

Ofsted's Chief Inspector at the Festival of Education, 2021

Good afternoon everyone. It's great to be speaking at the Festival again, if in a rather different format this year. I really do hope this is the first and last time we do this online – not least because I'm missing the sunshine and the lovely setting that we've been so spoiled by in recent years.

I first spoke as Chief Inspector at the 2017 Festival. I think I've spoken at every one since. I've spoken several times in my Ofqual capacity before that so I really welcome and value the forum it gives. But when I spoke in 2017, I'd only recently started in the role, and it was really this speech at Wellington that gave me the chance to set out my stall. So I have only 15 minutes or so to talk to you today, before what I hope will be a gentle grilling by John, so I thought I'd start by looking back at what I said then.

The centrepiece of my 2017 speech was 'the substance of education' – the curriculum. It marked the start of a period of reform at Ofsted. We spent the following 2 years working towards a new inspection framework, which we began in 2019.

And of course, as you know, this framework puts a clear focus on the curriculum. It was developed with considerable input from the teaching profession; and I think it's fair to say it's been generally well-received.

We know from the feedback we've had from inspections and from many other conversations that the profession has welcomed the chance to think about the curriculum afresh.

And you also welcomed the move away from data-focused inspection to a framework that puts less emphasis on exam performance alone.

I would never argue against the life-changing impact of good exam results – and of course all schools and colleges should aim to make the most of every student's potential. But grades aren't education in themselves; they should be a mirror of good education – and it's the education that we want to look at.

I was also determined that inspection should not be predicated on a narrowly utilitarian view of education. We do children a great disservice if we see them only as economic units, with education as the path to work-readiness, important as that is.

Back in 2017, I said that education should be about broadening minds, enriching communities and advancing civilisation; about leaving the world a better place than we found it. That's what I believed then – and that's what I believe today. It is a formulation that encompasses preparing children for adult life and work, without limiting them.

That core statement about the several purposes of education has been a useful

anchor for me. And we all know anchors are most valuable in choppy waters.

In a few weeks' time, schools and colleges will close their gates for the summer, ending the most wretched year and a half for education in living memory. School and college staff will be regrouping over the summer and preparing for a challenging year ahead.

So much has been said about catch-up – or education recovery, to use the language that sits more comfortably with the sector. Plans were hatched and then scaled back. New ideas are still being floated ahead of the next spending review. But as I've consistently said, for most children, most catching up will happen in their usual classroom with their usual teachers.

The magic of teaching – imparting knowledge, developing skills and building confidence – will mostly happen where it always happens. We should not let the pressure to fill learning gaps bend what schools and colleges do out of shape.

Broadening minds, enriching communities and advancing civilisation is still exactly what's needed from our schools.

So when I'm asked how we will inspect in September, I keep those purposes in mind. There are technical answers about methodology, and appropriate answers about meeting schools where they are. But there is also the central truth: we still believe in the substance of education, and that's what we want to see in action. So the education inspection framework, the EIF, focused on the curriculum, is here to stay.

There are always those who follow the adage: never waste a good crisis. There's been no shortage of ideas from the clean-slaters and flag-fliers of the education world. The pandemic has opened up discussion about the role of schools in promoting pupil well-being; about how catch-up should be measured and sometimes about the wholesale reinvention of education.

For reformers and would-be reformers, Ofsted is the carrot or the stick (depending on your point of view) that can drive changes in schools. Should we put more weight on well-being and inspect through that lens? Should we judge schools on how well they address disadvantage and seek to effect social change through the inspection process? Should the pressing issue of the day be made a limiting judgement, so that schools have no choice but to give it top priority?

I try hard to avoid reshaping inspection to address each issue as it comes along. The inspection process is already vigorous and robust. Safeguarding is a non-negotiable; personal development is a clear area of focus; behaviour is given the prominence it deserves and leadership and management is of critical importance.

In fact, when it comes to the debate about how Ofsted assesses schools that operate in areas of significant disadvantage, I'm always at pains to stress the importance of the leadership and management judgement.

Where a school struggles with issues that are out of its control –

recruitment challenges for instance – it is the leadership and management judgement that marks a school out as having real capacity to improve. Leadership that has the right ideas, demonstrates the right approach and has the courage of its convictions will always be recognised.

So I want to maintain our course, prioritising the substance of education. This approach has real value in many areas needing particular attention at the moment. Like teacher education and development, which are going to be absolutely critical as the sector meets the challenges of this recovery period. Or the education of children with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND), or of children in alternative provision.

I do firmly believe that the EIF has the flexibility to adjust to current circumstances. And that's because of its focus on education substance and on the journey, not just the end results. It makes it easier to allow for the struggles that children are having after missing so much. And it also encourages proper thinking about how to reshape the curriculum, rather than just rushing through at breakneck speed to cover everything that was missed but at a superficial level.

I hope too that stability in the EIF gives schools and teachers more certainty at a time when so much has changed.

