

Vallis First School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123644
Local Authority	Somerset
Inspection number	314653
Inspection dates	7–8 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Diane Wilkinson

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

Type of school	First
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	4–9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	220
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Fiona Ravenscroft
Headteacher	Naomi Pauley
Date of previous school inspection	10 February 2003
School address	Milk Street Frome BA11 3DB
Telephone number	01373 462657
Fax number	01373 453013

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This large first school has a Language Resource Base for pupils with severe language impairment. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the number with statements of special educational need are well above average, although this varies significantly between year groups. Attainment on entry is generally below that usually found. An above-average number of pupils join the school other than in Reception, particularly in Years 3 and 4. A few of the small number of pupils from non-British backgrounds are at the early stages of learning English. The current headteacher has been in post for two years.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school in which the curriculum and the quality of teaching have improved well over the last two years. As a result, pupils are enthusiastic about their learning, work hard and achieve well. Major reasons for the school's success are the very good leadership of the headteacher and the hard work and support of staff and governors. Together they are working successfully to improve the weaker areas of provision and the capacity for the school to improve further is good. Pupils love coming to school and say learning is fun. The vast majority of parents are very appreciative of the school and one typically wrote, 'I think the school is doing well and I don't have any worries with my children.' Evaluation of the quality of provision and pupils' progress is comprehensive and accurate and the information is used well to adjust procedures and programmes of work, particularly to help those pupils whose progress has slowed, to catch up. Throughout the school, pupils make good progress and standards are rising. By the end of Year 2, standards are close to the national average, but remain below average in Year 4, owing to the exceptionally high proportion of pupils with learning difficulties in this particular group of pupils. Over the last two years, the curriculum has been re-organised well to make effective links between subjects and provide activities that are relevant and interesting. Very good attention has been paid to the differing needs of pupils in Reception and in the mixed-age classes. In this respect, classroom assistants give valuable support in working with individual groups. Provision in the Foundation Stage is good. Throughout the school, pupils are taught well. Lesson activities are challenging and well matched to the level at which different pupils are working. Lots of games and practical activities engage and interest pupils so they are enthusiastic learners. The school has developed a productive range of partnerships with other schools and agencies which enhance pupils' welfare and enjoyment of school. Pupils' progress is assessed well and they are becoming increasingly involved in checking on how well they are doing, particularly in writing and mathematics, although some have to be reminded of what their improvement target is. The work of the Language Resource Base is very good and gives especially good support to Base pupils and others who have specific language needs, not only in Vallis, but also in other schools in the area. In mainstream classes, the effective support given to pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and also to those whose first language is not English means they make the same good progress as their classmates. The school pays good attention to pupils' safety and welfare and pupils know that they are well looked after. Relationships throughout the school are excellent. A relatively high number of pupils have specific emotional and behavioural needs and the school has worked hard to ensure pupils' good progress in their personal development, particularly in improving behaviour. The number of exclusions has declined exceptionally well. Most pupils now behave well and behaviour in the younger classes is often exemplary. In the older classes it is generally good, although on some occasions a small number of pupils talk when they should be listening or waste time when they should be working. When this happens, staff have to stop what they are doing to rectify the situation, which slows the pace of lessons.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Links with pre-school providers are good so that children make a smooth transition to school, settle in well and enthusiastically take part in activities. The accommodation has been adapted well to children's needs and the outdoor area is used especially well to support learning. The balance of activities when children work with an adult or explore things for themselves is good.

