Amanda Spielman at the Nursery World business summit 2022

Good afternoon. It's lovely to be here. Nothing beats meeting people in person, so thank you for inviting me back.

I last spoke at this event five years ago, in my first year as chief inspector. I think I remember talking to you about Ofsted's new strategy. Five years on, we're updating the strategy and I'll talk a little about that later on.

But first, I also want to reflect on the last two years, how the pandemic has affected your sector, and also to talk about the work we've done on education recovery so far. We all know that a child's early education has a lasting impact – so education recovery really does start here with you.

Impact of COVID-19 on providers

But before that, I'll start by thanking you – and your staff – for everything you have done and continue to do for children.

To say that the last couple of years have been challenging is just such an understatement. Restrictions, furlough, funding, constant rule changes. And that's before we even start to talk about staff well-being, staff retention and, most important of all, the impact on children themselves. None of us yet knows how much longer-term impact there may be.

Like yours, our work continued throughout the pandemic, and it highlighted how you were responding to the challenges. And it gave all of us a better understanding of the impact on children.

My most recent Annual Report described some of the difficulties you have been having. We know that maintaining ratios has been tough when staff have been ill or isolating, and that the quality and availability of temporary staff has varied.

We know that it has changed how many families manage their time and use childcare. Even after restrictions have been lifted, more flexible working or working from home means that many parents are at home more and perhaps looking to make less use of nurseries or childminders. So you have had to adjust your operating models. That makes planning just that bit more difficult.

Some of you have fewer children on roll and are worried about long-term financial sustainability. And that increasing flexibility for parents can also translate into a loosening those routines for children, which can make it harder to settle them back into nursery on the days they're with you. All these things really don't make life easy for you.

But I am pleased to say that, despite all the difficulties you have faced and continue to face, it is very clear from our recent inspection evidence that you are maintaining the quality of children's education and care. That's really down to the skill, adaptability and expertise of you and your staff.

I do know that at times, you feel overlooked and undervalued, and unrecognised for the work you do. It's absolutely fair to say that early years doesn't get the attention you'd expect given the size of the sector and the importance of your work.

And I do think for the wider world, the sector itself can appear quite confusing. Whereas a school is a school, has a building that is easily recognisable and most of us went to at least one, early years provision isn't so uniform.

Childminders, nurseries, pre-schools, kindergartens, nannies, holiday clubs, creches, the list goes on. Your settings vary enormously and, unlike schools, you're serving the needs of both parents and children.

We all know that the EYFS, now in its 15th year, is the statutory umbrella for all of this. But the list shows how varied early years provision really is. And of course, almost all children finish their early years in school Reception classes.

So the developmental and education needs of your children range all the way from babies, who have yet to learn to roll over, all the way to children on the cusp of formal education. It makes it an incredibly vital, diverse and complex sector, worthy of the closest attention from policymakers.

And there have been many different initiatives to support and encourage parents to use childcare over the years, but clearly we have yet to find a perfect solution. I know that some of you here today run organisations with multiple settings, and sometimes are dealing with inspectorates and regulations in more than one country. Your insights are invaluable to the government's plans for the future of childcare. And in shaping our relationship with you as we do our work as regulator and inspector.

The education inspection framework (EIF)

When I last spoke at this conference, we were in the early stages of developing the current inspection framework, or the EIF. We took some time to develop this framework, drawing on the best research we can find out there, to make sure that our inspectors were looking at what matters most.

Throughout education – from early years all the way through to further education – we now emphasise the curriculum: what we want children and learners to know and be able to do at different stages in their life.

That is every bit as true for our youngest children, and I will come back to curriculum in a moment. But, on the whole, the feedback we receive from our EIF inspections of early years settings is very positive.

Given the COVID-19 disruption, we couldn't have introduced the EIF at a better time. The education conversation about what we want children to learn and whether they are gaining the right knowledge and skills has never been more important. It sits at the heart of our framework. The pandemic context, and what you've been having to do differently as a result, is an important part of that conversation which of course starts from the moment the inspector makes that phone call.

This year, we are evaluating how well the framework is going, as well as developing our strategy for the next 5 years.

The revised EYFS

Alongside our new framework, the DfE [Department for Education] made revisions to the EYFS. And these revisions came into force last September.

Reading the new document, I was really pleased to see more precision in the early learning goals. I like the fact that it makes it clear that those goals are an assessment point at the end of the stage and the EYFS separates this from the curriculum – those 'educational programmes'.

