

St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124319
Local Authority	Stoke-On-Trent
Inspection number	328108
Inspection date	30 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Melvyn Hemmings

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	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	239
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	Celia Teague
Headteacher	Bernadette Sims
Date of previous school inspection	5 June 2006
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	North Street Stoke-on-Trent ST4 7DG
Telephone number	01782 234919
Fax number	01782 233 287

Age group	3–11
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues in detail:

- the provision for pupils joining school at an early stage of learning English
- the extent to which the ability of pupils to think critically is being developed
- how effectively leaders promote community cohesion.

Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation form, assessment and tracking records, parental questionnaire responses, observations of the school at work, and discussions with staff, the chair of governors and pupils. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

This average-sized school has Early Years Foundation Stage provision in the Nursery and Reception classes. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is below average. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is high, and increasing numbers of these pupils are entering school with little or no spoken English. There is privately managed pre-school and after-school provision on site.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school. It provides pupils with a wide range of very stimulating learning experiences within a warm and very caring ethos, firmly based on the Catholic faith. The vast majority of parents are supportive of the school and are rightly proud of the motivational activities provided for their children. Two parental comments are typical of many: 'The school has a lovely, calm feel about it and children always seem to be beautifully behaved,' and, 'My child enjoys learning here, and we feel he is safe and cared for when he is at school.'

The drive and ambition of the headteacher is at the heart of the school's success. Her inspirational leadership provides very focused educational direction and a clear vision for school improvement. The highly effective senior management team support her well, and a strong team ethos is evident amongst all those involved in the life of the school. Good improvement since the last inspection means that subject leaders are now fully involved in evaluating and developing provision in their subjects. Governance is excellent, with governors monitoring the work of the school closely and holding it to account for its performance very effectively. Leaders promote community cohesion at local, national and global levels in an outstanding manner. This stems from the excellent relationships in the school between staff, pupils, parents and governors. There is a willingness to be outward looking in their shared thinking of promoting a sense of belonging for all communities. Everyone in school is treated equally and fairly and helped to appreciate and value the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances. Pupils' awareness of national and global issues is very effectively developed through the curriculum and by links with other schools.

Leaders show unrelenting commitment to improving further the school's excellent provision. This is exemplified by the recent strategies introduced to develop pupils' skills in thinking critically. Staff have worked with a variety of outside agencies and speakers to extend their expertise in this aspect of pupils' learning. As a result, the curriculum for mathematics has been adapted to include a wider range of creative tasks for pupils to solve. Though pupils' skills are developing, leaders acknowledge there is more to do to develop critical thinking across the curriculum. The intention is also to help pupils to use these skills to evaluate more effectively for themselves how well they are doing, and what they need to do next to improve.

Children make a good start in the Early Years Foundation Stage and, from their low starting points, make good progress. This progress is maintained in Years 1 and 2 as pupils effectively build upon previous learning. This is particularly the case for the high numbers of pupils whose first language is other than English. As a result, standards by the end of Year 2 are broadly average in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils' progress accelerates in Years 3 to 6 as teachers capitalise on the very firm foundations laid in previous years. This leads to pupils attaining standards by the end of Year 6 that are consistently well above average in English, mathematics and science. This represents outstanding achievement from when they first start at school. Of particular note is the excellent provision for pupils at an early stage of learning English, which enables them to make the same progress as other pupils. The individual needs of these pupils are quickly identified and personalised programmes put into place to develop their learning. Their progress is very effectively monitored and evaluated, and extra help is used from specialist agencies if required. Staff have undergone training to meet the particular needs of these pupils and are adept at developing their learning.