Schools adapted with speed and resourcefulness to the pandemic. To remote education of course, but also to offering wider community support where it's been needed. It's understandable that some people think it's time to look harder at the part schools play in pupils' health and happiness.

My view is that for most children, a good school contributes much to their well-being. Good education in orderly classrooms; developing wider interests through sport, music and other extra-curricular activities; building friendships; good pastoral care, with that watchful teacher eye for problems. Well-being isn't an activity, it's an outcome. It's so important that schools return to what they do best, and don't get knocked off course by the pressure for them to solve every social ill.

And I'm very aware of the irony of my saying this right now. We've just published our [review of sexual harassment and violence in schools and colleges](#). That highlighted, once again, the role of schools in setting a culture that will stretch far beyond their gates. But I hope our review also made it abundantly clear that schools and colleges are part of a bigger picture. Schools must be places where abuse and harassment are not tolerated – but the social shift needed to address a problem as widespread and ingrained as this one, cannot be left to schools alone.

So when I talk about schools being knocked off course and being under pressure to resolve societal matters, it's often not a clear-cut issue, although when the matter directly relates to pupil safety, the relevance and role of schools is clearer.

But there is a newer phenomenon that I think is problematic for schools. And that is activism – or rather a particularly confrontational brand of

activism.

Because of course activism has a long and noble history. Activists have shaped society and play a major role in changing the world for the better – most obviously in promoting civil rights and pushing for the kinds of legislation that dramatically improves the lives of whole sections of society.

I've just mentioned our sexual abuse review – commissioned by the government in response to the outpouring of personal testimonies on the Everyone's Invited website. That was activism in action – and nobody can argue about its merits.

What I'm concerned about is not the activism that broadens debate and brings about long-term change but the militant kind of activism that demands immediate adherence to a position. We are seeing these confrontational approaches both outside and inside schools. It's affecting staff, parents and children and can have a limiting effect on education.

This matters because education does lie at the heart of social change. Education builds understanding and acceptance. The reason section 28 remains powerfully symbolic is that it was perceived as an attempt to remove discussion of homosexuality from the classroom. It looked like an attempt to enforce a moral orthodoxy on education through legislation. And it failed.

The Equality Act is in a way the polar opposite of section 28. Rather than restrict discussion, the Act tells schools what they must teach. On the face of it, this should ensure that children grow up with a diverse and rounded understanding of society.

But moral orthodoxies haven't gone away. The protected characteristics enshrined in the Equality Act don't always exist in harmony. And the conflict between them cannot be entirely neutered by legislation. Which brings us back to schools.

It cannot be right for children to have to cross what amount to picket lines outside their school because one group's religious beliefs – protected by law – sit uncomfortably with teaching about another group's sexuality – also protected by law.

It cannot be right that the curriculum can be filleted by pressure groups.

And the militant defence of orthodoxies is not confined to adult protests or to the protected characteristics.

We are also seeing more pupil activism in schools, on many fronts. Some of this is about racism, or anti-racism; some is about climate change; some is about issues that are quite remote for most British children, such as the charged and complicated politics of the Middle East.

But in some cases, children and teachers are suffering abuse or even violence simply for being who they are: for being the wrong religion, or race or ethnicity. This is completely unacceptable. And nor should children be all

but forced to support a fellow student's campaign, no matter how compellingly presented, nor feel that they will be ostracised if they do not.

This is a difficult problem for schools. So much effort goes into encouraging young people to understand and think about their democratic rights, which of course include the right to protest and to campaign for what they believe in. But education must come first. And no child should ever feel targeted or marginalised because intolerance has replaced reasoned debate. Schools must continue to be places for all children to be welcomed, to learn and to grow in every sense.

However high feelings run on an issue, the correct response of a school should surely be educational. For some issues, the right approach may be to help children learn about the historical background, so they can understand the tensions at play today. Let's expose young people to alternative perspectives on complex problems. Let's give them the tools to make their own political choices, including decisions about the rights and wrongs of world events.

Let's not have teachers policed by self-appointed 'moral guardians' who refuse to tolerate an alternative viewpoint. Or harried on social media into apologising for what they've said, or into changing the way they teach, in the face of militant activism.

Social media can enable great humanity, when it rallies around charity or disaster. And it's a mechanism through which ideas can be shared and debated.

But sadly, it can also be a place of groupthink, intolerance and bullying. It fosters and then feeds off tribalism – whether in politics or in social attitudes. It encourages people to run with their herd, feeling at home in the company of like-minded types.

Education should never fall into the same trap. Campaigners often aim to convince us that in a complex world full of difficult challenges and multi-faceted problems, there are simple solutions. But to educate our children properly, we shouldn't pretend this is true.

To return to where I started, that's why substance matters. It's why teaching a rich and stimulating curriculum matters. And it's why broadening minds remains our best hope of leaving the world a better place than we found it.