This is a good thing. For too long, children have been assessed and measured against the early learning goals from the moment they start. And that doesn't make a great deal of sense. It's a bit like assessing children at the start of a GCSE course based on what they will have learned by the end, before any of the content has been taught.

And over the years, assessment has become a bit of an industry in itself, making a heavy workload for staff and often taking time and attention away from the interplay between practitioners and children, which is so crucial.

The new EYFS specifically says:

> When forming a judgement about whether an individual child is at the expected level of development, teachers should draw on their knowledge of the child and their own expert professional judgement. … Sources of written or photographic evidence are not required, and teachers are not required to record evidence.

I'm repeating that message to give you and your practitioners confidence that Ofsted inspectors are not looking for files full of assessment evidence on individual children. You don't need to photograph a child with a group of 5 bricks to prove that you have introduced children to the number 5. If the practitioner has been working with the child, they will know whether the child can recognise 5, can count up to 5, can build a tower of 5, or not.

A photograph doesn't give the practitioner this information: they already know it, and it could give false assurance that the child understands something that is in fact beyond their knowledge. We can all fall victim to what looks good, through photographs of lovely children caught in the moment,

without knowing whether the knowledge and skills underneath are secure. I'm sure parents love the photos – I'm not saying don't take them – but please, don't take them for us!

The impact of COVID-19 on children

And I think that our knowledge of what children can do and what they need to learn next is even more important now, given their very different experiences over the last 2 years.

It is a stark thought that children turning 2 now have spent their entire life in the context of a pandemic. Their first years have been considerably different from what we have previously expected a 'normal' early childhood to look like. Many children have only socialised with close family and, often, any other adults they've met will have been wearing masks.

In the research we published last December about pandemic impact, we did report on how many children are behind where would have been expected pre-pandemic.

I'm particularly concerned about the increased delays in vocabulary acquisition and communication skills. And linked to this, children's social skills are not as strong. Many children seem to be suffering more separation anxiety – and first-time parents especially seem to be more anxious about leaving their child. And you told us that many of the children take longer to settle or are shyer with unfamiliar people.

And early indications from our most recent research is that you are continuing still to find gaps in children's communication and language development and PSED – especially in those independent skills. And your efforts to teach these and close these gaps is sometimes hampered by staffing levels still being in flux and some staff not yet having enough training.

Fortunately, you also told us that many of the social difficulties have proved to be short-lived. That once you got children back into consistent routines, they've quickly grown in confidence and become more comfortable with familiar adults and other children. This, I hope, suggests that there isn't a long-term negative impact on children's social development.

Overall, I think there is hope that there will be little, or only very limited, long-term impact on our youngest children.

Communication and language

In tackling the impact of the pandemic on the delay in children's speech and language acquisition, it is heartening to know from recent inspections that many of you have really redoubled your efforts to give children the opportunity to talk. We saw a nice example of this in a nursery that had re-introduced group snack-time, and was really using it to encourage children to listen to each other and take turns in conversation.

On every inspection, inspectors talk to you about what you're doing to make

sure that children learn, remember and use more words. And the reason for this is simple: a good vocabulary sets a child up for life.

Knowing and using more words brings confidence and assuredness. Children can communicate well, articulate what they're thinking, get what they want. At the simplest level, it helps them to make friends and fit in socially. It's good for their self-esteem and mental health.

And it's now well accepted that the number of words young children have does correlate with how well they go on to do at school, as well as their success in adulthood. Children with poor language and communication when they get to school are less likely to do well in tests at 11; it leaves children with a lot of ground to make up.

So the more words a child has heard, knows and uses by the time he or she start school, the better. What will this mean for you? Well, of course you can make sure that children have lots of activities that build and develop their vocabularies. And that all children benefit from those activities, not just the bold ones who put themselves forward.

These are the things that you and your staff do well, day in, day out. Listening and talking to children, introducing new words, encouraging them to use them, rewarding curiosity about language. Reading then comes more easily when children start school.

But while vocabulary can be picked up through activities and everyday conversation, there will always be some words that just need to be taught explicitly. So please, don't be afraid to teach where you think a child needs to be taught. And this is especially relevant for those children who arrive with fewer words.

The power of reading

I do often talk about the importance of reading aloud when talking to an early years audience, and today is no exception. So, forgive me for banging the drum once again. Reading really is one of the best things we can do to help children increase their vocabulary. Stories, rhymes and songs all help children learn new words that aren't always going to come through everyday conversations.

