

Amanda Spielman at Stonewall

Good morning everyone.

It's a great pleasure to be here at this conference about children and young people. It's especially good to be following on from Ruth, who has led [Stonewall](#) with such vision and determination.

Many of us here today work in education or social care. As Chief Inspector, I do both. Our education role extends all the way from early years through schools and colleges to adult education, so it's a broad remit.

This morning, I will of course be talking about some of the issues that are particularly relevant from an LGBT perspective – including the current challenges in some primary schools around the teaching of relationships education. And I'll give you some wider perspective on how we approach all kinds of equality issues.

The link between education and civil rights

For a hundred years or more there has been a healthy debate about how far education should extend beyond basic literacy and numeracy – the extent to which it should teach about wider life. The very first seminar in my own education MA many years ago was about the different concepts of education that came to be embedded in different countries' schools, as their national education systems emerged during the 19th century.

And here we are today – in the 21st century – reflecting on the same theme: about how far education is about teaching life.

Stonewall is 30 years old. And its history is, to a large extent, bound to education. Major shifts in the education landscape book-end the struggles that have played out since Stonewall was founded 30 years ago, to challenge the introduction of section 28.

That clause told local authorities not only that they “shall not intentionally promote homosexuality” but also that they should not “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”.

A provision designed to quieten LGBT voices – and in particular to limit the influence of those voices on the young – had the opposite effect.

It galvanised opposition and mobilised a campaign – embodied in Stonewall – that ultimately defeated the legislation and, in doing so, played a part in liberalising society's attitudes to same-sex relationships, to a remarkable degree.

In 1987, the [British Social Attitudes survey](#) recorded that just 11 per cent of people believed that same-sex relationships were “not wrong at all.” By

2017 that figure had risen to 64 per cent. This is an astonishingly rapid change, and there's a clear link between effective campaigning, legislative change and the evolution of social attitudes.

State education has had an important role in this period of change:

- it's been the focus of changes in the law – generally moving in favour of liberalisation
- it has helped prepare children for life in modern, diverse Britain, by teaching the values of individual liberty, tolerance and mutual respect
- and, for good and sometimes for ill, it has often been the crucible of public debate about LGBT issues in society – from section 28, to the current arguments about relationships education

The role of Ofsted

Which brings me on to the role of Ofsted in education and social care – and in the particular context of LGBT issues.

Many of you here today work in education – whether as teachers or in another role. Some of you work in social care, youth support, or in other services that we inspect. So I will assume a fair degree of awareness about Ofsted.

In both education and children's social care, we are the inspectorate and in some areas we are also the regulator. This means we are, to a great extent, the arbiter of quality in these areas.

There's a lot of mythology about Ofsted, and it can be somewhat out of step with the work we do and the powers we have. This is particularly the case in education. First and foremost, we inspect. We do that impartially and without fear or favour; we judge each school as an individual institution; and the judgements we reach are based on that school's relative merits.

I'm not naive about the effect our judgements have on schools and on teachers – especially the judgements at the top and bottom of the scale – but I'm also very clear that the system we use is a good one.

Parents understand it and it's been replicated by any number of other inspectorates, because of its clarity.

And our inspection work gives us a unique insight. We are able to look right across the education and social care landscape.

That allows us to spot and comment on emerging trends. And we augment what we learn through inspection, with targeted research into the areas that matter most to schools and social care providers.

Taken together, our reporting and research clearly influences the sector and its practices.

It's this soft power that we bring to bear, and we try to use it well to help improve the way all children are educated, and vulnerable children are looked after. Because at Ofsted, our aim is always to be a force for improvement.

Today I'm mainly going to talk about education and how we are changing the conversations we have with schools.

From September, we will be inspecting schools in a rather different way. The central aim of [our new inspection framework](#) is to encourage much greater emphasis on the substance of education – the curriculum that children are taught.

For too long, there has been a tendency to concentrate rather too much on results – sometimes to the detriment of other outcomes of education. And sadly, too much reliance on performance data can lead to unintended, and even unwanted, consequences.

Results matter of course, but education is about so many more things:

- it's about the acquisition of knowledge, for its own sake
- it's about the broadening of horizons through that knowledge
- it's about the development of the skills needed to make a success of adult life
- it's about encouraging harmony between different people
- and it's about the advancement of civilisation

All of these aims are brought together in the curriculum. This is the heart of education, where the ideas and principles meld together. So we have put it at the centre of our new approach to inspection. A coherent and well-sequenced curriculum is the best way to make sure that every child benefits from a high quality education – which of course, is what leads to high attainment.

