

Therfield First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117153
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326537
Inspection dates	12–13 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Jill Bavin

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

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	First
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	49
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Alison Saward
Headteacher	Mrs Linda Meredith
Date of previous school inspection	25 April 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	The Causeway Therfield Royston Hertfordshire SG8 9PP
Telephone number	01763 287284
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Age group	4–9
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Therfield is a very small village school. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are taught in a Reception class. There is also a mixed Year 1 and 2 class and a mixed Year 3 and 4 class. The Reception class is currently taught by an unqualified teacher. All children come from White British backgrounds. Over a fifth of children in school currently have identified learning difficulties or disabilities, which is higher than the national average. A lower than average proportion of children is eligible for free school meals. There is no pre-school provision on site.

The school gained the Active Mark in recognition of its physical education work and the silver Eco-award for its work regarding environmental issues in 2008. The school gained the Healthy School standard in 2006.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Therfield First School is an outstandingly effective school much appreciated by parents and pupils. One parent summed up the views of many, 'I feel my child is getting the best possible education'. Another wrote, 'I can only praise this school as outstanding'. An overarching strength is the leadership of the school. The headteacher provides outstanding leadership and has established a shared ethos based on her view that, 'there are no barriers to raising performance'. Extremely successful teamwork in sharing responsibilities, including continually reviewing the school's effectiveness, means that this is a school with an exceptionally precise understanding of its strengths and priorities. This accounts for the impressive rate of improvement in what was already a good school, and means that the school is extremely well placed for further development.

An outstanding curriculum, exceptionally well taught, produces a remarkably positive learning environment for pupils. Consequently they make much faster progress than is usually expected, and usually reach exceptionally high standards in all tested areas by the end of Year 2. By the time pupils leave in Year 4 their work is usually in excess of normally expected levels in all subjects and very high standards in English, mathematics and science are maintained. Academically, pupils are guided exceptionally well. Considerable improvement in giving them opportunities to solve problems independently in mathematics, which was an issue previously, has underpinned improved teaching in all subjects. Giving pupils time to think, express ideas, solve problems and assess their own learning is now an established way of working. This contributes to pupils' outstanding personal development, because in addition to assuming roles of responsibility for the school, they are taking an impressively mature responsibility for their own learning. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is especially strong. They are confident learners with a high level of self-belief and generosity towards each other. They are interested in, and highly respectful of, cultures that differ from their own. They have an impressively secure understanding that there is a diverse variety of beliefs and culture within contemporary Britain.

While provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage is good overall, activities and resources are not always as exciting and stimulating as they could be. Planned activities do not always fully reflect children's interests. Throughout the school arrangements for ensuring pupils' welfare and pastoral care are extremely strong. There are rigorous systems for checking how well each pupil is doing and regularly setting, reviewing and adjusting challenging targets. Governors and staff provide extremely effective support and work rigorously with the headteacher to ensure that all pupils make equally impressive progress whatever their starting points.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Staff in the Reception class successfully ensure that children receive a good start to their education. This is because they share a good understanding of how children at this age learn best. They go to considerable lengths to ensure that children enjoy a smooth transition into school and continue to feel entirely secure while they are learning. Consequently, little time is lost at the beginning of the year in developing children's readiness to learn. Pastoral care is outstanding: relationships between adults and children are very strong. Support for children who have difficulty learning is extremely sensitive, skilful and effective. These strengths

contribute to outstanding personal development for all children in the Reception class. Children demonstrate how secure they feel by behaving extremely well in their own classroom or outside space, in assemblies and lessons in the school hall and around the school. In this very nurturing environment children are extremely receptive to new experiences. When they are working at activities independently of direct adult intervention they concentrate for impressive periods of time. During the inspection one boy exercised enormous patience, and experimented with weight and balance, while trying to hang items from a 'clothes line' he had constructed.

