

# Amanda Spielman's speech to the Festival of Education, 2022

Good afternoon everyone.

I've always enjoyed speaking at this festival. The setting is beautiful, the weather is usually glorious and it's full of fascinating people. Also, it's an opportunity for me to be a little bit more reflective than usual.

So I want to talk about the year we've had in education – but I'd also like to look forward. I'd like to talk about the opportunities and about the challenges that lie ahead. And, I want to set out a few thoughts on how inspection might evolve.

Later on in my talk today I touch on the thorny subject of political impartiality. So I'm going to practice what I preach today and steer well clear of Westminster speculation. There are times I'm very happy to remind everyone that the post of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is, as the name suggests, a crown appointment. And this is one of those times!

## **In praise of schools**

So let's start with this year. And I suppose it's best summed up as a year when schools have all been trying to reassert normality, while still managing abnormal circumstances.

Schools and colleges have worked incredibly hard to make the best of a bad situation. Schools have rightly been praised for adapting to unprecedented challenges. And I think this last year really has been a crowning achievement.

Managing through a crisis is relentlessly tough. But trying to put one behind you, reset, and move forward, takes real effort and vision. I'd like to thank everybody working in education for their commitment and energy this year.

Back in September, it was clear that the path ahead would be full of obstacles. Staffing shortages, lower parent confidence, attendance issues, uncertainty over exams, greater anxiety among children.

As we approach the end of the year, schools and colleges can look back with pride at a job well done. You have been restoring normality and reducing anxiety. You have brought children back into school and helped bridge many of the gaps to get them to where they need to be. You have prepared a cohort for exams that they weren't sure they would sit a year ago. You have, without doubt, earned a great summer – and I hope you get one.

I don't need to remind this audience about the importance and value of schools and teachers. The pandemic helped bring this home to parents at least, as they grappled with home learning.

You do so much more than educate the next generation. You support children's social development and keep them safe. Teachers see and hear things that, in the most extreme cases, can save lives. When home is not a place of safety, the classroom can be.

And the watchful eyes of teachers can identify more than just the children with difficult lives outside school. They can also spot the children with additional needs beyond those of their classmates. Identifying these children and targeting support helps make sure that the benefits of a good education are available to all.

And recognising additional needs is perhaps harder now than before the pandemic. We know that some children aren't where they would normally have been at this point. The Key Stage 2 results this week for reading were encouraging, but for maths were a disappointing reminder that, despite all your efforts, there is still some way to go.

Many children still need some help to catch up. Some of them might tick the normal diagnostic boxes for SEND, but have no real needs beyond not having received all the schooling they should have done. As far as possible those children should get the help they need without having a label pasted on them.

Fortunately schools have the experience and know-how to identify the children who really do have additional needs. But the SEND system has long been overstretched, even before COVID disrupted children's lives and so many of their support services. Just last week the LGA reported that requests from councils for SEND support rose by nearly a quarter in 2021.

And here I will mention that we are consulting on a new framework for inspecting SEND provision in local areas, alongside the Care Quality Commission. Because of course, support for many young people with SEND goes much wider than school. We really want to understand the experiences of children and their families. And we want to look more closely at how local partners are meeting children's needs. Our consultation runs until September, and you can find it on our website.

## **Giving children the best start**

And now I want to look forward to the next school year. We all know there will still be external pressures. But I hope it will be a big further step towards normality, and a chance to concentrate on what children most need.

For schools, I think that starts with structure. Many school routines were heavily disrupted by COVID – first when schools were closed and then when they returned under restrictions. It's only recently that more normal structures and routines have returned. And it's not always easy to re-establish them. You only have to look at the debates around office versus homeworking to see that established routines don't just snap back into place.

But for children, they are vital. The pandemic has shown quite how much the great work of schools begins with having children in classrooms with their teachers. So attendance has to be the top priority. Lots of good work has

been happening to improve attendance from the rates seen earlier this year. Our recent report on [‘Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence’](#) reflected what we’ve been seeing in schools that are handling this particularly well. They listen to families and children, they understand and empathise – but they are still consistent in their expectations. This shows how much they care about their children.

