

Merlin Top Primary Academy

Braithwaite Avenue, Keighley, West Yorkshire BD22 6HZ

Inspection dates

29–30 November 2016

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Early years provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Pupils' attainment in all subjects is below average. Too few pupils reach the higher standard of greater depth.
- Teachers do not insist on the very highest standards of presentation of work in pupils' books.
- Pupils' progress varies between year groups and too few pupils make better than expected progress, particularly in reading and writing.
- The quality of teaching and learning is not consistently good. Some activities do not challenge pupils to think deeply about their learning, particularly the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged.
- Governors have not ensured that the school's website is fully compliant with statutory requirements.
- Pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to write at length in a range of subjects.

The school has the following strengths

- The principal is determined to improve outcomes for all pupils and is successfully strengthening the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school.
- The curriculum is well developed and is engaging pupils' interests and supporting their emotional well-being.
- Pupils are happy and feel safe. This positive view is endorsed by parents and carers and the improvements in behaviour since the last inspection.
- Provision in the early years, particularly in the outdoor area, is good. It stimulates children's curiosity to find things out. As a result of good provision, children make rapid progress from their low starting points to reach expected standards.
- Although the overall effectiveness of the school continues to require improvement. Leaders' accurate evaluation of their work is ensuring that the right priorities for improvement are set and are driving improvement effectively.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen the quality of teaching across the school so that it is consistently good or better, particularly in reading and writing, by:
 - ensuring that there is a consistent approach to the teaching of spelling across all year groups
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to write at length in a variety of subjects
 - ensuring that all pupils are taught a range of reading strategies to improve their fluency and comprehension skills
 - ensuring that work in books is always well presented and that this is supported by a consistent handwriting style.
- Improve outcomes, particularly those of boys and the most able and disadvantaged most able pupils, so that more pupils can reach the higher standards and make better than expected progress by:
 - ensuring that work is consistently well matched to pupils' needs and abilities
 - ensuring that targeted funding for disadvantaged pupils is linked more precisely to the needs of pupils, particularly most-able disadvantaged pupils
 - ensuring that pupils are challenged to think about their learning, to reason and explain their answers.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The principal has brought much-needed stability to the school. She is relentless in her determination to improve pupils' outcomes and is equally determined to raise the aspirations of all pupils by providing an engaging curriculum that instils a love of learning and embraces the wider community. For example, an integral part of the physical education programme for key stage 2 pupils is to access the local waterpark for kayaking, raft-building and sailing activities.
- The principal has established a strong leadership team that collectively has the capacity to drive through the improvements needed to secure good outcomes for pupils. She is very ably supported by the vice-principal, who ensures that assessment information is monitored carefully and any underachievement of pupils or groups of pupils is tackled swiftly. As a result, pupils across the school make no less than expected progress and an increasing number are making more than expected progress.
- Leaders have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. This is reflected in the accuracy of improvement plans, which detail the necessary actions to bring about improvement. While teaching and learning overall require improvement, there is a strengthening profile of teaching evident within the school.
- Middle leaders are recently appointed and are clear where there are strengths in their subjects and what needs to be done to improve pupils' outcomes. They are involved in checking the impact of their work in improving teaching and learning across the school, but this is not yet fully reflected in the proportions of pupils reaching age-related standards.
- Leaders have a strong commitment to delivering high-quality support and training for all staff. The induction procedures at the school ensure that everyone is fully aware of the high expectations of leaders at Merlin Top. As a result, teaching and learning are improving.
- Performance management procedures are securely in place for all staff, and leaders set ambitious targets to reflect the need for rapid improvement in pupils' outcomes. Such systems are used appropriately to reward success and address any underperformance.
- Leaders have implemented an exciting curriculum, with thoughtful attention to the needs and interests of pupils, particularly those of boys. There are increasing opportunities for pupils to question and reflect on their learning, and links are made between subjects to support pupils' understanding. This has had an immediate impact on pupils' attitudes to learning, which are now good.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the promotion of fundamental British values are explicitly taught. The increasingly rich curriculum provides pupils with extensive opportunities to reflect on their learning and find out about important people in history. Year 6 pupils were very keen to tell inspectors about the important role Martin Luther King played in shaping world views.
- The physical education (PE) and sports grant for primary schools is spent wisely. The PE subject leader and sports coach prepare a comprehensive programme of activities

for pupils across the school. This ranges from wall-climbing in Year 2 to annual outward bound residential trips for pupils in Years 3 to 6. This is contributing to pupils' growing enthusiasm for learning and their increasing awareness of how to keep themselves fit and healthy.

