

St Nicholas Preparatory School

Independent School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	213/6390
Unique Reference Number	100543
Inspection number	320381
Inspection dates	29-30 January 2008
Reporting inspector	Linda Kelsey 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).

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

Information about the school

St Nicholas Preparatory School was started in 1998 when The Montessori St Nicholas Charity formed a joint venture with Asquith Court Schools who have now been replaced by Cognita Schools Ltd. It is situated in Westminster occupying two listed buildings at 23 and 24 Prince's Gate. This co-educational preparatory school for children aged 2 years and 9 months to 11 years old has 302 children on roll, with 49 children, under the age of 5, attending part time. The majority of the children are bilingual, from an international community and with a large majority having English as their second language.

Entry to the school is selective in that the school expects all pupils older than 5 years old to have a basic command of English and have very few learning difficulties. Although some children have special circumstances, such as dietary or medical needs no child is said to be vulnerable. One child is registered as having special education need because of a physical disability. The most recent Early Years inspection was in 2004.

Evaluation of the school

The school provides a good quality of education and a good level of support, care and guidance to its pupils. This good school has some outstanding features in the quality of the curriculum provided and the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils. The school has a well deserved reputation of high academic achievement, cultural tolerance and good teaching. The school is well resourced and teachers work hard to meet the needs of all the pupils whatever their background or experience. As a result pupils make good progress during their time at the school.

Quality of education

The curriculum provided by the school is outstanding. Pupils benefit from an extensive range of subjects and after school clubs. A number of subjects such as physical education (PE), information and communication technology (ICT), science, dance, music, and French are taught by specialist teachers. Schemes of work are well planned and cross curricular links are identified so that the learning is relevant and exciting. They show clear progression and provide opportunities to challenge the more able. Music contributes well to the life of the school.

Pupils are taught in mixed ability groups according to their age and based on assessment at entry. There are specialist teaching rooms available for the older pupils and physical education (PE) is taught at the neighbouring Imperial College site. Both the English National Curriculum and the French distance learning programme (Centre of National d'enseignement a distance - C.N.E.D) are offered. The Montessori method is followed in the Nursery and Reception classes.

Pupils regularly take part in concerts and recitals in school and in the local church. Annual performances add value too, for example next month the school is performing 'Oliver'. Recent involvement with the Schools Sports Partnership has contributed to raising standards in PE through training for staff and even more opportunities for competing in games with other schools. The school is currently reviewing its Literacy curriculum to incorporate the government's new Primary Framework for literacy and mathematics and improve the teaching of phonics.

Take up of the varied sports opportunities by pupils is high. They talk enthusiastically about them and can say how they help to keep them healthy. There is a good range of visitors to the school, for example, the dentist, police, fire-fighters and visiting artists. These enrich the curriculum very effectively. Good use is made of the locality with visits, for example to the Science and Victoria and Albert museums. There is an excellent range of after school and holiday clubs which include sports, French, cookery, drama and dance. The residential visits and outdoor pursuits that pupils are involved in further enhance the curriculum.

The quality of teaching in the school is good overall and as a result pupils make good progress achieving well above average standards by the end of Year 6. Test information shows that pupils progress well from year to year and progress is particularly good for the children using English as an additional language. Across the school, teaching ranges from outstanding to satisfactory. Lessons, such as in science are excellent, as they are taught by a specialist in a laboratory. Teachers know their subjects well and engage pupils with an enthusiasm for their curriculum areas. Pupils benefit from this good teaching. For example, in a history lesson, a pupil said "This is my favourite lesson because she makes it fun". The very good relationships between staff and pupils mean that pupils feel confident to 'have a go'. In the best lessons, work is very closely matched to individual pupils' needs. Paired work and small group activities allow pupils to discuss their ideas and develop their thinking. In the relatively less successful lessons there is too much teacher talk and an emphasis on the 'hands up' strategy prevents some pupils from being fully involved in the learning. The over use of 'closed questions' results in pupils' thinking not being challenged. In some lessons, young children spend too long sitting on the carpet. Resources are used well to engage pupils' interest. Marking of pupils' work is consistently good and shows pupils what they need to do next to improve their work.