Exams too provide structure and focus. I’m unapologetic in my support for exams. They give children something tangible to work towards and they test what they have learned throughout their time in school.

And the glue holding school structures and routines together are rules and discipline. The word ‘discipline’ – like exams for some – comes with connotations. For some, it conjures images of over-strict headteachers, punishments and coercion. But for me discipline is rooted in respect. Respect for the school, for staff, for fellow pupils and for learning itself. It’s the discipline of being on time, of treating people well and of making an effort. In successful schools, these things are taught and reinforced, humanely and effectively. Discipline is not a dirty word.

And respect for each other plays into another crucial aspect of the school experience – socialisation. Again, we have seen the effects of lockdown. The youngest children were particularly affected. Children who missed time at nursery were less well-prepared for school. Many hadn’t had the chance to learn how to get along, take turns, share. And these things need to be reinforced all through school – it is clear that a prolonged period without normal structures and routines has contributed to behaviour problems this year in all age groups.

Because of course socialisation continues as children get older. Schools broaden minds, and they also broaden social circles. They introduce children to peers from different backgrounds, with different interests and different perspectives. We talk a lot about preparing children for life in modern Britain and a big part of that happens at school, in and out of the classroom. Children learn about differences and similarities, friendships and frictions – and how to rub along together regardless.

But the structures and rhythms of school life are getting back to normal. These are important building blocks of a school’s culture. And if a school’s culture is healthy, then children are better able to learn.

Since becoming Chief Inspector I’ve kept a relentless focus on curriculum: what is taught and why; how topics are sequenced and schemas built. And how this helps teachers make sure that children really learn and can use their knowledge, not just answer specific test questions.

And I think our emphasis has contributed to a resurgence of interest in building good curriculum. There are great resources being developed both in schools and outside schools. And I see this as a positive example of Ofsted’s influence.

We recognise how careful we need to be. Sometimes our influence can have

unforeseen consequences. For example, a positive comment in a report, perhaps recognising the success of a school's particular way of doing something, can spawn a thousand imitations, that copy the style but not the substance. But the shift in emphasis towards real curriculum thinking over the last few years has been – in my view – a true success story.

And there's one particular aspect of curriculum that I'd like to talk about today. Reading with fluency is the gateway to almost all learning. Without reading, there is little science, no history, no geography. So we should champion reading as a vital life skill; reading to learn; reading for advancement; reading to expand horizons; reading for pleasure. When reading is discussed in educational circles, it can quickly become a valuable, but somewhat limited conversation about the earliest stages of learning to read. Alongside this there should be wider thinking about how to embed reading throughout a child's time in education.

As an aside, among the many areas of education that we inspect is prison education. It's a depressing truth that many prisoners are illiterate. And, as our [research on reading teaching in prisons](#) earlier this year highlighted – it's staggering that despite the scale of that problem, so little attention is given to putting this right.

So what do children need for a great start in life? Structure, socialisation, a great curriculum. And of course, they need great teaching.

## **Pedagogy – more nuanced discussion**

A great curriculum exists on paper, but it's pedagogy that brings it to life in front of a class. And I think the focus on curriculum has helped bring fresh thinking to how teaching is done.

There are very welcome developments in recent years in discussions of pedagogy. Not just stronger linkages between evidence and practice, but also a clearer recognition that while there are elements of pedagogy that are universal, there is much that needs to be subject specific. There's a better understanding of the limitations of generic approaches. The recent Bristol University study: 'Characterising Effective Teaching', is one recent example of work that gives insight into the relative strengths of using different approaches to teach different subjects.

Pedagogy has not been on Ofsted's radar for a number of years. We have been agnostic about the way children are taught, while taking a stronger interest in what they are taught. But of course there is a complex interface here, and it will be interesting to see how this discussion evolves in future.

## **Teaching in a fractious world**

But there are some very immediate challenges for teachers in a fractious world. It's always been the case that teaching doesn't happen in a sealed environment. Teachers have always had to take account of the wider world and how it influences pupils. They have always had to bring elements of current

affairs into the classroom.

Young people have always been willing to question the establishment and the mainstream consensus. But the very idea of a mainstream consensus sometimes seems increasingly contentious.