By putting more emphasis on what is taught and how it is taught, relative to the results a school achieves, we can reward those who educate with real integrity.

Schools that think hard about what they teach and how they teach it – and put that ahead of efforts to improve their performance statistics.

Schools with integrity work to unlock the potential of every child.

In the new inspection model, we are particularly interested in how schools contribute to the personal development of children. This area is now a judgement in its own right. This makes more space in inspection for discussing things like the PSHE lessons in which wider life issues can be explored.

And we want schools to be valued for making a culture where differences of all kinds are valued and respected – and bullying of all kinds is

marginalised. Examining the overall culture of a school in thorough inspection discussions is a far better way of assessing this, than deploying some kind of checklist to make sure every conceivable permutation of racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance or any other possibility is specifically tackled by one school rule or another.

Framed properly, inspection complements and counterbalances other kinds of measurement and reporting, by making sure that good outcomes flow from doing the right thing in the right way. This really does support schools and help them improve.

Equality, education and Ofsted

Through our inspections of education and social care, Ofsted is also the main checking mechanism for the [Equality Act](#), itself now nearly a decade old, which is part of the valuable framework of law and policy that provides for all children to be educated for life in modern Britain.

That's why I have recently found myself speaking a good deal about equalities in education, and in particular defending heads' rights and responsibility for making sure they are taken seriously in schools.

And to take one step back for a moment, in recent interviews and discussions in the context of the Birmingham protests, I have been reminding people that equalities legislation protects a whole range of characteristics, which between them reflect many of the dimensions of difference in our society.

Aside from those in which Stonewall has a particular interest, they include age, race, religion, disability and others. Some people hold many of these characteristics simultaneously, while others identify very strongly with just one or two – and make those a defining feature of their lives.

But as we know from many controversies of the past and of the present, the important rights we have established, and that we protect, are not in reality completely separable from each other. The exercise of one right can sometimes be seen as limiting of another right. The different protected characteristics can and do bump into each other. Many of the other rights are stoutly defended, just as Stonewall defends LGBT rights.

And Ofsted's position, as the checking mechanism of equality, means we are obliged to make decisions in situations where the different protected characteristics are colliding. This is even more difficult where there are competing claims of individual rights, parental rights and group rights.

I'm reminded here of a story told by a woman named Agnes, who was finishing secondary school a century ago in 1918. A bright and ambitious girl, Agnes was encouraged by her excellent and forward-looking Catholic girls' school in Birmingham to break with tradition and go to university.

But ambition is a personal trait – whereas tradition belongs to the group: and in Agnes's life 100 years ago, that meant family and community, especially the parish church.

Agnes's family, concerned that she should stay within that community, insisted that she attend a Catholic teacher training college, rather than a secular university.

That required an application supported by the parish priest. But he refused to sign, on the grounds that the only suitable life for a Catholic girl in 1918 was marriage and motherhood – for which any further education was quite unnecessary.

Agnes remained a staunch churchgoer her entire life, and was not embittered by the truncation of her education. But when she told this story to her only granddaughter, she did talk about her long-lost aspiration, and about how glad she was that her granddaughter and her contemporaries were now free to choose their own paths, in the light of their aspirations and talents.

That is my grandmother's story. And I think it is interesting, because it illustrates neatly how group pressure, parental influence and religious authority can intersect – and sometimes come into conflict with – individual rights.

And of course, we are seeing that same kind of conflict playing out today.

The current protests against relationship education lessons began outside a primary school in Birmingham. From this one school, protests and campaigning have spread to other schools in Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere.

You'll all have seen the media coverage. At times, it has had echoes of the arguments about section 28: is it appropriate for young children at primary school to learn about gay relationships or gay marriage?

Should the state be able to teach children about things that the child's parents do not approve of? Should the state decide what children should know about? Is morality an entirely private matter that ought to be kept out of the domain of politics and government?

A lot of charged rhetoric has been expended on this, so it is worth considering from first principles.

Relationships and sex education – RSE – is described in government guidance under this catch-all term. But at primary school, the expectation is unequivocally on teaching about relationships; despite some of the misleading rhetoric that has been pushed out from some quarters, we're not talking about sex education here. That is an expectation only for secondary schools.

So a primary school child will normally learn about same-sex relationships in the wider context of human difference.

