

Speech: Amanda Spielman at the 'Wonder Years' curriculum conference

It's a real pleasure to be here today at the delightfully titled 'Wonder Years' conference. I'm also pleased to be here and able to talk to you all so soon after we've published the [draft new Education Inspection Framework](#).

Some of you might have taken a look at our proposals – the download stats tell me quite a lot of you probably have – and you may already have fired off your thoughts. If not, you've still got another 10 weeks to do it.

And I said when I launched them, this is a genuine listening exercise. I want your collective wisdom and expertise to help us make what I think are already a strong set of proposals even better.

And for me, the new framework really is about making sure that children's time in education are their wonder years. The time when they get to grips with the power and flexibility of the English language and the fundamental mathematical concepts, when they learn about the scientific principles that shape the world around them and the universe, and the events that have forged history.

It should also be the time that children discover the possibilities of foreign languages, develop an appreciation of music and the arts, as well as the rudiments of some principles and practice of design and technology. Those opportunities should be a basic expectation for all children during their school and college years. And that, more than anything else, is why we've designed a framework that rewards those who deliver them.

Put another way, a high-quality education, built around a rich curriculum, is a matter of social justice. We know that those who are born in more advantaged circumstances get a major head start in life. All of you know the much-cited findings about language disadvantage for children from poorer families. Time in nursery and primary school is the best opportunity to tip the playing field back towards the level. That is why we have stressed, in the [draft schools handbook](#), the importance of reading to young children frequently, and of introducing new vocabulary in contexts that stimulate their understanding and thinking.

But the role of education in delivering social justice doesn't stop at the beginning of children's education. We know from our curriculum research that it is disadvantaged pupils who are disproportionately affected by the narrowing of key stage 2 and the shortening of key stage 3, or who in various ways become less likely to take more academic subjects in key stage 4.

And though this is on the face of it plainly wrong, I understand why it happens. If you're a school in a challenging area, and you feel that outcomes data is the sole proxy for measuring the quality of what you do, your job inevitably becomes oriented towards finding the best way to secure those

grades and in turn those performance tables points. Especially when you face the double whammy of an intake that starts some way behind, and the difficulty of recruiting teachers to some of our most deprived towns.

But the consequence of this narrowing is that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do lose out on building that body of knowledge that should be every child's entitlement. For that reason, if we really want to reduce economic and social inequality, the place to start is what is taught in the classroom.

That isn't a personal prejudice of mine, but has been well demonstrated. For example, I've mentioned before Cristina Iannelli's finding – that most of the advantage associated with attending a selective school is accounted for by the curriculum studied there, and in particular the greater likelihood of taking the core academic subjects. And this doesn't just apply to economic disadvantage either.

Serious attention to curriculum is just as important for the children with special needs and disabilities. One of the occasional frustrations I have when it comes to children with special needs, is that we sometimes seem to forget that as well as having particular needs, they are still children. A child with severe or complex needs may well take longer to acquire and build that knowledge than other children.

But that doesn't mean we should assume it is irrelevant for them, or limit our efforts to help them achieve it. For children with SEND, the decisions that leaders make about the curriculum make a huge difference. They can't afford for leaders to get it wrong. Even more than other children, they haven't got the time for leaders to get it wrong.

Quality of education

Many of you will have seen that our [draft handbooks](#) talk about the importance of developing cultural capital. I know this can be a contested phrase.

But to spell out what that looks like in practice for Ofsted, it means our inspectors will consider how schools are equipping pupils with the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens: how they are introduced to the best that has been thought and said, and how they are helped to a real appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

At the same time, I know that given PTE's strong focus on standards, some of you have worried that removing the outcomes judgement might allow schools to take their foot off the pedal when it comes to attainment. But nothing could be further from the truth. Outcomes have not become irrelevant or unimportant to Ofsted. Try telling any teenager that their GCSEs don't matter, or telling parents that we shouldn't care how well their children do in reading tests at age 11.

Schools should be held to account for how well their pupils achieve and that will not change. What this framework does, however, is to make sure that outcomes are considered in their proper context, to understand whether they

have been achieved in a way that sets young people up to succeed in further study and life beyond, rather than just to pass a particular set of exams.

Again, I believe that is how we will not only level the playing field for the most disadvantaged, but also how we make sure that we drive forward the real standards agenda.

And I am also fairly sure, to return to the 'Wonder Years' title, that the way to kill a real love of knowledge and learning is to give children 12 years of jumping through mark scheme hoops, with some nods towards developing some desirable but ill-defined skills thrown in alongside. If we really want to develop all children's intellects and curiosity, they need to be taught the right, connected knowledge about Shakespeare, about the Battle of Trafalgar, and about the structure of the cell – that will pique their interests and passions!