We don't live in a consensual era. Argument is hard-wired into how we communicate. A quick jaunt around social media opens up a world in which the mainstream media aren't to be trusted; clashes of opinion rapidly descend into personal insults; and people identify their ideological group with slogans, hashtags and flags.

The reality is that children are growing up in an online world that both reflects and fuels the atomisation and polarisation of society. People exist in self-sustaining echo chambers, that encourage conflict, rather than discussion.

So teachers need to be expert guides through disputed territory, while maintaining their own impartiality. The DfE [Department for Education] [guidance on political impartiality](#) is detailed and helpful here. It helps schools understand what the boundaries are and what they shouldn't do, as well as what they should, which I think is genuinely helpful for schools when views even among staff can diverge, as well as among parents.

The guidance reminds us that impartiality isn't just about keeping one's own politics out of the classroom; it's about providing balance. It makes clear that doesn't mean being neutral on every issue, just because contrary opinions exist on the fringes. Teachers should teach that racism is both wrong and illegal; and that climate change is supported by evidence.

What balance does demand is being a teacher not a campaigner where matters are contested. And that is very often the case when discussion moves from the problem to the solution. Even when there is consensus on a desirable social or economic goal, there are nearly always competing solutions, often hotly advocated. A teacher's impartiality truly helps young people.

Because for many young people social media is their newsstand, radio and television in one. Information is credible when "everyone is sharing it," not when it's properly sourced and evidenced. So inevitably misinformation becomes endemic and is then reinforced by the popular and influential kids.

That is a challenge for teachers – but it's also a great opportunity to tackle misinformation head-on and make children more savvy about the content they come across. And the more knowledge children possess, the easier it is for them to spot what's real and what's fake and to question sources of information.

And of course we need discussion. Society evolves through new ideas, new thinking. That's why it's not always healthy for young people to adopt the views and attitudes of their parents without question. But it's equally unhealthy for their views to mirror those of a teacher. And it's worrying if children's opinions emerge fully-formed from an echo chamber made up of their

peers and online influencers.

And we need intellectual openness in the young. The willingness to listen to alternative opinions, the ability to conduct reasoned debate, and the tact to offer constructive criticism are more important now than ever, because they seem to be under some threat. So teachers must find ways to introduce different perspectives and to promote debate and discussion, but in a way that doesn't result in conflict or encourage further polarisation. That is no easy task.

## Where next for inspection?

I said at the start that I would talk a little about where inspection might go in the future. This year marks 30 years of Ofsted. We were created in an effort to bring consistency to school inspections, which used to be the responsibility of local education authorities. I would argue – it won't surprise you – that in this regard Ofsted has been successful.

From Northumberland to Cornwall inspectors apply the same framework. And judgements hinge on the same criteria. It would be hubris to claim that there is perfect consistency across the board, or indeed that perfect consistency is even achievable. Inspection is a human activity, based on professional dialogue – it's not a tick-box exercise. But if the aim was for Ofsted to help raise education standards through consistent inspection, then I would argue that aim has been met.

Which isn't to say that inspection can stand still. As the education landscape shifts, inspection frameworks evolve. For a good many years before 2019 inspections were oriented towards reported outcomes. But that model replaced a more expansive earlier model that looked in depth at all a school was doing. With the [education inspection framework \(EIF\)](#), we haven't expanded the overall scale of inspection, but we do once again have a much greater interest in what sits behind the outcomes.

So how might inspection evolve in the future?

There is a long wish list of ideas from interest groups, passionate campaigners and others about what should be looked at on inspection. Many of these are hot potatoes of the day: school meals (with or without hot potatoes), sport, green issues and many more. They're generally pretty reasonable ideas in themselves, but they would often involve either a hefty expansion of inspection, or risk bending the model out of shape and losing focus.

Post-pandemic there are also calls for us to shift our emphasis more fundamentally towards mental health and wellbeing. But it is important to recognise how much this is already the case. Within our inspection framework, the personal development judgement covers a school's approach to wellbeing.

And beyond this, we all know that a good education in a supportive and encouraging environment – where the curriculum is taught well, children have positive relationships with adults and their peers, as well as opportunities

to find and pursue their interests – is a significant contributor to children's health and happiness. And this is exactly what the inspection framework is assessing.

