

Merryfields School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124519
Local Authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	293019
Inspection date	18 January 2008
Reporting inspector	Michael Megee

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	2-11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	57
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Vacant Position
Headteacher	Sarah Poyner
Date of previous school inspection	18 February 2002
School address	Hoon Avenue Newcastle ST5 9NY
Telephone number	01782 296076
Fax number	01782 296082

Age group	2-11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school takes pupils from across Newcastle-under-Lyme. Since the last inspection, the profile of the pupils admitted to the school has changed. There are now no pupils over the age of 11, and the school has begun to admit pupils with the full range of moderate to profound learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Just under a half of the pupils in the school now have moderate learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There are a small number of pupils with autism who are taught as a separate class group. Although there is a wide range of individual attainment on entry, all children begin with skills that are exceptionally low in comparison with the national average. At the time of the inspection, the headteacher had been in post for a year and an assistant headteacher for one term.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Merryfields School is a satisfactory and improving school with several good features. It has been through a difficult period accentuated by changes in both the age range and the type of disabilities of the pupils, as well as in its leadership. The new headteacher, well supported by her assistant headteacher, has brought in good ideas of how the school can raise its expectations of what can be achieved. This has already led to improvements in English provision, and in gathering reliable information on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress.

The key strength of the school is the pastoral care offered to the pupils and their families. As one parent said, 'The school has a relationship with the whole family not just the child.' The caring nature of staff makes all pupils feel valued and very much at home. This is the reason why pupils very much enjoy attending this school and behave exceptionally well. In the Foundation Stage, children develop good attitudes towards learning and make a sound beginning to their education. In Years 1 to 6, because of satisfactory teaching, pupils' progress continues at a steady rate and achievement is satisfactory. The school has recently provided specific training to all the teachers in English, which means that pupils now make good, rather than satisfactory, progress in this subject.

There is sometimes a mismatch between activities in lessons and the needs or capabilities of the pupils. Teachers have yet to gain all the skills they require for the different population of pupils now in the school, and activities can sometimes be undemanding, particularly for those with higher ability. The school has not yet gathered enough reliable assessment information to enable it to always set challenging targets for learning. The school has identified correctly that these aspects are priorities for improvement and staff are beginning to acquire the necessary skills.

Teachers develop strong relationships with their pupils and this gives them the confidence to take an active part in school life. Pupils take their responsibilities seriously and contribute well to the community by raising funds for charity. The curriculum meets the needs of pupils well and successfully helps the pupils to learn how to stay safe and healthy. It is enriched well by educational visits and exciting residential opportunities.

The headteacher, staff and governors are enthusiastic about the school and are committed to doing their utmost for the pupils. They have a shared understanding of how the school needs to improve. The new senior management team has made a very clear and accurate analysis of the next steps which need to be taken. It recognised early on that the school needed to gather, analyse and utilise the information on pupils' progress more effectively. It has made a good start in this, and has already introduced an improved framework for tracking progress.

There are good links with parents and other agencies. All parents are very pleased that their children come to this school and find it to be welcoming and supportive. They approve of the new headteacher. 'Completely on the ball' and 'She has a firm hold on everything that needs to be done' were typical comments.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 3

A good curriculum, coupled with sound teaching, enables children to make satisfactory progress in the Foundation Stage. There are good arrangements for introducing the children and their families to the school so that they settle in happily and quickly. The staff provide kind and

sensitive support so that children quickly develop good personal skills, including excellent behaviour.

What the school should do to improve further

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- Ensure that work always matches pupils' differing needs and consistently provide more demanding activities for pupils with higher ability.
- Make full use of information from monitoring pupils' progress to set challenging targets for achievement.
- Improve opportunities for pupils to experience mainstream education.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next Section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

The standards pupils attain are exceptionally low compared with those expected nationally. Although progress is satisfactory overall, pupils make good progress in English because this has been an area of whole-school focus. Parents appreciate the strides that their children make in the school: 'Before he came here, he had no communication at all. His progress has been astronomical.' In other subjects, progress is satisfactory. This is because pupils' targets and activities in lessons are not always sufficiently challenging, particularly for pupils of higher ability. There is no discernible difference in the achievement of the different groups within the school, such as girls/boys. Teachers and teaching assistants sensitively support pupils with additional learning difficulties and/or medical needs enabling them to do as well as others.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils are friendly and politely inquisitive with visitors. The staff provide good role models for the pupils in how to behave courteously and calmly and they do a good job in supporting pupils whose behaviour maybe unpredictable. As a consequence, all pupils behave outstandingly well. Pupils say with much justification that they feel free from bullying. It is clear that they thoroughly enjoy everything about the school and this is demonstrated by their good attendance. As one parent said, 'The escorts have to tell him to wave to me in the morning, because he's so keen to get to school.'