- Leaders generally use the pupil premium funding to support disadvantaged pupils' academic, personal and social development effectively. A range of external agencies are secured to support pupils to overcome any difficulties they face in their learning. The support the school receives from the speech and language service is particularly strong. For example, in 2016, outcomes for disadvantaged children in communication and language were in line with those of their peers and represented an improvement on previous years. Use of this funding to meet the needs of the small number of most-able disadvantaged pupils is not as effective. Website information for this area of the school's work is not yet fully compliant.
- Following its conversion to academy status, the Northern Education Trust has provided effective support to the school to secure its leadership. It continues to monitor the work of the school and provide regular advice and support. It has provided considerable financial support to the school, which has been successful in helping to improve the quality and design of teaching spaces for all pupils.
- Parents are keen to support their children at home, and this is reflected in the very high attendance at parents' consultation evenings. Parents who spoke with inspectors at the end of the school day were generally happy with the school and felt that their child was well supported, happy and safe. There were very few responses to the online parental questionnaire, Parent View, for inspectors to consider, but they endorsed these views.

Governance of the school

- Following the last inspection, governors have reviewed their roles and addressed the elements of their functions that required improvement. They are fully involved in setting the vision for the school and ensuring that money is spent wisely. The recently appointed chair of the governing body is equally driven to see improvement in pupils' outcomes.
- Minutes of meetings reflect the improved level of challenge and questioning that governors are levelling at school leaders to bring about this change.
- Governors are in the process of updating the school's website and ensuring that all generic policy information provided by the trust is reflective of practice specific to Merlin Top. This is particularly evident in the comprehensive policy that is now available for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. All staff are committed to keeping pupils safe.
- Leaders have implemented a programme of training and thorough induction procedures to ensure that all staff have a very good understanding of their responsibilities and what is expected of them. There are clear processes for staff to

report any concerns and record-keeping is detailed.

- Well-established relationships with other agencies mean that communication about support for vulnerable pupils is strong. A comprehensive audit of safeguarding procedures has just been undertaken. This has resulted in a more detailed policy that is bespoke to Merlin Top. It is awaiting formal ratification by governors before being uploaded to the website.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are inconsistent. Not all teachers demand enough of pupils and work is not consistently well matched to pupils' abilities, particularly those of the most able pupils. This means that outcomes for pupils vary between classes and very few pupils are able to reach the higher standards of attainment.
- Teachers use a range of resources to support pupils' independent learning in lessons. These are readily available and for the most part are highly appropriate; however, sometimes the reading content is too difficult for pupils, and as a result their progress slows.
- The teaching of English, grammar and punctuation is strengthening. Pupils receive a discrete lesson each day and pupils' books show that pupils are applying their skills directly to their independent writing. However, spelling is not taught with the same degree of consistency, which means that some common spelling patterns are not yet secure.
- Pupils are taught to write for different purposes and for different audiences, and this is linked well to the subjects being studied. However, there was limited evidence seen by inspectors of pupils developing their stamina to write at length and at greater depth.
- Handwriting is not yet consistent across the school. This impacts negatively on the quality of presentation seen in pupils' books.
- Pupils are eager to read, but have limited strategies to use when faced with unfamiliar texts. This leads to a lack of fluency in some pupils' reading and the speed with which they can comprehend meaning. This contributed to the disappointing outcomes in the 2016 key stage 2 reading test.
- Leaders are working hard to improve outcomes in reading. They have invested heavily in a new library to which all pupils have access. Teachers ensure that all pupils are heard to read at least three times a week, and a new approach to the teaching of reading beyond phonics is in place. This has had a positive impact on pupils' attitudes to reading, but is yet to impact on overall outcomes.
- The teaching of phonics has improved considerably and in 2016 the proportion of pupils reaching the required standard was broadly in line with national figures. This represents significant improvement since the school was last inspected, with almost twice as many pupils gaining the required skills.
- Teachers ensure that pupils are confident and accurate in using their basic calculation skills and provide opportunities for pupils to practise and apply these in a range of contexts and subjects. This was evident from work seen in pupils' books, but there was

less evidence of pupils using reasoning and problem solving.