Assessment across the school is good and teachers use marking and test data to find out how well pupils are doing. Teachers also use this information to set annual

targets for pupils and to check whether they are making the progress that is expected. However, some targets set are over ambitious and therefore the school is building a portfolio of pupils' work to help teachers make more accurate judgements. The co-ordinator for special educational need (SENCO) works closely and effectively with teachers to put in place extra support for pupils not making the expected progress.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Pupils' personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Behaviour of the pupils in class and around the school is outstanding. Pupils' positive attitudes to school are a credit to the parents and the teachers responsible for them. Pupils are articulate and have well thought out ideas about the school and how it can improve.

Pupils study the six main religions of the world through their religious studies programme. Through their own very diverse backgrounds the pupils share their beliefs and cultures in an open dialogue with their peers. There is an 'international day' once a year but the school does not capitalise on the opportunities to celebrate the traditions, customs and food of the different countries that the pupils come from. Relationships stretch across the cultural differences and there is a high level of tolerance and understanding between pupils who recognise the strengths of everyone being different. As one girl remarked 'it's so warm and friendly here and we get the opportunity to meet people from all over the world'. After more consideration she added 'I wouldn't get that opportunity back home where everyone behaves the same'.

Pupils greatly enjoy school and readily settle to work in class when asked to do so. They find the lessons enjoyable and fun. Through the well resourced lessons in English, ICT, science and mathematics the pupils are acquiring basic skills well to prepare them for their future well being. Attendance is just below the national average and authorised absences are higher than they should be reflecting the dilemma the school encounters in sanctioning extended holidays to families abroad.

Pupils know what constitutes a good diet and eat the well prepared and freshly cooked lunch time food with relish, making wise choices about how much they want to eat. Fresh snacks of fruit, biscuits and milk are served daily. There is good sport provision through the curriculum and after school clubs and pupils keep fit by swimming, gymnastics, football and many other activities. Pupils are taught how to use science equipment safely and they listen carefully to instructions, put on their goggles and use flames, water, pliers and electrical components with confidence. They are able to be trusted with equipment by the teachers.

Pupils support charities at home and abroad. For example; 'Jeans for Genes Appeal', planting daffodils in Hyde Park for the Marie Curie charity, and raising money for hospitals and orphanages in Malawi.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The overall provision for pupil's welfare, health and safety is good. Procedures for ensuring the well being of pupils are outlined in many of the policies available in the school. These are reviewed and updated regularly and the school carries out good risk assessments on the security of the school, its buildings and grounds and when pupils are out on school visits. Members of staff are trained in first aid and to prescribe medication sympathetically and there is a designated member of staff for child protection. The school fulfils the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002.

The school has sought advice and worked hard at ensuring that the historically listed building has been adapted to ensure that pupils can work as safely as possible. There are specialist rooms and equipment for the safe teaching of science and teachers take great care to make sure that pupils are aware of all the hazards. Good health and safety advice is offered to pupils and parents about hygiene, diet, drinking water and about regular physical exercise. The school has ensured that there are robust systems in place to ensure the safety of pupils and staff through regular fire and electrical checks and monitoring the safe arrival and collection of pupils from school. As a result many pupils said they feel very safe while at the school.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school sets itself high standards for the recruitment of staff. Procedures are fully in place to ensure that all members of staff are fully checked for their suitability to work with pupils. The school has a single central record of all staff checks.