People are different in so many ways. Even the youngest children notice the various dimensions of physical differences between people. Going beyond what is immediately visible, children's families may worship differently. And families may love and marry differently too.

For young children this last part can be as simple as teaching them that some

families have a mummy and a daddy; other families may have two mummies or two daddies; some may have just one parent; and some children may not live with their mummy or daddy at all.

And by the way, nearly all schools are already doing this, and doing it well.

And this is important.

It's important because most children will come across same-sex couples in their young lives, and they should be able to recognise these couples as the loving families they are.

And it's also important that children who are beginning to recognise some difference in themselves, do not assume that this makes them bad, or ill, or alone in the world.

So it's right that the values of tolerance and respect for these differences, are taught to children – just as explicitly as we teach them about arithmetic, or ancient Rome.

And we are an increasingly diverse country. Multi-cultural, multi-racial, increasingly socially liberal in many parts of society, but not in others. And the laws of this country, embodied in the Equality Act, are designed to ensure that we give equal weight to many of the facets of difference – the nine 'protected characteristics'.

And that point about "equal weight" matters. There is no hierarchy in the law. One characteristic does not have primacy over another. And here's the rub. When voices are raised in argument, it can result in what I've previously called 'cause wars': – as in, 'my protected characteristic should be more protected than yours'.

Around relationships education, the dividing line tends to be between religion and sexual orientation – but there are points of friction elsewhere. Where protected characteristics bump up against each other, it can be hard to find common ground and to build a consensus.

But there must be some level of working consensus, if we are to tackle the scenes we are seeing outside some of our primary schools. It is profoundly disturbing for children to be faced by megaphone-wielding protestors as they arrive at school. Just as it is for teachers and school leaders to be intimidated over the lessons they teach.

Dialogue is essential to calm tensions and find pragmatic solutions that do meet the requirements of the law.

And given the religious nature of many of these protests, it's important to point out that nearly all faith schools teach relationships education – and do it well.

These schools teach about same-sex relationships in a respectful way, but they also teach the tenets of their faith.

So they may teach that gay marriage is both legal and socially accepted in this country, but also that their own religion does not countenance same-sex relationships. That approach will not find favour with everybody in this room, but it balances and respects both protected characteristics.

And as it happens, recent protests have been at non-faith schools.

The Department for Education has recently published guidance in this area, which is a welcome step forward, but there is still latitude for headteachers on what is taught and when.

More generally, in England we do give schools a great deal of latitude and flexibility in the curriculum and other decision-making – it's part of what makes teaching so rewarding, and it's what gives schools their unique flavours – but in this area I do believe it would be more helpful if primary heads, in particular, had more certainty over what they should be teaching and when. As things stand, heads are largely left alone to manage what can be very fraught and sometimes angry discussions.

It would be better, surely, to have one national conversation about Relationships and Sex Education, rather than hundreds of local discussions, each coming to a slightly different conclusion.

So coming back to Ofsted's role in all of this.

We are an inspectorate – we inspect. And this area is one of the very few where we have to carry out a compliance check. We check that schools are meeting the minimum requirements set by equalities legislation. And, in the vast majority of schools, this is happening.

What we don't do is set a maximum. We don't say what constitutes a good lesson plan for relationships education. And we don't endorse a particular approach – but we do and we will continue to defend the rights of schools to decide how they meet their obligations, after consulting with parents.

Because it is increasingly challenging for schools to prepare young people for life in modern Britain.

The increased diversity of the country – and in the case of LGBT, the visibility of the diversity that has always been there – is a great thing. But with greater diversity and a greater willingness for people to promote and defend their particular view of the world, comes more space for disagreement.

And alongside this we see a wider shift in the tenor of debate. An emphasis on single issues – sometimes to the detriment of real consideration of different perspectives and willingness to find that working consensus, putting children's interests first.

I spoke recently about the challenges children face in this new “if you're not with me, you're against me” age: where there is a lack of tolerance of divergent views and where this intolerance is entrenched in the echo chamber of social media.

I stand by the solution that I suggested then: arm our children with knowledge. Teach them well. Prepare them for a modern world – in which many people will try to tell them what to think – by giving them the knowledge to contextualise those arguments and the skills to express their own views and put them into action.

And teach them about the wonderful diversity of humanity in modern Britain: a diversity of race, gender, faith and love. Education shouldn't sow the seeds of discord, it should prepare the citizens of tomorrow to create a more tolerant, respectful and hopeful world.

Thank you.