Well-pitched expectations mean that children, including those who find learning difficult, make good progress overall in all areas of learning. There is a good focus on early language and literacy skills, problem solving and number work, and using technology. Consequently, children usually leave the Reception class just above the levels of skills and understanding expected for their age. With the headteacher's support, leadership of the provision is good. Staff have a good understanding of the work required to fully reflect the latest national requirements for this age group. They have begun to consider how they can make even greater use of children's interests as a basis for learning, but this is at an early stage. The headteacher recognises that the next step is to ensure that resources are improved to stimulate independent learning even further. Good use is made of the outdoor space which enriches children's learning. There are good opportunities for children to use their imaginations and explore their understanding of the world around them. For example, during the inspection a group of seven children cooperated impressively to devise their own performance using a 'stage' and 'microphones', while confidently instructing their teacher to provide chairs for the audience!

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that activities and resources in the Early Years Foundation Stage always reflect children's interests and are more consistently exciting and stimulating.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

For a number of years standards have been exceptionally high with pupils making extremely rapid progress. Assessments towards the end of Year 2 indicate well above average standards in 2006, 2007 and 2008 in reading, writing and mathematics. Current tracking of pupils' progress indicates that much faster than average progress is currently being sustained in all years. By the time they leave Year 4 the vast majority of the pupils achieve extremely well. This applies equally to all groups including those who find learning difficult, and those with particular gifts or talents. This is because year on year teaching is never less than good and often exemplary. Although an impressive feature of the school's work is the extent to which pupils do well across a wide range of areas, any relative weakness is rapidly and effectively addressed. Consequently, in all year groups, work in pupils' current books demonstrates extremely rapid progress in extended writing since September, reflecting this year's focus on improving their composition skills. By Year 4 standards in English, mathematics and science are well in excess of what is typical at this age. In subjects such as information and communication technology, physical education, history, art and design technology, standards usually exceed normally expected levels for their age group. Such impressive academic strengths combine with pupils' remarkable personal development to ensure they are extremely well prepared for the future.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils work and play together exceptionally harmoniously and their behaviour is outstanding. Older pupils willingly and spontaneously 'look out' for younger ones. Pupils' huge enjoyment of school is reflected in their consistently above average attendance rates. They appreciate opportunities to work collaboratively and are extremely generous in their support of each other's ideas. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Pupils have a very secure understanding of right and wrong and apply this to themselves and each other. They demonstrate extremely thoughtful sentiments when they contribute messages to a Chinese 'wishing tree', such as 'I hope this is a happy and peaceful year'. They identify their own personal strengths confidently to contribute to 'flowers of achievement' and value non-material qualities when preparing poems for Mothering Sunday. They take active responsibility with a growing awareness of global issues. For example, pupils recently conducted a 'water wastage' survey around school which resulted in them asking for automatic taps, which have been provided. Pupils are exceptionally clear about how to stay safe, fit and healthy. They are very willing to try new fruits, and very keen to take physical exercise, for example very many pupils use hoola hoops at break-times.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

The exceptional quality of teaching is summed up by one parent, 'our daughter is captivated and motivated by the imaginative and well-prepared teaching.' Outstanding features include the extent to which pupils are actively involved throughout the lesson and an enthusiastic delivery that generates genuine excitement in return. The introduction to 'co-ordinates' in a lesson combining mathematics and geography, kept pupils constantly involved and alert. They used the interactive whiteboard, recorded other pupils' ideas and responses on a flipchart and set each other sensible challenges, all within the first twenty-five minutes. In a highly successful mathematics lesson open-ended tasks gave pupils plenty of opportunity to challenge themselves. This opportunity was grasped by pupils of all abilities, the more confident mathematicians decided to use negative numbers of their own volition. Pupils who find mathematics more difficult were still determined to extend themselves by using more numbers than originally asked for. In the same lesson one boy raised a philosophical question that clearly arose from thinking deeply about his task. This was respected and valued, even though an answer was elusive. Very precise planning that ensures every pupil's needs are met is based upon tight and accurate assessment. This provides extremely effective challenge and demonstrates consistently high expectations. Teaching assistants make an excellent contribution to pupils' learning especially for those with learning difficulties.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

