



Inspection report

The Birches

Better
education
and care

Unique Reference Number 105613
LEA Manchester

Inspection number 272098
Inspection dates 5 - 8 October 2004
Reporting inspector Maureen York HMI

Inspection carried out under section 10 of the school Inspectors Act 1996, and was deemed section 12(3) under the same act.

Type of School	Primary	School address	Newholme Road
School category	Community Special		West Didsbury
Age range of pupils	2 - 11		Manchester
			M20 2XZ
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	0161 448 8895
Number on roll	106	Fax number	0161 445 4970
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mrs Jill Neal
Date of previous inspection	May 1999	Headteacher	Mrs Marie Morgan

Age group	Published	Reference no.
2 - 11	November 2004	272098

Introduction

The inspection was a pilot of the new arrangements for inspection announced by Ofsted in its consultation paper of February 2004. It was carried out with the support and co-operation of the staff of The Birches School and of the local education authority.

The inspection was carried out by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Birches is a primary school for pupils aged 2 to 11 years who have severe learning difficulties. The pupils' attainment falls within the range of National Curriculum levels P1 to P8, with a small number of more able pupils working within Level 1. There are 106 pupils on roll and 32 children have profound and multiple learning difficulties. The school is in the south district of Manchester and the catchment area also covers part of the central district. English is an additional language for 44 per cent of the pupils and 50 per cent are eligible for free school meals. The school moved to its current site in 1997.

Key for inspection grades

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

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Overall effectiveness of the school

This is a good school. Attainment on entry is well below national expectations but the pupils make good progress because the school understands their needs and provides effectively for them. Teaching is good overall with some that is very good. The conscientious leadership of the headteacher and the senior management team provide a clear direction and most pupils make at least good progress in relation to their difficulties. Whole school targets are set, but they have yet to have an impact on raising standards. Pupils enjoy coming to school and there are robust systems for securing their safety. The commitment of the staff means that care and guidance for the pupils are strengths and the school enjoys a good reputation in the community. Most parents are rightly proud of their school. The school recognises the importance of self-evaluation and its view of itself is accurate in most areas. The school provides good value for money.

Grade: 2

Capacity to improve and improvement since the last inspection

The school has taken appropriate action to address satisfactorily the issues identified in the last inspection report. There has been very good progress in developing information and communication technology (ICT) and in developing the use of alternative means of communication for those pupils who need additional help. The school has extended its use of monitoring. Teaching remains good and standards have been maintained. The governing body remains insufficiently involved in evaluating the work of the school.

The school is currently facing a change of role as part of the LEA's strategic review of special educational needs provision. It is well placed to adapt to its changing circumstances because the senior management team use self evaluation well to plan for the future.

Grade: 2

What the school should do to improve further

In order to raise standards and pupils' achievements the school should:

- ensure that teachers' daily planning and recording identifies clearly what individual pupils are expected to learn in the lesson
- evaluate fully the impact of its work, especially the teaching, on pupils' progress
- develop the role of the governing body so that it plays a full part in monitoring and evaluating the work of the school.

Achievement and standards

All pupils enter school with prior attainment which is well below that expected of the majority of pupils nationally. Most pupils make at least good progress in language, literacy and numeracy, and very good progress in their personal and social development. Pupils in the Foundation Stage make good progress in their learning and social development, and a real strength of the school is its integrated nursery provision. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties learn to listen and some respond to simple requests. They communicate their thoughts and feelings through gestures and pictures. More able pupils hold simple conversations and write their names and short phrases. In mathematics most pupils recognise and match basic shapes and are at early stages of understanding the passage of time through, for example, their pictorial timetables. They recognise and match single numbers and understand how to add and subtract, using practical objects. More able pupils can also recognise and name numbers and count to ten. In ICT pupils use: switches, touch screens, roller balls, keyboards and some can load and run programmes and print documents at a basic level. The pupils discover the sounds they make on musical instruments, and with support they create interesting collage displays using a wide variety of materials.

