

Amanda Spielman at the Wellington Festival of Education

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me once again to address this splendid festival. And I'm grateful too for the final slot of the day, after Lord Agnew, when I know I am pretty much guaranteed a good turnout!

Two years ago, I made my first speech at Wellington as Chief Inspector. From the beginning I was clear in my ambition for Ofsted and the direction I wanted us to take, during my tenure.

Taking on this role is a bit like taking on the role of Doctor Who. Each regenerated Chief Inspector has the same broad aim in mind, but we do have different ways of going about it. And it's worth noting that there are now women in both roles. I'll leave this thought with you, we've never been seen in the same place.

Back in 2017, I set out my priorities for Ofsted in my speech here.

I said that I wanted Ofsted to be seen as a force for improvement. I said that I wanted us to add real value to the education landscape, through our research work as well as through inspection, and to that end, I intended to strengthen our research function.

I said that I wanted us to focus on the curriculum, the substance of education. And I spoke about British values and the importance of schools bringing those values to life for the children who pass through their gates.

Now, two years on and at my half-way point, I want to reflect on the progress we have made and how we've been able both to contribute to and shape the debate around education issues. I would then like to consider some future challenges for our schools and young people, and how we collectively might evolve to meet them.

First then

How is Ofsted a force for improvement and what does improvement look like?

As the education inspectorate we're rarely loved, I'm not sure that any inspectorate is. It is our role to judge and to publish those judgements for all to see. There are those in the education world, and I'm sure in this room, who don't like it: but we remain the arbiter of quality in state education.

The four-point grading scale may not always find favour with schools, but it is proven, and it works. By that I mean it is readily understood by parents, it's workable (even allowing for the individuality of our inspectors) and it's seen as a best-practice model for inspectorates. The police and fire

inspectorate, the probation inspectorate and the Care Quality Commission are three of the inspectorates who assign the same grades as we do: outstanding, good, requires improvement and inadequate.

In our most recent parent survey, nine out of ten parents knew the grade of their child's school, college, nursery or childminder. That's quite a statistic.

Another impressive figure is the proportion of schools that are now rated as good or outstanding. Our most recent data tells us that 85% of all schools have reached that standard. That's a great testimony to the efforts made by everyone who works in schools across the country.

But it's only right to acknowledge that this success comes with caveats. As you will all know, current legislation doesn't allow us to inspect outstanding schools routinely.

That is undeniably problematic for us, for parents and for the schools themselves. Without some regular scrutiny, it's impossible to say whether an outstanding school is still hitting the same heights. And we know that when we do go back into outstanding schools, we often find that they are doing less well, even allowing for the fact that we are not visiting a random sample of outstanding schools.

This academic year, we have inspected more than 300 outstanding primary and secondary schools, about 8 per cent of the total number. Only 1 in 6 retained the top grade. That's concerning.

As we move into our new inspection regime it's only fair that we are able to test all schools against the same benchmark. It's certainly something that we're discussing with government.

So at one level, inspection itself, I think we have continued to be a force for improvement. But bald statistics are just one way of demonstrating progress. There are other ways we can make a positive impact.

Research

Our research function plays a couple of critical roles for us.

First, it allows us to add real value across education and social care. Cross-cutting research allows us to combine what we learn through inspections with new insight and fresh thinking.

For example, this year, we published our own research into knife crime in the context of London schools. The timing couldn't have been more tragically apposite. There have been over 30 fatal stabbings in London alone this year. And quite a number of the victims have been of school age.

As the media covered horrific cases, from the gang-related to the seemingly random, there has been demand from the public and politicians for something meaningful to be done.

In among many sensible suggestions, there was a worrying narrative that started to emerge around exclusions.

It is the sad truth, that there are children in schools, particularly those living difficult or chaotic lives, who are involved with gangs in their neighbourhoods. When these children are excluded, they take these gang connections with them into the next stage of their schooling. However, it started to become common currency that excluded children were turning to, or being turned on, to a gang lifestyle only after they were excluded.

As is often the case, this became caught up in the desire for a simple solution. A soundbite solution, that there should be no more exclusions. That we should turn off the tap for the gang recruiters, no longer send children to pupil referral units where they can be preyed on by the drug dealers and gang leaders.

Except that doesn't tally with what we see. Many PRUs are doing great work in very difficult circumstances. In some cases, they are turning young lives around and preparing young people not for a life of crime, but for a new chance to contribute and thrive.