There is an exceptionally interesting range of activities available to pupils, both during and beyond the school day. These provide an extremely well balanced education and contribute significantly to pupils' enjoyment. A key strength in the school's approach to the curriculum is the autonomy that teachers have to respond flexibly to pupils' needs and interests. This means that while much work may combine subjects to add relevance for pupils within a topic

such as, 'materials', 'the Great Fire of London' or 'the Victorians', the exact period of time spent will depend on how well pupils are doing and their interest levels. Similarly, pragmatic planning means that teachers do not make artificial links between subjects, and so they elect when and which subjects to teach discreetly for a while. Personal, social and health education plays an impressive part, contributing highly to pupils' personal development. The use of computer technology is good and pupils use computers confidently to augment their learning in all other subjects. Pupils appreciate the extensive sports opportunities, often winning competitive events. There are many opportunities for pupils to increase their musical skills. A strong focus on practical participation and application supports the development of key skills highly effectively and creatively.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Parents appreciate the pastoral care their children receive highly. This is exemplified by the comment, 'the school has a wonderful attitude towards the welfare of the children'. The school clearly regards all aspects of pupils' welfare as of paramount importance. They are vigilant in ensuring that pupils are extremely well looked after, which contributes to their strong sense of security in school. Procedures for safeguarding and for child protection meet requirements. This is a school that goes the extra mile to include all pupils seamlessly. For example, because coloured film overlays help some pupils with reading, all have these available as bookmarks. Parents of pupils with identified learning needs are extremely complimentary about the support they and their children receive. Academically, pupils are guided extremely well, often in dialogue with the teacher. Marking of work in books is good because it usually identifies what pupils have achieved specifically and is interactive, inviting a response. Systems to track pupils' progress are particularly thorough and are used extremely effectively. Hence any required individualised learning is very astutely timed, which contributes to its powerful impact on pupils' learning.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

This extremely strong profile of the school's provision is largely attributable to the headteacher's outstanding leadership. Parents are fulsome in their appreciation of her work. She is constantly seeking ways to improve the quality and impact of provision even further and is supported very effectively by the chair of governors. They encourage highly effective partnerships with all governors, staff and professionals outside school to support a close analysis of the school's effectiveness. The result is a school with an exceptional balance of staff accountability and autonomy: highly effective teamwork and a complete absence of complacency. Action plans for school development are comprehensive but succinct and useful documents that drive challenging but realistic targets for judging success. Priorities are, therefore, very securely based on extremely thorough evidence. The school is very aware of its responsibility to reach out to the local community and beyond. A questionnaire to the school's immediate community brought little response, but did provide feedback that people in the village feel the school 'does all it can' to meet local needs. The school is at an early stage of forging links with an urban community in order to extend pupils' experience even further.

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Annex A

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?	1
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2

Achievement and standards

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

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which 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	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

16 March 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Therfield First School, Royston, SG8 9PP

Thank you very much for being so friendly, helpful and welcoming when I visited your school recently. I enjoyed meeting you, seeing you working and talking with you. A special thank you goes to those children who met me in the staff room and brought work to show me. I agree with you and your parents that you go to an exceptionally good school. Here are some of the brilliant things I found about your school:

- you all make tremendous progress and reach very high standards in reading, writing and mathematics
- by the time you leave Year 4 you are doing better than most other children of your age in all your subjects
- you behave extremely well and are very kind to each other
- you enjoy learning very much because lessons are such fun
- you are very grown up about serious things, like saving water
- you have a very grown up understanding of how to keep healthy
- you have lots of really interesting activities to do, including plenty of music and lots of sports
- you feel very safe in school because you know that all the adults care about you a great deal
- the headteacher, teachers, teaching assistants, and governors work together really well as a team to keep finding ways of making your school even better.

The main thing your school needs to do to make it even better is to decide how to make learning for the youngest children even more exciting.

You can help your school by continuing to show so much interest in your lessons and behaving as brilliantly as you do now. I hope you always enjoy learning so much.

With good wishes,

Jill Bavin

Lead inspector