodiversity paradigm. For example the plans could be redesigned as 'Well Being Support' plans.
- BSPs have a 'Positive Handling Plan' section. However, it was confirmed with staff that the school has worked on reducing the use of planned restrictive physical interventions and such interventions are now rarely used and only in extreme circumstances.
- Interviews with staff confirm that support for mental health and wellbeing is exemplary. The therapists work collaborative with each other and with teaching staff sharing their knowledge about the student and their professional expertise and insight to create highly personalised flexible and transdisciplinary programmes of support.
- There is an excellent established comprehensive well-being programme which can be considered another area of strength for the school.
- Staff were able to identify a range of approaches to help students develop understanding of emotions. This includes restorative justice and brief solutions therapy. Psychotherapy is also offered to students where appropriate to do so.
- One of the case studies submitted by the school describe the school's extensive Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) programme directly aimed at developing confidence and self-esteem including the English Showcase, Drama productions and residential trips.
- In both interviews and case studies, staff were able to provide evidence of the positive outcomes achieved by students in their emotional well being and mental health. For example one case-study describes how one student who in their previous educational setting demonstrated high anxiety levels and dysregulated behaviour. Since coming to Holmewood the students has become less stressed and is making progress both academically and socially as a result of targeted support. Another case study describes how a student has benefited from drama therapy.
- A submitted case study describes how the school has sought to improve the quality of education by introducing a 'deep dive' quality assurance system. This has translated into a greater focus on academic success with improved exam performance and the school being upgraded by Ofsted to being an outstanding educational provision. The high expectations set for students in terms of achieving academic qualifications is impressive.

Key outcomes identified from observation/review of key activities:

- Staff treat the students with dignity and respect and have clearly built trusting relationships with them. Young people present as confident, relaxed and happy with no indication of anxiety or stress. They have been empowered to be themselves, speak their own mind and respect others.
- The school offers an inclusive environment in which each autistic person is empowered to recognise their autism as an integral part of who they are but also to explore and express diverse identifies around gender, sexuality, race, religion and other aspects of their personality including co existing neurodivergent conditions
- Students are supported to develop skills, confidence and insight to be self-advocates.
- Student behaviour was excellent. On those rare occasion where a student needed to be reminded of 'expected' or 'appropriate' behaviour this this was done in a very gentle, non-confrontational way.
- The teaching of emotional intelligence, self-respect and respect for others is skilfully woven into the curriculum.
- Students are provided with meaningful positive feedback to boost confidence and self- esteem.
- Zones of regulation were on display in the Lower School and to a lesser extent within the Upper School. However this was consistent with staff explanation that as the students progress through the school they are expected to internalise and personalise sones of regulation tools rather than requiring explicit whole class reminders.
- Students were mostly on-task, fully engaged in the learning activity and experienced a sense of completion and achievement from completing an activity. They were observed to develop knowledge and understanding in a range of topics.
- Academic expectations present as being set at a very high level, with students being engaged in activities comparable to those taught at mainstream and working towards National Curriculum goals and GCSE and A level qualifications. Programmes of study in the Upper School are highly bespoke with students being provided with opportunity to obtain qualifications based on a personal skill or interest. In some cases, tutors have been bought in to deliver specific examination courses where this related to a particular skill or interest of a student.
- Providing structure and predictability to learning activities is an important way of reducing anxiety for autistic students. However the assessment team consider that within this context, there could be opportunity to make some lessons more challenging in ways previously discussed by providing more activities which are multi-sensory, student centred or collaborative.
- Any identified areas of development in this report should be considered as building upon and fine tuning what is already excellent practice. Positive outcomes for students as they transition through the school and into early adulthood are outstanding and impressive both academically and in terms of preparation for the world of work but also in terms of social and emotional well-being.
- Feedback from parents and students confirm that the school has a transformative impact on the quality of life of the students and their families. Admission to the school often seen as a life changing turning point, after previous very negative experiences of school.

Nine students were interviewed by the assessment team. One student preferred to submit a written account. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive with the following positive areas highlighted:

- Smaller class sizes
- Lots of help.
- Clubs.
- Teachers are nice.
- Teachers are honest with us.
- Other students are nice.
- You can be yourself.
- There is less tolerant for students bullying other students for being different.

One student said that the work was sometimes too easy. Another student felt that the content of one lesson was patronising. However the students were keen to emphasise that they still felt the school was good.

68 students completed the Autism Accreditation confidential survey. The majority of feedback is very positive. For example, over 70 % of young people rate the support they receive as excellent or good. Comments left by young people include statements such as:

- The support I get is of very good quality.
- Thank you for making this school a good one.
- I love my school and it is a great place.

A couple of students complained of feeling bored or tired at school. Another student spoke about not being given enough processing time and not always understanding what to do. One student wrote a detailed response highlighting a range of concerns. They complained about false promises; lack of communication between staff and students; the study room being too loud; staff not understanding ADHD or common mental disorders and unprofessional staff behaviour.

Within the limitations of this being confidential feedback, the school will wish to consider if there are any ways in which these complaints could be further explored or addressed. While respecting the perspective of the young person, the assessment team noted that these comments were not supported by feedback from the majority of students.

Five parents were interviewed by a member of the Accreditation team. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive with the following areas highlighted:

- Behaviour support.
- Flexibility around uniform.
- Information received from the school
- A genuine partnership- a conversation.
- Smaller environment.
- The school is a happy place.
- Autism specific knowledge and understanding.
- 'They know what they are doing'. 'They are doing everything right'.
- The school is open minded. They don't just see autism as the only thing. They pick up on different things.
- One parent felt that the staff knowledge and understanding of other neurodivergent conditions which often co-exist with autism has improved over the years.
- Only school to have an in-depth understanding of autism in girls.
- Teaching assistants are very well trained.
- Quality of teaching.
- Bespoke academic courses.
- Well matched groups
- Level of assessment is very good.
- Very challenging has made great progress- going to college.

One parent felt that it had taken a while for their child to access the range of therapeutic support that had been promised them. Another parent suggested that there could be more physical exercise.

Responses to a confidential survey is also included as an appendix to this report. 45 parents/carers completed the Autism Accreditation confidential survey. The majority of feedback is very positive. For example, over 95 % rate the support their receive as mostly or always good. A number of parents/carers left highly complimentary comments of which the following are a sample:

- My child is given excellent support and understanding at The Holmewood School. As well as the academic teaching, they are teaching my child life skills, about their autism and strategies to help.
- Our son's life has been transformed through him moving to Holmewood. The school not only 'gets' him but also supports him to succeed.
- The staff at Holmewood have an incredible depth of knowledge in Autism.
- Holmewood is amazing I could not ask for more.
- Holmewood is a wonderful school, with amazingly sensitive, caring and intelligent staff. They communicated incredibly well with parents, and leave us feeling our kids are in the best hands.

- An excellent parent/ school partnership, a real understanding of the issues and a desire for solutions and progress rather than just containing problems.
- The school is life changing.
- One cannot easily find the words to express the impact Holmewood school has had on my child's life. It's not as simple as say, night and day, light at the end of a tunnel where there was none, desperate despair transformed to hope or a lonely often sad young child being full of charm and fun. It is no exaggeration to say that every member of the holmewood team appear to be extremely dedicated to enhancing the life of every student on an individual basis. Holmewood and all the team are an example of what can be achieved.

One parent expressed the view that further training was needed on 'friendships, bullying, mental health'.

One parent stated 'It is worrisome at the language a lead at the school would use to describe a child'. Within the limitations of this being confidential feedback, the school will wish to consider if there are any ways in which these complaints could be further explored or addressed.