And it's far better to be schooled in a PRU which is registered and inspected than end up in some of the poor examples of unregistered alternative provision that we highlighted earlier this year. Many of these places offer little in terms of education or support, many have serious health and safety issues and we estimate that as many as 6,000 children may be out of sight in unregistered, or illegal schools. Pupil Referral Units really are a much better bet for the children who might otherwise slip through the net of education.

I'm a realist though – and we know that the life chances for young people who are excluded are often limited, compared to those who remain in school. Exclusion should be a last resort, though it must be available to headteachers in extremis. Nobody should ever be a cheerleader for exclusion, but sometimes it's the only way to manage persistently unacceptable behaviour that threatens the education, or the safety of classmates. It must remain on the table.

Our [knife crime research](#) found no clear causal link between exclusion and knife crime. So we spoke out against the neat soundbites and we pressed local authorities, the police and other partners to include schools more readily in their existing partnerships to tackle knife crime and other kinds of serious youth violence. It wasn't radical thinking and it wasn't a silver bullet, but it was based on our research and on evidence.

A second role that our research function plays, is the gathering of [intelligence and insight to underpin the development of our inspection model](#). The curriculum research we carried out ahead of crafting the [new inspection framework](#), was crucial.

It underlined why we were right to concentrate on the curriculum in our thinking. We saw that, even in some very good schools, which were scoring

well at inspection, something was getting lost in terms of the curriculum.

We saw that years of over-emphasis on exam performance by a number of agencies, including Ofsted, were having a corrosive effect in some classrooms. This focus on performance had the unintended and unwanted effect of curricula being narrowed across the age groups.

For example, at key stage two, we saw the depressing impact of teaching to the test. Some primary schools are spending a disproportionate amount of time on maths and English, to the detriment of science – and indeed other humanities, arts and practical subjects, which were often lumped into rather nebulous topic work. That's not good preparation for life in year seven, when children should be ready to enjoy a wider menu of lessons – and have opportunities to tackle new challenges and wrestle with new ideas.

And all that for the SATs, which are fundamentally for the benefit of the school. I have nothing against the SATs per se, as tests they serve a purpose. But, as I have said before: it's wrong and unnecessary to ratchet up the pressure on young children as they approach them, when they ought to barely register they are being tested at all. And it's certainly a great waste of children's last year in primary school, if their curriculum experience is mostly limited to two subjects.

So the first challenge for us was to recognise the part we had played in creating this unwanted culture and to see what could be done to put the curriculum back at the heart of education. And the second challenge was to do that without undermining or reversing the very many improvements that we have seen over recent years. We really wanted to bring about a positive change carefully and responsibly. I hope we have succeeded.

Curriculum

Which brings me on to the curriculum and the changes we're making to the inspection framework.

I have spoken many times in recent months about the framework and what it means, so I don't want to talk about the nuts and bolts of it here. For those of you who hanker for detail, my colleagues Sean Harford, Matthew Purves and Paul Joyce will be speaking here tomorrow afternoon, so please do go along.

This is a good moment to stop and thank everyone, individuals and organisations, who has helped develop this new inspection model. Many thousands have contributed to a process that really has drawn on the full spectrum of expertise and insight from every quarter, and has helped to make this framework strong and valuable to parents and schools (and of course all other kinds of education provider) alike. For myself and all my colleagues, I can say that this has been an enriching experience.

But this afternoon, I would rather reflect on the shift that has happened since we started to talk meaningfully about the curriculum.

Three years ago, education discussions tended to linger not on what was

taught, but on how it was taught. Debates on pedagogy raged, and for many, where you stood on the traditionalist or progressive debate defined your character forever more.

Now though, the curriculum is the hot topic. There are any number of sessions here at Wellington discussing what a strong curriculum should look like. And that reflects many discussions that are going on across education publications and online as well as in schools. And rather than seeing the curriculum focus as a challenge, it seems that many school leaders and teachers alike are energised by the opportunity to think harder about what they teach as well as how they teach it.

I see that as an example of the soft power that Ofsted undoubtedly wields. Inspection is often seen, wrongly in our view, as something of a big stick. But, incorrect or not, the perception that you carry a big stick, as Roosevelt observed, does mean people will listen to you.

Above everything else we have achieved over the past few years, prompting a resurgence of interest in a strong curriculum and a rigorous debate about what children should learn, has been the most satisfying. And I hope it will have a lasting impact on education and on the lives of the children who are currently passing through school.