Concepts and accessibility

The audience here is full of people I very much admire and respect. Many of you – speakers and audience – have been part of the fascinating recent discussions, such as those about substantive and disciplinary knowledge, which I am sure will get plenty of airing today. But, and I hope you won't mind me saying this, it is probably fair to say that your levels of interest in education research and theory are probably not entirely representative of the teaching profession as a whole.

Which is why, in order to be successful under these draft proposals, we are not expecting every head to become an expert on Michael Young or Daniel Willingham, or to match the erudition that you will hear from many speakers today. Our evaluation of the quality of a school's curriculum will reflect the quality of their practice, rather than their ability to use the 'right' curriculum language. Indeed we have also shown, through the [third phase of our curriculum research](#), that we can quite quickly distinguish between those who have a genuinely good curriculum, implemented well across a school, and those who simply talk a good game.

To demystify the proposed new process we have tried to make our language and definitions in the handbook as straightforward as possible. Alongside the handbook, Sean Harford, our National Director of Education, has also put out a special edition of the [school inspection update \(SIU\)](#) that gives some further clarification and definition in the schools context – remember, the main framework covers everything from childminders through to adult education.

That update explains that when it comes to learning, we have used the definition from cognitive psychology, as a change in long-term memory. So "if nothing has altered in long-term memory, nothing has been learned". That leads to our understanding of progress as knowing more and remembering more. The connections between knowledge give rise to understanding, and as pupils develop unconscious competence and fluency, this will allow them to develop skills, ie the capacity to perform complex operations, drawing on what is known.

We also know that we learn by relating new knowledge to what we already know. Therefore, the more pupils know, the more they have the capacity to learn.

This won't be new to you, and I hope that the clarifications in that update help to put to bed any suggestion that we are asking too much of teachers. Alongside the SIU we have also put out a [series of curriculum videos](#), further explaining our thinking – but if you think there is more we can do to shed light on the process, please do let us know.

Diversity

I also want to address another worry that I have heard being expressed around curriculum diversity. Some of the people here are at the forefront of innovative curriculum design in your schools. To that I say, all power to you. This draft framework is absolutely not about trying to put a straitjacket on innovation in schools' curriculum or to impose an Ofsted model.

Instead we are using the statutory expectation of a broad and balanced curriculum and the national curriculum, which all maintained schools are expected to follow, and which academies are expected to match in ambition, as our baseline. So long as schools achieve that, they are free to design and build their curriculum as they see fit, and Ofsted will reward the curricula that demonstrate thought and care about how to build rich and deep learning. Similarly for those who want to adopt existing designs, textbooks or other products that work well, that is equally fine and very often to be encouraged.

Breadth

That concept of breadth will necessarily mean different things at different stages of young people's education. We've been clear in the handbook, for instance, that the priority for key stage 1 is for children to master early reading and mathematics. Otherwise so much of what comes later will be inaccessible.

For that reason, and building on what we've learned through our 'reading champion' programme of inspections over the past year, inspectors will be looking at the extent to which pupils in key stage 1 learn to decode text through systematic synthetic phonics and whether they develop into fluent confident readers.

Similarly in early mathematics, inspectors will be looking at whether primary schools have considered the sequence in which mathematical concepts are taught and whether there are opportunities for recall of facts, concepts and procedures, which should lead, for example, to automatic recall of number bonds for addition and subtraction, and of times tables.

I want to be clear: no school will be criticised by inspectors for focusing its key stage 1 curriculum on literacy and mathematics. But that said, equally no school will be criticised for providing greater breadth: primary

schools are best placed to know what it takes to get their children reading early, expand their vocabulary and to put in place the fundamentals of maths.

As children move through primary school, we will expect to see that focus on the fundamentals maintained, but that should be alongside broader learning across all the foundation subjects. These are subjects which we know, from our inspections and curriculum research, are too often being squeezed in many primary schools. Of course the statutory tests remain important, but here again, our inspectors will be looking to see that children's performance in English and maths is achieved through proper teaching, practice and reading, rather than simply learning how to sit SATs papers. That, after all, is what will set them up properly to succeed in secondary school.

And when it comes to secondary school, that rich breadth of curriculum should continue. For almost all children, there is no reason to start narrowing down their learning before the age of 14. It really does pain me to think about how many potential historians, artists, linguists, musicians and designers we've lost because we made them drop subjects almost before they'd begun, so they may never have discovered their talents in them.