Consistently high quality teaching and learning is the main reason for pupils' excellent achievement. Teachers plan lessons very carefully so that pupils of different abilities are effectively challenged. Marking is very effective in guiding pupils to improve their work. Relationships are excellent and lead to classrooms being calm and friendly places in which to learn. Pupils have positive attitudes, are keen to learn and show real engagement and enjoyment in their activities. Pupils with learning difficulties make the same progress as other pupils because of the very well targeted extra support they receive. The outstanding curriculum promotes pupils' academic and creative skills very effectively. Art and music have a high profile and the school has recently gained the prestigious national Artsmark Gold award for its work in promoting pupils' artistic talents. The school has also achieved Activemark in recognition of its commitment and achievement in physical education. A wide range of enrichment activities very effectively extend and add further interest to the curriculum. These include well-attended extra-curricular activities, such as sporting clubs, Spanish, performing arts, science and a variety of instrumental clubs, which make a very positive contribution to pupils' excellent personal development.

Outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development means pupils' behaviour is exemplary and they are very polite and courteous. Pupils willingly take on responsibility, such as being a member of the school council and, in so doing, make a very positive contribution to the life of the school. They also contribute very well to the wider community, such as by organising fund-raising events for local charities. Pupils are adopting healthy lifestyles very well and can talk knowledgeably about the need to take regular exercise and eat a balanced diet. They also have an excellent understanding of how to stay safe. Pupils are prepared for their future lives in an excellent way. The outstanding pastoral care and support provided for pupils is much appreciated by parents. Safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements and staff are firmly committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all pupils. The very strong links with outside agencies, such as the Speech and Language Service, ensures extra help for individual pupils is readily available when required.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children start school with skills and abilities well below those expected for their age. They make good progress and, though standards are below average on entering Year 1, this represents good achievement. Despite the disruption over the last year due to staff reorganisation and the leave of absence of the leader, teaching and learning are good. Adults have a good understanding of the needs of children of this age and set activities that are challenging and often linked to the children's own experiences. The good balance between activities directed by adults and those chosen by children makes an effective contribution to their development as independent learners. At times, however, these independent activities are not sufficiently structured to ensure children are clear about what they are expected to learn and what they need to do to complete the task successfully. Children show a great deal of enjoyment in their activities and work very well together in pairs and small groups. Their confidence thrives in a supportive atmosphere because of their excellent relationships with adults. Welfare requirements are extremely well met and children are cared for exceptionally well in a safe and secure environment. Good leadership has rightly identified the need to ensure the planning of independent activities is tightened so that children always learn effectively. Good links with parents mean they are kept fully informed of the progress their children make.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve pupils' skills in thinking critically to solve problems and to decide for themselves how well they are doing and how they might improve.
- Ensure the planning for independent activities in the Early Years Foundation Stage ensures children are clear about expected learning.

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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?	1
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**

1 May 2009

Dear Pupils

Inspection of St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 7DG

Thank you for the very friendly welcome you gave us when we visited your school. We enjoyed meeting you and seeing the many exciting things you do. Your school is outstanding. It helps you make excellent progress and reach standards that are well above average in English, mathematics and science by the end of Year 6.

What we found out about your school

- You show a great deal of enjoyment in coming to school and are very keen to learn.
- Your behaviour is exemplary, and you work very well with others in pairs and small groups.
- Those pupils who are learning English for the first time do really well because of the support you are given.
- A lot of you enjoy taking part in the wide range of after-school clubs that add further interest to the excellent curriculum.
- Your artwork is very good, such as seen in the corridor display from pupils in Year 5 who have used stitching and fabric to illustrate the different seasons of a year.
- Adults look after you well and make sure you are safe in and around school and on visits.
- You are leading healthy lifestyles and show a very good understanding of how to stay safe.
- Your headteacher and teachers are working hard to help you do even better.

What we have asked your school to do now

- Improve your skills in thinking carefully about how to solve problems and to decide for yourselves how well you are doing and how you might improve.
- Make sure that activities in the Nursery and Reception classes are always planned well so children are clear about what they are expected to learn.

You can all help your school to improve further by continuing to try your best in your activities and being kind and considerate to others. All of you are a credit to your school and your parents.

Yours faithfully

Melvyn Hemmings

Lead inspector