British values

I also talked about British values in my 2017 speech, about the importance of embedding them within the wider curriculum. And I spoke about the need for a true civic education. Both of those remain just as true today. It's so important that all these values are taught, understood and lived. None of them is an easy concept for young people to grasp, and none of them is as universally recognised as we might like to think. They don't just rub off on children without ever being taught. School is how and where we make sure that every young British citizen ends up with the same level of understanding.

I'm not going to put you on the spot and ask you to tell me the four British values that are particularly referenced by DfE: instead I'll remind you that they are: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. And they are each being tested by a combination of events and social changes.

While I am not one of the siren voices claiming that democracy is under some sort of existential threat, it's true to say that it's not in rude health at present.

The rule of law does remain a clear bedrock for society at large. However, equalities law is clearly coming under strain, especially where some of the different rights that we value and protect in law bump into each other.

I have spoken recently about the protests at some primary schools over the teaching of relationships education that includes some recognition of same sex relationships. I have been very clear that the laws of the land don't allow us to pick and choose which protected characteristic under the Equality

Act we actually want to protect.

We are a highly diverse country. We place equal legal value on the rights of women, equality of opportunity for people with disabilities, and on respect for people of different race, religion, or sexual orientation.

There is no hierarchy in the legislation, but with so many deeply entrenched positions there can be a tendency for 'cause wars', as in 'all characteristics may be equal, but my characteristic is more equal than others'. Different groups often view the concept of tolerance and respect through their own particular lens.

Within schools, we're starting to see how damaging it can be to have this sort of self-determination of what 'acceptable', 'tolerant' and 'respectful' looks like. It thwarts attempts to reach the kind of consensus between schools and parents that is so important.

More generally, in education we often talk about preparing young people for life in modern Britain. We certainly use the phrase a good deal at Ofsted. It runs through a lot of what we're about as an organisation because it neatly encapsulates one of the important roles of education.

Because education is about a lot of 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 also about socialisation, encouraging harmony between different people, and it's about the advancement of civilisation.

Education pioneers across the world knew this as they began to formalise state education systems. The founders of the common school movement in the United States in the 19th century wanted to mould fine upstanding citizens of the Republic, as much as they wanted to instil knowledge and a habit of reading and learning. Preparing children for life in 19th century America, if you will.

More recently, conversations with our Ofsted counterparts from France, Sweden and the Netherlands have showed us how the same debates are echoed in other countries.

So it's important to have this sort of wider thinking in mind, when considering what preparing young people for life in modern Britain really means.

The phrase is often used about the role of schools in teaching children to respect people who may be different from them.

That is certainly part of the aim, but it would be wrong to narrow the work down to a discussion about equalities, or even about wider British Values.

We need to consider the influences and interactions that Britain and the wider world bring to bear on a modern child.

The range of influences on children has changed out of all recognition in the

last couple of generations. Children's consumption of information is very different, and the context provided by the world around them is different too.

Starting with the last point: in recent years we have watched the fragmentation of the traditional political tribes, not just here, but across the world. We have seen the rise of single-issue campaigns and campaigners.

Looking at the world through a single lens can lead us to lose sight of the bigger picture. Complexity is shunned and political discourse narrows and becomes more polarised.

Of course, simplicity is not of itself a bad thing. Simple narratives are the gold standard in politics, they help connect otherwise disengaged voters with the complicated world of statecraft. They achieve cut through and there are some parallels here with teaching: making the complex understandable and bringing dry facts to life.

But what we increasingly see is not a simple narrative, but a simplistic one that isn't good for anyone. A narrative in which the world's problems have a single, neat solution, where scapegoats abound and critics are seen as the enemy, to be discredited, discounted or disowned.

There is an anti-education narrative in this as well. 'The elites can't be trusted. The educated may have learned a lot in their ivory towers and among their dreaming spires, but they'll never understand the real world.'

Narrowing and polarising is happening on many fronts. We see universities coming under pressure to withdraw invitations to speakers that the student body decides it cannot abide.

And pressure groups are not always political in the traditional sense. Recently there have been at least two instances where schools have faced fierce protests from animal rights and vegan protestors, for raising animals on school grounds and encouraging the children to learn about, and be involved in, their care. The objectors were outraged because those animals would in time be slaughtered to provide meat for the school canteen.

It's relatively easy in the modern world to build a considerable head of steam from a single-issue campaign. The ubiquity of social media, makes it a matter of a few clicks to sign up to the latest cause, add your name to a rapidly-growing petition, or spread the word about the next protest march.