Careful planning ensures many areas of learning are covered in one activity, such as counting the pieces of fruit children carefully cut for their salad. Children's personal and social development is good, although the school recognises children need to take more responsibility for organising their learning. Visual timetables are helping to address this well. The provision is well led and managed and all staff keep a careful watch on how well children are progressing so they can quickly move them on to the next stage.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make better use of pupils' individual improvement targets by ensuring that pupils know them well enough to encourage their progress and that the good practice seen in writing and mathematics is extended to reading.
- Find further ways to help those pupils who find it difficult to listen and work hard in lessons so that the rate of progress does not slow.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Comparisons of standards between year groups are difficult because of the differing proportion of pupils with specific needs. However, very good monitoring records clearly indicate that throughout the school all groups of pupils achieve well. The school is reaching and sometimes exceeding its challenging targets. Parents recognise this and typically one wrote, 'I have been very pleased with my children's progress.' Reception children's good progress helps most to reach the levels expected for their age by the time they enter Year 1. This good start is built on well in Years 1 and 2, where standards have risen over the past two years and are close to the national average. Standards have risen more quickly in writing than in reading because of the school's focus on this aspect, with reading having become a priority for development this year. Improved progress and rising standards are also evident in Years 3 and 4, but the higher proportion of pupils with specific learning needs, a number of whom have joined since Year 2, results in standards being below average. The skills pupils are acquiring to support their future economic well-being are satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good and children in Reception make good progress in their personal and social development. The very successful strategies to improve behaviour have resulted in most pupils behaving well. Incidences of poor behaviour are rare, which is impressive considering the emotional and behavioural needs of a significant minority of pupils. However, some older pupils still find it difficult to concentrate well in lessons. The school has also successfully improved attendance levels, which are now average, and attitudes to school are good. Relationships between pupils and adults are excellent and this makes a major contribution to the good quality learning evident in all classrooms. Pupils are thoughtful and reflective and express their ideas well. They make a positive contribution to the work of the school and local and wider community. The school recognises that more could be done to encourage pupils to take responsibility for their own learning. It has begun to work well on this aspect through the use of personal timetables and learning journeys. Pupils are knowledgeable about how to keep healthy and safe and gain a good understanding of other cultures, particularly through special events such as 'India Week'.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Very good systems for monitoring an individual pupil's progress help staff to plan activities well matched to their pupils' needs. Tasks are relevant to pupils' lives and interests and are practical and fun. Pupils agree that staff make lessons exciting, and one parent voiced the views of many when writing, 'I am extremely happy with the teaching at the school.' Very good use is made of classroom assistants in supporting different groups of pupils so the range of ages and prior knowledge in each class is addressed well. Assistants also make a major contribution to supporting Language Base pupils, especially when they work in mainstream classes. These pupils are very well taught when working in the base. Staff use resources such as the interactive whiteboards well to help pupils understand easily and are very skilled at making sure all pupils are fully involved in whole-class sessions. The pace of learning is good, although it sometimes slows when a few pupils interrupt activities by talking or when they work too slowly. Good arrangements have been made for staff with particular expertise to teach lessons in other classes, especially for physical education.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has improved especially well over the last two years. It is rich and relevant, both enthusing and motivating pupils. Children in Reception are provided with good activities to support learning in all areas. Effective links are made between different subjects, with information and communication technology skills enhancing pupils' learning well. Good collaborative planning focuses effectively on development priorities. Having successfully raised standards in writing, the school is now correctly focusing more on reading. A wealth of special activities, visits and visitors helps improve pupils' progress and enjoyment of school, particularly in the media arts project. The programme for pupils' personal, social and health education is good and the school has successfully begun to help pupils take more responsibility for their own learning.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school takes good care of its pupils and one parent wrote, 'I can go and relax knowing my child is well looked after.' Health and safety checks are rigorous and child protection and staff vetting procedures are effective. Very good support and guidance for pupils' personal development results in their good behaviour and few exclusions, despite the considerable number of pupils with behavioural needs. Pupils gain confidence and maturity, with the school now encouraging them to develop independent learning skills. Especially good support for pupils in the Language Resource Base is a major reason for their good progress. Pupils' academic progress is monitored very well and they receive good advice on how to improve, although the use of target-setting to support progress is still developing and the full effect of this has yet to be seen.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management at all levels are good. The headteacher provides exceptionally strong leadership and has created an effective team of staff and governors. They share her vision of a school where all pupils can do their very best and staff work hard to reach the high improvement targets they have set. Based on very effective monitoring of the school's work, self-evaluation is accurate and the information is used well to address weaker areas. In the past, considerable changeover and absences of staff together with the lack of a permanent headteacher for over a year inevitably slowed school development. This has meant that the school has had to prioritise areas which need to be addressed and staff recognise that more still needs to be done. Accelerated improvement over the past two years has now ensured that the school is progressing successfully towards its goal. This, together with the staff's determination to improve even further, means the school is well placed to do so. Subject leadership has evolved well. Curriculum teams successfully ensure a consistent approach to development planning, resulting in improved progress throughout the school. Governors are fully involved in the work of the school and fulfil their duties well. They make an important contribution to monitoring and development planning.

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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?	2
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	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2

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	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
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?	2
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?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
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

- 9 November 2007 Dear Pupils Inspection of Vallis First School, Frome, Somerset BA11 3BD
Thank you for welcoming us to your school. We were particularly impressed by how friendly and helpful you are and I want to thank the pupils who gave up their time to talk to us. You and your parents think your school is good and we agree with you. This is what we thought was especially good about the school:
 - You work hard and make good progress so standards are rising.
 - You enjoy school, behave well and get on well together.
 - You say lessons are fun and we agree with you. Teaching is good. Activities are interesting and help you to learn well and classroom assistants support you well in group work.
 - Adults take good care of you and give you good advice on how you can improve.
 - Those of you who find learning difficult receive good support, especially when working in the Language Resource Base.
 - Your headteacher, staff and governors have done a good job in helping the school to improve and they are working hard to make it even better. What we have asked your school to do now:
 - Make sure that you know your individual targets really well and refer to them when you are working, and give you targets for reading as well as for writing. You can help by trying hard to remember your targets and using them regularly to help improve your work.
 - Spend less time in lessons having to make sure you are listening and working hard. You can help by not talking when you should be listening nor wasting time when you should be getting on with your work. Thank you again for all your help and good luck for the future.
- Yours sincerely D Wilkinson Lead Inspector

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Yours sincerely

D Wilkinson
Lead Inspector