Maurice Sendak's Wild Things 'roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth'. That's a great line to read aloud – and it's a fun line to hear.

Listening to a well-read story is a joy most of us will remember from childhood. It's sensory; it's exciting. It helps to give children a love of stories and reading, as well as some much-wanted attention.

About a quarter of 5-year-olds still start primary school without the language and communication skills expected for their age. You and all of your staff are in the best position to help those children, especially the ones that aren't lucky enough to get that exposure to English words at home.

Physical development

Another area of concern exacerbated by the pandemic is the lack of physical activity. Obesity data for 5-year-olds shows that far more children are now overweight than before the pandemic. So the work you do to help children lead fit and healthy lives is really important.

Inspection evidence tells us that you have adapted outdoor play areas, taught children to use a greater variety of play equipment outside, such as larger slides, more climbing equipment, bikes, and sand and water play areas. You are helping children to be more active, so they get their heart rates going, building core strength and agility. Some of you, especially in deprived areas, are putting more of your money into this, because you have recognised that some children will have limited opportunity to get physically active elsewhere.

Many of you have invested heavily in making sure that children eat well. Working as a nursery chef is an important role. It takes a lot of knowledge about young children's dietary requirements, as well as being able to tempt them to eat what is good for them through creative cooking.

There is no doubt that giving children a nutritious, well-balanced diet is really important. Inspectors are frequently told by parents that children are introduced to new tastes in nursery and have a better diet because of this. You know the importance of feeding young bodies at the same time as feeding young minds.

The role of play

Finally, I'd like to talk a bit about some of the misunderstandings out there about Ofsted inspections and play.

Over the years, Ofsted has often been accused of wanting to limit the time that children spend playing in their early years. And I want to say quite unequivocally that this isn't the case. Play is important. Play is fun. All children must have time to play, on their own and together. There are so many ways that play helps young children's development.

There is a wide spectrum of play. Some is completely unguided, and some is more guided, to support particular learning. Children often can't differentiate between what is play and what is learning – but they don't have to; that is the job of your staff. To children, most of what they do in nursery is play. It is the adult's task to identify what a child needs to learn and how to make sure they do learn it, either explicitly, such as teaching a child how to use a pair of scissors safely, or through play. You might not want to just give young children a pair of scissors to explore how they work.

If children are learning something for the first time, sometimes it is better to teach them explicitly. We know that when we first introduce games that require taking turns, children find this very difficult without adult

instruction and a bit of supervision. But once they have learnt how to take turns, they are very able to play quite happily together. We see this from learning to complete a jigsaw together or playing at cooking in a toy kitchen.

In physical play, children may throw and catch independently, but if they don’t know how to do this well, they will improve if an adult shows them how to hold their hands or to track the ball they want to catch. Without this adult intervention, children can go on not knowing how to throw and catch effectively, which can affect their ability to play sport later.

When you know what children already know and can do, and what their next steps are, you can decide effectively on the teaching activities, including play, that will help children progress.

The best start in life

What does all this mean, and particularly in terms of what we – Ofsted – are going to be doing next?

I promised at the beginning that I’d say something about our new strategy. Reflecting on just how important a good early education is, we have been discussing how effectively we inspect and regulate the early years sector and how we can give more prominence to early years in our work.

So we’ve chosen to have a specific strategic focus on the early years in our next 5 years. We think it’s the area in which our work can have the most impact. Our curriculum reviews in schools have helped developed conceptions of high-quality education in different subjects. And we would like to do what we can to build the same level of evidence for early years.

Early years inspection used to be strongly oriented towards childcare. With the EIF, we have rebalanced to look more at education as well as childcare. We’re now putting due weight on the substance of early education, reflecting the 7 areas of learning. That means what we’re looking for from you is to provide a rounded experience for children.

Conclusion

I know we share the same aim in wanting the very best for young children. We are all determined to help children recover – physically, emotionally and educationally – from the effects of the pandemic.

The last 2 years have been draining for everyone working in education and care. And there are challenges for your sector that pre-date COVID-19 and its restrictions.

I’m determined that the momentum around education recovery shouldn’t just start at age 4. The early social and physical development of children is the root from which they grow. Their early exposure to language, numbers and the world around them sets them up for a lifetime of learning.

Our aspiration for early years must be more than just a surviving sector. We should have a thriving sector: valued by government, cherished by parents and giving children the best possible start in life.

So thank you for all you do – and thank you for listening today. My colleague Wendy Ratcliff, who I think many of you will know, and I will be very happy to stay for a while to chat with you.