In education, there are often sophisticated campaigns that seek to add topics to the curriculum and quickly garner support. The media is awash with stories inspired by these campaigns and the list of things that schools 'really must cover' grows: sleep lessons, farming, first aid, online relationships, sign language and gardening are among the list of suggestions in recent months.

I'm certainly not saying that these ideas lack merit, but they highlight a wider point about the role of schools. It's something we have raised concerns about.

The role of schools

For every new responsibility that gets loaded on to schools, something has to give. Curriculum planning is a challenging job and we are encouraging schools to strike the right balance between different subjects. Adding the latest hot topic can result in a trade off, something with potentially wider merit for young people being squeezed out. Schools have a finite amount of time to educate and so what we demand of them must be manageable.

We had calls from a number of campaign groups to add additional checks into the inspection framework. Again, many of them sounded perfectly reasonable, until you stop to think about the practicalities and the kinds of specialist expertise that would be required to do them justice. Not to mention what a long list of new checks would do to the time it takes to carry out an inspection.

And we are already accustomed to balancing many expectations within inspection. But we don't come under as much pressure as some schools. We know that some schools have had campaigners intimidating them to prevent certain lessons from being taught or to bring about changes in schools, and leaning on parents to give the impression of a united front, in order to close down debate. That cannot be allowed to stand.

In our pluralistic society, we are seeing a worrying trend towards an intolerance of different opinions and attitudes. And what characterises this new single-issue reality, is confrontation. If you fervently believe in one simplistic answer to all the world's problems, then it follows that all other solutions and actions are wrong. Debate is shouted down.

And nowhere is it shouted down more, than on social media.

For many years, when we have discussed the need to prepare children for life in a digital world, we have focused on developing the skills required by a modern, digital workforce. In more recent times, as the darker side of the online world has started to affect young people in terrible ways, through bullying, grooming or child abuse, there has rightly been an increasing effort to educate children about online safety.

But there's more to equipping children for their online life than teaching them how to avoid the predators and the dangers that undoubtedly exist. In an online world that mirrors and reinforces the simplistic narratives and aggressive campaigning that we see elsewhere, there is a need for intellectual rigour and knowledge too.

It's no exaggeration to say that young people now grow up online. In 2017, Ofcom reported that half of all 11 and 12 years olds had a social media profile, despite the minimum age on all major platforms being 13. And 2017 was two years ago, a long time when you consider that Facebook and Twitter are barely teenagers themselves.

Some studies suggest that children are very good at spotting 'fake news' and are more inherently untrusting of online sources of information than some

older people. But 'fake news', of the malevolent foreign government variety, is just part of a wider issue.

As children grow up they are influenced above all else by their friends and peers. And that is true online. They see what their friends share with them, both of themselves and of the wider world. To a great extent, their online lives are curated for them by their friends, creating an echo chamber. This is reinforced by the algorithms of social media platforms, directing advertising and content that is likely to chime with their existing likes and opinions.

Knowledge is the answer

What is taught in schools takes on even more importance if the wider influences on young people are too often simplistic, over curated or fake. It's an important answer to those who say that school classrooms are not the right place for children to learn about same-sex relationships. Parents may want to shelter their children from the truths, half-truths and lies that exist in the wider world, but the same will not always be true of their peers. Isn't it better to learn about the world from a reputable teacher, than from their friends in school playgrounds, or online?

The importance of a strong curriculum lies in its ability to broaden and strengthen the minds of young people.

Knowledge is a key component when preparing young people for life in modern Britain. It's not just about schooling children to spot things that are fake, it's about teaching them what's real.

In a world where children (and adults for that matter) are being told that the answer to all the world's problems is simple: build a wall, destroy capitalism, prevent immigration, cancel Brexit, carry out Brexit, it falls to schools to broaden their outlook, not narrow it.

A wide, rich curriculum, well taught, arms children with knowledge. That knowledge allows them to contribute to discussions about the world around them and the issues faced by society. It enables them to look again at what they are told is the 'truth' and challenge it where appropriate, not just parrot the latest lazy narrative, or conspiracy theory.

And for teachers, the challenge is to cut through the noise that assails young people on all sides and make knowledge even more seductive and compelling. Well-informed children are resilient children.

Developing an engaging and rich curriculum, imparting knowledge, encouraging a healthily critical eye and instilling strong values will turn out the rounded and resilient citizens of the future. This country needs them.

Thank you