Now that does not mean that Ofsted believes that there is only one approach to structuring key stages 3 and 4. There may well be a good rationale for starting some GCSE content in year 9, especially in linear, core subjects, or because it offers pupils the opportunity to study a broader curriculum right through year 7 to year 11.

Where our concerns arise is when the desire to start teaching GCSE content early either comes at the expense of a broad and rich curriculum, or when it is used as an excuse to dedicate excessive time to drilling exam technique at the expense of the learning of new knowledge.

Knowledge versus skills

This is also probably the right place for me to address the vexed arguments about whether teaching of knowledge sits in opposition to teaching skills.

From a pragmatic inspection point of view, opposition between knowledge and skills is unnecessary. Yes, we want to see pupils being taught powerful knowledge, but it is also clearly essential for pupils to develop skills. We consider a skill to be the capacity to perform, whether cognitively or physically, drawing on what is known, and the new framework directs inspectors to consider what schools are doing to develop both pupils' knowledge and skills.

That is why we want pupils to be able to analyse, evaluate and solve problems using what they have learned. And there are clearly desirable physical skills and capabilities that develop in the sports, arts and also technical and vocational capabilities.

What the evidence does show, however, is that these skills are largely domain-specific – evaluation of evidence in science is not the same as evaluation of evidence in history; being creative in dance is not the same as

being creative in mathematics. And we would expect schools' approaches to curriculum design to reflect this.

EBacc

In a similar way we have made it equally clear that knowledge must not be reduced to or confused with simply memorising facts. A pub quiz is not a curriculum.

Nor, and I hope we've made this clear by now, is a curriculum simply a list of subjects to be studied. Which is why I disagree with those who claim that references to the EBacc in the new inspection framework represent Ofsted dictating the curriculum. They do not.

The government has decided that its ambition is for the EBacc subjects to be studied by the vast majority of young people up to the age of 16. It is an ambition I support.

In almost every other OECD country, young people study an academic core that includes their home language, maths, science, a foreign language (most often English) and a humanity up to the age of 16, if not 18. We also know that the very wide latitude given to both schools and pupils in England came to mean too many students, particularly disadvantaged and lower-attaining pupils, giving up core academic subjects at a startlingly early age.

Even when, as I have said before, getting a grade 3 in history GCSE may ultimately prove more beneficial than a Merit in a BTEC. I also happen to think that if you were to ask the proverbial woman on the street whether young people should study these 5 subjects up until 16, most would be shocked to find out that this is not already a requirement.

So the draft new inspection framework proposes that we will be looking at the extent to which schools are working to increase EBacc uptake. What that does not mean is that we will expect every school to be at the same stage, or even to be heading towards the same end point in terms of EBacc entries.

The government has been very clear that the 75% and then 90% targets map out the national expected picture, not requirements for every single school. Schools in disadvantaged areas will be starting from a lower base, and many will have struggled with recruitment, especially when it comes to modern foreign languages – our inspectors will take account of this. In the same vein, they are likely to look unfavourably on a leafy grammar that is not already securing high levels of uptake in these subjects.

So yes, we will be playing our part, as required under statute, to support government policy, but we will not be applying a blunt instrument to do so.

Consultants

And that means I do not want to see schools rushing to quick solutions – such as hiring consultants to help them prepare in some way for the new framework. No school should have to spend a single penny on consultants to prepare for

it.

That is why we have put out so much explanatory material, and why we continue to run events on the proposals across the country. You already have enough demands on tighter budgets without the supposed necessity of preparing for a new Ofsted framework adding more.

I hope you will agree, that we have been consistent over the past 4 years in communicating the message that inspection is not a hoop-jumping exercise.

I was pleased to see from our latest polling of teachers that our myth-busting campaigns have reached so many of you. That will continue with this new framework.

In fact, I strongly believe that by focusing on the substance, rather than performance metrics, we have created something which is far less gameable by supposed inspection experts than any framework which has come before it.

My hope is that once embedded, this framework will help to sound the death knell of a school improvement industry that has too often pushed approaches to improvement that are designed to push results without necessarily making any improvement to real standards. If anyone tries to sell you the 'Ofsted inspection curriculum' I hope that you will – politely – tell them where to go.

Conclusion

I want to leave some time to get to your questions, so all that remains is for me to thank you for inviting me here today, and to thank all of you who have already played a part in shaping the draft framework.

As I started by saying, I hope that many more of you will send us your thoughts in the weeks to come, so that we really can make sure that every child's years in nursery, school and colleges really are their wonder years. Thank you.