The pupils enjoy coming to school and have a positive attitude to their learning. They behave well, are developing independence and are beginning to take some responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Pupils carry out their school tasks with pride, for example when they take the register to the office. The pupils strive to reach the next challenges which are set for them, and enjoy the praise and celebrations which result when they master them. In weekly assemblies they reflect on their achievements and grow in confidence to try even harder. At the end of each afternoon the pupils still themselves and focus their attention on the lighted candle, which they have come to associate with the quiet time that signals the end to their day's activities in school.

Most pupils know the difference between right and wrong and accept correction where it is necessary. They learn about other cultures and share each other's special festivals, for example at Eid, Diwali and Christmas. They consider the needs of others and enthusiastically take part in fund raising activities in the community. As they mature the pupils begin to learn the value of money through using coins to make purchases whilst shopping.

Grade: 2

Quality of provision

Teaching is good overall and there is some which is very good. Teachers and support assistants work together well. They are particularly skilled at using symbols to help their pupils to communicate and involve them in making choices. There is laughter in the classrooms and an evident sense of enjoyment, from both adults and children.

The good pace of teaching contributes to effective learning. Individual targets in personal and social education, literacy, numeracy and ICT are now more precise, and help teachers to record more accurately the small steps of progress which pupils make. Whilst there are good examples of work of this kind in other subjects there is, as yet, no consistent practice across the school. Not all teaching is sufficiently based on what the pupils are expected to learn by the end of the lesson. Medium-term planning does not show how teachers assess the pupils' learning.

The school is recording the pupils' achievements in practical and interesting ways which help parents to see what daily life in school is like for their children. Although annual reporting to parents indicates in some detail what their children are able to do, it rarely comments on the progress they have made since the previous year.

The curriculum is broad and balanced; it provides experiences which interest the pupils, match their varying levels of ability and enable them to make progress. Although pupils are placed in classes according to their age and ability for most of their lessons, the school has a flexible approach. Pupils can join other groups for particular activities where this would be beneficial for them. Emphasis is rightly placed on developing the pupils' communication and social skills in all areas of school life. At lunch and break times pupils are taught to eat and drink and care for their own health and hygiene. A wide range of lunchtime activities are organised and through these pupils are encouraged to be active, to develop friendships and to play in pairs and small groups.

Inclusion is given high priority at this school and all pupils have opportunities to link with other schools, both to develop their social skills and to take part in curriculum activities. The curriculum is also enriched by a range of off-site educational activities, such as swimming, visits and residential experiences. A strong multi-cultural dimension permeates all aspects of the curriculum, and high standards of care and support are evident throughout the school.

The school provides a safe environment, and strongly promotes a healthy approach to life. Pupils are carefully prepared for moving on, either to their next classes, or to their next school.

Grade: 2

Leadership and management

The conscientious leadership of the headteacher and the senior management team provide a clear sense of direction for the work of the school; their roles and responsibilities are understood by all. They work well as a team, providing support and challenge to the headteacher and to each other. All staff care deeply for the welfare and personal development of the pupils and provide good support for their learning needs.

The school has collected data on the pupils' performance and is identifying areas for development. It has introduced new strategies to address these areas but has yet to evaluate their effect. A three-

year school improvement plan has recently been developed which sets appropriate strategic priorities. However, these are not linked sufficiently to whole-school targets for raising standards.

Performance management is well established but the regular monitoring of teaching by the senior management team is not focused tightly enough on pupils' learning. A high priority has been placed on providing professional development for all staff. Resources have been appropriately targeted on areas of need, but to date there has been little formal evaluation of their use.

Good links have been established with other schools in the area. Pupils have benefited from working with a local primary school in art, by participating with pupils from a local secondary school in sports events, and joining other special schools on an outdoor education experience. Links with the community are good. Very effective use is made of a wide range of support services.

Staff work hard to establish good relationships with parents. The home-school diary is a very valuable means of communication and of providing support and guidance. This is greatly appreciated by parents. Accommodation and resources at the school are generally well used. Careful attention has been paid to establishing a light, airy and welcoming atmosphere.

Whilst the governing body is very supportive, at the present time its role is weak. It does not routinely monitor and evaluate the work of the school and has not played a major part in setting its direction.

The head teacher and senior managers recognise the importance of school self-evaluation and have made a positive start in identifying accurately the school's strengths and areas for development.

Grade: 2

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