- Associate staff are effectively deployed in lessons to support groups and individuals. Their work is particularly effective in supporting pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, whose progress rates are improving across the school.
- Homework is set in line with school policy and comprises project-based work with regular practice of basic skills. In Year 6, the expectation is that pupils will complete more formal English and mathematics. Increasing numbers of pupils are beginning to return their homework, which is in keeping with the improving attitudes to learning across the school.
- The teaching of PE is a strength of the school. There is an extensive and imaginative programme organised for pupils in all year groups, which makes the very best use of school facilities and those of the wider community, for example outward bound residential trips, water sports and traditional games. This is supplemented by weekend and holiday activities. Lessons are highly structured, well resourced and meet the needs and abilities of all pupils. As a result, pupils are making rapid progress in acquiring their technical skills and improving teamwork.
- Music and drama are equally well taught, with an expectation that all pupils will be involved and will succeed. Learning is lively and fun, with all pupils demonstrating great enthusiasm. In addition, pupils from Year 3 onwards are given the option of free musical tuition to learn to play the French horn, trombone or guitar. Consequently, pupils' skills in a range of subjects are improving rapidly.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Great emphasis is placed on supporting pupils' well-being. The curriculum is shaped to provide a wealth of opportunities for pupils to succeed and for their self-esteem to flourish. Pupils talked to inspectors about 'I-challenge' – a programme which allows them to collect points for completing challenges on their own or as a team. The programme is having a positive impact on improving pupils' attitudes to school.
- Pupils know how to keep themselves safe and have a good awareness of bullying in all its forms. They are confident that should an incident arise there is a trusted adult in whom they can confide. This is supported by the views of parents.
- The school's partnerships with other agencies are strong and these are used to ensure that the most vulnerable pupils and families access the right support in a timely way.
- Pupils are growing a deeper awareness of global issues and their responsibilities to help others. Every Christmas each class nominates a charity that they will support and organises fund-raising activities to do this.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.

- There are very clear systems in place to ensure that behaviour is managed consistently well. This is demonstrated by the detailed behaviour logs that are maintained and the reduction in the number of recorded incidents compared with this time last year.
- Pupils demonstrating challenging behaviours are managed well. The 'Den' is a well-resourced unit that provides a safe haven for vulnerable pupils throughout the day and particularly during playtimes and lunchtimes. Staff within the unit and across the school are skilled in de-escalating situations so that the learning of others is not disturbed.
- Pupils demonstrate great resilience towards their studies and helping each other out. For example, pupils in Year 6 were observed supporting their partners by asking questions such as, 'Have you tried it for yourself? What are you stuck on?'
- Playtimes are well organised and well supervised, given the context of the school grounds. Areas are zoned so that pupils know where certain equipment can be used and there is lots of space for pupils to run off energy. Adults facilitate play well and ensure that pupils are safe.
- The introduction of a more engaging and exciting curriculum is having a positive impact on pupils' attitudes to learning, which have improved since the last inspection. However, teachers do not set consistently high expectations for the presentation of pupils' work in books.
- Pupils' attendance, although below average, is improving. Leaders are proactive in finding incentives to strengthen attendance further. For example, pupils achieving 100% attendance are rewarded with a tee shirt. Already there is an increase in the number of pupils on track to achieve this compared with the same time last year.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In 2016, the outcomes of pupils at the end of key stages 1 and 2 were below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. This was due to the impact of boys' attainment, which was considerably lower than that of girls in all subjects.
- Much has been done to address the disparity in outcomes between boys and girls, including adaptations to the building and significant changes to the curriculum in order to engage boys in their learning. As a result, there are signs that in several year groups across the school the differences are beginning to diminish.
- In both key stages 1 and 2, very few pupils were able to achieve the higher standards of attainment in any subject, compared with national figures. The school's own assessment information indicates that this remains the case in most year groups. This is because, at times, work is not well matched to the needs of most-able and disadvantaged most-able pupils, who are not consistently challenged to think hard about their learning and to reason or work things out for themselves.
- Nevertheless, pupils' progress from their starting points is no less than expected in reading, writing and mathematics, with a growing number of pupils making better than expected progress. This is particularly the case in Years 2 and 6, where strong rates of progress are evident in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Disadvantaged pupils are well supported and all teachers must report on their progress each term. This means that across the school disadvantaged pupils make the same

rates of progress as their peers and reach broadly similar standards. Recent improvements to teaching have resulted in pupils making better progress. As a result, there are signs that differences in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and others nationally are beginning to diminish.

- The progress of middle-ability pupils was significantly below average in the 2016 national tests. However, inspection activity and the school's own assessment information shows that they are now making expected progress in all year groups and they are on track to achieve improved outcomes in 2017.
- The school's assessment information indicates that pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making expected progress from their often low starting points. Inspection evidence confirms this view. This is because work is carefully matched to pupils' needs and is supported through lots of discussion and picture stimuli.
- Outcomes in phonics for all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, have improved year-on-year and are now much closer to national figures.
- Outcomes in music and PE are improving rapidly as a result of highly effective and engaging teaching. Pupils quickly acquire skills and are given increasing opportunities to apply them.