School's premises and accommodation

The school is housed in two attractive listed buildings over four floors and good use is made of the available premises which present challenges in terms of adaptations that can be made. Classrooms are light, airy, well decorated and large enough to accommodate the number of pupils and there are specialist teaching rooms for science, information and communication technology (ICT) and art. There is a very well equipped library managed by a qualified librarian. The school has excellent ICT equipment and makes use of a nearby gym at Imperial College and the use of Hyde Park opposite for outdoor sports. The furniture and fitting are of good quality and the grounds which are owned by the Imperial College are used well to extend the pupils' outside experiences. The school does not have adequate facilities for pupils who are ill.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school enjoys the confidence of most of its parents, although one third made negative comments on one or more areas. In almost all cases these concerns were

not found to be substantiated by inspection evidence. All the necessary information is supplied via the prospectus and the on line website, and supplemented through regular headteacher's newsletters. However, the information needs updating with recent details of forthcoming visits and menus. Parents say that their children are happy and one parent commented that 'this is a great school'. Another parent said they appreciated the diversity the school offers academically, culturally, creatively and physically for their children saying that 'the school is very nurturing with a positive environment and good international mix'. Parents receive information about their children's progress through regular reports and parents evening. They are encouraged to come into school to discuss concerns and many do so at the beginning and end of the day.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has suitable procedures for dealing with complaints. It has to date received 8 formal complaints. The majority of parents say they are aware of the procedures for dealing with these.

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 suitable facilities for pupils who are ill (paragraph 5l).

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:

- raise the quality of teaching to the level of the very best by focusing monitoring of teaching and learning on improving the level of challenge to activities and questions led by teachers
- develop and use the rich cultural heritage of all pupils in all aspects of school life.

Inspection of funded nursery education

Effectiveness of the funded nursery education

The provision is good.

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Planning and assessment is systematic, ensuring that staff promote all aspects of children's learning successfully. They are clear about children's different abilities and children are being challenged.

Children are confident in speaking in a group and contributing to discussions. Those with English as an additional language receive good individual support. Many children are able to write and some can read simple words. They have a good grasp of mathematical concepts. However, the exercises children do to learn these skills do not always help them to understand how to use this knowledge in context.

Children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is fostered. Their behaviour is generally good, they relate well to each other and concentrate well during many activities. However, this is less so when there are successive or lengthy large group times. Children with learning difficulties are supported well by the liaison between parents, staff and other agencies.

Children's knowledge and understanding of the world is promoted well by the interesting topics children explore through visits, artwork and exciting imaginative play areas. Their creativity is fostered effectively by the many accessible art resources and they are very competent in using computers. Children's agility and dexterity is good, aided by the use of Montessori resources and excellent games and PE sessions.

The partnership with parents is good. Parents are well informed about the topics children are following. They participate in the classroom and in whole school projects. A comprehensive system of child profiles is being introduced to inform parents about their children's progress more effectively and help children to celebrate their achievements.

The leadership and management is good. There is a commitment to continually improving what is provided, to children's best effect and there is now rich child initiated imaginative play. However, weaknesses in large group times are yet to be addressed. There are effective systems in place to encourage staff to evaluate their work and local authority training is used well to enhance what children receive. The setting meets the needs of the children for whom it provides.

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:

- monitor the size, length and frequency of group times to ensure sufficient time is allowed for children's independent learning
- further develop how number and letter work is integrated into other activities so that writing and counting is meaningful.

School details

Name of school	St Nicholas Preparatory School		
DCSF number	213/6390		
Unique reference number	100543		
Unique reference number (funded nursery education)	EY2450252		
Type of school	Preparatory		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1998		
Age range of pupils	2-11		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 129	Girls: 125	Total: 254
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 29	Girls: 19	Total: 48
Number of children receiving funded nursery education	Boys: 42	Girls: 32	Total: 74
Annual fees (day pupils)	£ 10,530 - £11,250		
Address of school	23-24 Princes Gate London SW7 1PT		
Telephone number	0207225 1277		
Fax number	0207823 7557		
Email address	info@stnicholasprep.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mr David Wilson		
Proprietor	Cognita Schools Ltd.		
Reporting inspector	Linda Kelsey HMI		
Childcare inspector	Maggie Thorpe		
Dates of inspection	29-30 January 2008		