Pupils have very good relationships with adults and with each other and they show a clear mutual respect. Pupils take responsibility well. For example, each class has a job board for pupils, and there are opportunities for older pupils to display leadership as house captains. The school, though, offers few opportunities for pupils to develop independence further through taking part in lessons in mainstream schools. Pupils make their views known well through the school council. Pupils have a good understanding of how to stay safe and healthy. At lunchtimes, most pupils make sensible, healthy choices of food and take part enthusiastically in physical activities, such as football and dance. Pupils know that these activities are good for them and help them to stay fit. These activities, as well as sound progress in developing basic skills, prepare them satisfactorily for the next stage of their education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teachers relate well to pupils and they make good use of encouragement to guide pupils' behaviour. Teaching assistants provide good support for pupils with complex medical needs, although they are sometimes underused in general classroom situations. The activities in lessons are not always sufficiently challenging for all the pupils, particularly for the more able pupils who are a relatively new group for the school. For example, they may be asked to do tasks that lack challenge, such as colour in worksheets, and opportunities are missed to encourage them to contribute their own ideas. This slows down their progress. In English, activities and teaching strategies are much more varied, which has led to higher achievement. Although there is a new tracking system within the school, reliable assessment information is not yet available to assist the teachers in preparing lessons and setting targets.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Pupils experience a good array of educational opportunities, enriched very well by a range of additional activities such as purposeful educational visits, visitors and residential opportunities. These greatly add to pupils' enjoyment of learning. For example, pupils talk excitedly about the science visit to Jodrell Bank and the day a theatre group came to the school for drama activities based on Robin Hood. Parents speak fondly of the school's Christmas play: 'It was brilliant. Every single child took part, no matter what their disability was. An afternoon that touched me, I will never forget.' The school takes good care that pupils in the mixed age classes do not repeat work. The curriculum promotes most aspects of personal development well, for example, by giving pupils clear information about how to keep safe and healthy. The curriculum, however, does not provide pupils with a range of experiences in a variety of settings and opportunities to work in different environments, such as local mainstream schools, are limited.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Pastoral care is of very high quality throughout the school. Right from the time children first start school in the Foundation Stage, the staff go out of their way to develop strong links with parents and with outside agencies. Parents appreciate receiving a daily commentary on their children's progress: 'Every day my daughter's teacher sends me home a daily report on a Dictaphone. That's really reassuring.' These strong links foster confidence and trust and ensure that the pupils' well-being is safeguarded well. The great cooperation between all the agencies means that pupils with particularly complex needs are very well supported. Where it is possible, the school is beginning to involve pupils in their own assessment by encouraging them to check their own targets. Many pupils are able to say what their targets are. Although teachers are now collecting much useful information on pupils' achievements, the school does not yet have sufficient tracking information to clearly say what pupils have to do next in order to improve.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher and senior management team are enthusiastic and work together well to improve the school. They recognised quickly that teaching skills and the assessment system would require significant updating in order to do the best for the changed profile of pupils who are now in the school. The leadership team has gained a strong commitment from the staff towards promoting pupils' achievement in the new situation, although most of the new developments have not been in place long enough to have had a clear impact. The exception to this is in English where the headteacher has brought about significant improvements in achievement through the measures which she has introduced.

There are clear and appropriate priorities for development. The school has developed new systems for self-evaluation which aim to yield more detailed information, particularly on pupils' progress. This has meant that, at least in broad terms, the school now has an accurate view of its own effectiveness. However, there is not yet enough secure information in the system so that the school can maximise the pace at which pupils achieve. Given the track record of improvement over the last year, as exemplified by the improved progress in English, the school has a satisfactory and increasing capacity to improve.

Governors are supportive and are aware that the new system for tracking pupils' progress will enable them to hold the school to account more effectively.

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Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Thank you very much for all your help and cooperation when we inspected your school. You told us you feel safe and happy at school and that you very much enjoy your lessons.

We think that your school is satisfactory with several good features. We found out that:

- Your behaviour is excellent and you attend well.
- You make satisfactory progress in your learning.
- All the staff look after you very well.
- The school provides interesting activities which you enjoy.
- Your headteacher and teachers do a satisfactory job.

The school is working hard to make things even better for you. There are three things we have asked the school to do:

- Use the information it collects on how well you do to set even better targets for you.
- Make sure that each one of you is given work that is at the right level.
- Give more of you a chance to do lessons in mainstream schools

Thank you again. We wish you all success in the future.