Early years provision

Good

- Children enter the early years with skills generally below those typical for their age, particularly in the areas of learning associated with speaking and listening and in making relationships.
- Teachers undertake detailed assessments of children to ensure that all work is well matched to the children's needs and interests. Consequently, all children make good progress from their starting points and the proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of Reception has improved year on year and is now broadly in line with national figures.
- Staff within the early years are highly skilled and use questioning effectively to probe children's thinking and extend their learning. As a result, children are curious about the world around them.
- Outdoor provision is of a very high standard. It is well organised and well considered, and offers a wide range of rich learning opportunities in which children can explore, build and climb. Children are able to sustain interest, because of the quality of the resources available and the skilful interventions of adults.
- Across the early years, the development of mark-making and early writing skills is promoted well. For example, a group of children were building 'Batman's cave' in the block play area. They were encouraged to write warning signs to keep the 'Joker' away. Very shortly afterwards there were lots of warning signs placed all over the 'bat cave'.
- Early mathematics skills are promoted equally well and a wealth of resources are available to support this. One child was observed in the mud kitchen making cakes and using measuring jugs accurately. She explained to inspectors, 'I need to get that one

the same as the other, so everyone can have some.'

- Learning journals provide an accurate picture of the key stages in a child's development, and the increasing use of 'Magic Moments', which capture learning in the home, is enabling parents to have greater involvement in the record of their child's achievements.
- The early years leaders have great enthusiasm for their role. They understand the learning needs of very young children and have successfully created a stimulating learning environment that is focused and purposeful and in which children can thrive. This is reflected in the year-on-year improvement seen in outcomes. They recognise that more challenge is needed, particularly for the most able, to ensure that more children exceed the expected levels of development.
- Transition arrangements from the early years into Year 1 are highly effective. Colleagues work together to adapt provision during the summer term to ensure that there is no dip in attainment and progress once they enter key stage 1. This is supported by assessment information which shows that pupils in Year 1 are continuing to make better than expected progress.
- Early phonics teaching is effective and children are able to recognise initial letter sounds and build simple words. They are not yet able to do this with fluency and speed.
- Progress in personal and social and emotional development is good and this accounts for the strengths seen in children's behaviour and in their relationships with adults. They are encouraged by adults to take turns and to share. However, not all adults insist on children tidying up before they leave the area of learning they are working at. This means that during continuous provision there are resources left on the floor.

School details

Unique reference number	139229
Local authority	Bradford
Inspection number	10020745

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	366
Appropriate authority	Academy trust
Chair	Matthew Riley
Principal	Lesley Heathcote
Telephone number	01535 210028
Website	www.merlintopacademy.org
Email address	office@merlintopacademy.org
Date of previous inspection	12–13 March 2015

Information about this school

- The school does not comply with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish about, safeguarding, special educational needs and pupil premium strategy.
- The school does not meet requirements on the publication of information about the use of the pupil premium funding for the most able disadvantaged pupils or its most recent special educational needs policy on its website.
- This is a larger than average-sized primary school.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as their first language is above average, with the proportion of pupils who are of White British heritage below the national average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils eligible for support through the pupil premium funding is almost twice the national average.

- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average.
- The early years provision consists of Nursery and Reception classes. Children attend Nursery for half of the week, either on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning, or Wednesday afternoon, Thursday and Friday.
- There have been significant changes to the staffing team since the school's last inspection including the appointment of the principal and vice-principal and six recently appointed teachers.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed pupils learning in 14 different lessons and part-lessons, several of which were observed jointly with the senior leadership team of the school.
- In addition, inspectors looked at samples of pupils' work in a range of subjects and listened to pupils read from Year 1, Year 2, and Year 4.
- Inspectors met with groups of pupils, the principal, and members of the governing body, as well as representatives from the Northern Education Trust.
- In addition to having several conversations with parents at the end of the school day, inspectors took account of 19 responses to Parent View.
- Information from the school about pupils' recent and current progress was examined, as well as the school's evaluation of how well it is doing and records of leaders' monitoring of the quality of teaching. Records relating to behaviour, attendance and documents relating to safeguarding were also scrutinised.

Inspection team

Diane Buckle, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Larissa Thorpe	Ofsted Inspector
Sean Smith	Ofsted Inspector

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