But we entirely recognise that there has been a sharp rise in mental health issues among children, so mental health and wellbeing are likely to remain big concerns. On the one hand, we need schools to be linked effectively to all the health and other services on which children depend. But we also need to avoid overloading schools with therapeutic or clinical services, or losing sight of their core educational purpose.

When thinking about the evolution of inspection, it's interesting to consider its role and purpose. That starts, I think, with who it's there for. First and foremost, of course, inspection should always be carried out in the best interests of children. Working in children's interests and reporting without fear or favour keeps inspectorates honest and maintains the trust of the second group – parents.

It's easy to forget how recognised and valued inspections are among parents. Ofsted has been providing them with informative reports about their children's schools – and yes, judgements too – for 30 years. Our reports help parents understand how their school is doing and help them with their decisions about their children's next steps.

But really it's about reassurance more than anything. What parents hope to get from inspection is a view of the school that matches theirs. This also highlights how problematic the exemption for outstanding schools was. For a proportion of parents, the grade their child's school carried belonged to an earlier generation – and didn't always reflect what they knew.

The relationship between an inspectorate and those it inspects will always have a different energy. Our relationship with schools and the wider sector is fundamental. And we work hard to build trust and respect, because that foundation helps to bring about improvements.

I've spoken a great deal about the power of professional dialogue between school leaders and inspectors. That dialogue should be the engine room – sparking ideas and helping shape the school's next steps. I recognise we can't reach every aspect of a school on inspection, or look at the work of every teacher. But we have worked collaboratively to develop a clear approach to inspection. And that approach is ultimately about the dialogue and feedback that will help schools improve.

When I think about the future of inspection, I think about how best to make the link between inspection and improvement. Like the school inspectorates in many other countries, we are not an improvement agency. There is a principled policy separation of diagnosis and treatment in our system. Ofsted describes a school's strengths and weaknesses, and what it needs to do to improve. It's then for others to make those improvements happen.

The DfE has begun its regulatory review to shape how best to use and balance the different levers in the system. We are of course involved in that review.

Sometimes the mechanics of improvement can cause friction. Using Ofsted grades to trigger academisation or a transfer from one trust to another is undoubtedly a simple and transparent way to make these decisions. But it inevitably raises the stakes on inspection for schools at risk of a low grade. And the DfE announcement that, from September, consecutive 'requires improvement' grades will be sufficient to trigger the process, will raise the stakes again.

I'm determined that inspection should be as constructive and positive as possible. So we will continue to do all we can to help schools feel confident they understand what inspection is considering.

I spoke about the collaborative development of the inspection framework – working with leaders in the sector. I hope that the framework development set a tone. We want inspection to be clear and transparent, so schools know what to expect. And we continue to support that transparency through our curriculum reviews, handbook updates, roadshows and presentations.

We repeatedly say that there's no special alchemy needed to prepare for Ofsted. And we don't want our inspectors to come to believe all school corridors smell of fresh paint. We want to see what you do for your pupils every day.

And I know it's argued that schools serving disadvantaged areas are disadvantaged themselves on inspection and that this needs more recognition, particularly as the stakes rise. But we also have to expect the same standards for children wherever they are being educated.

We can't differentiate our overall achievement grade based on geography, or context. We can't say a school is good enough in Knowsley, if it would be below the line in Buckingham. That's not being fair to schools – that's being unfair to children.

But we must reward the clarity of vision and leadership that is often especially apparent in schools serving disadvantaged communities. We put great store in our leadership and management grade for that purpose.

I would encourage parents and the wider education system to do the same. We all need to recognise that improvement is a journey that starts with leadership – and that good leaders have to be supported.

At the start of this speech I alluded to the unusually uncertain national context. So I'm going to turn to the most stable national figure of the last 70 years, the Queen herself, for a quotation that to me is encouraging and especially apt.

Over the years I have observed that some attributes of leadership are universal and are often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their efforts, their talents, their insights, their enthusiasm and their inspiration, to work together.



Now that sounds like a pretty good description of a well-functioning staff room, or indeed education system to me!

Thank you for your time today. And thank you again for everything you have done and continue to do for children.