

Speech: Amanda Spielman's speech at the Birmingham School Partnership conference

Thank you Estelle and Tim. And thank you to Birmingham Education Partnership for inviting me here.

I've been to Birmingham quite a few times since starting this job. The first time, earlier this year, was to meet the previous chief executive at the city council, Mark Rogers. And I visited some schools with our regional director, Lorna Fitzjohn: Billesley Primary and Queensbridge School.

Of course I'm not the first Chief Inspector to take an interest in Birmingham. But were you aware that the region has been a focus of attention since the very earliest days of the inspectorate?

Ofsted is 25 years old this autumn. We took a look back at the announcements from the early months and it turns out that Sir Stewart Sutherland, the very first Chief Inspector, chose the West Midlands for his first out-of-London visit. Some things have changed though: he met chief education officers from the region before visiting Menzies High School in Sandwell, which I'm told is now part of Phoenix Collegiate.

And beyond the names, schools in this region have changed a great deal since then too. Against the backdrop of wider social and cultural shifts in the city, you have got some exceptional schools, giving children a real, full education and setting them up to succeed.

But there is still much more to do, particularly at primary, where key stage 2 results are still below the national average. We need to make sure all children, whatever their background, receive the education they deserve.

That is why this conference, and BEP's work to help improve schools, regardless of their particular type, is so important – especially your project on Raising Attainment for Disadvantaged Young People, which I know is held in high regard.

And Ofsted's role in improving schools is critical too. It's clear that our mission to raise standards in education is just as relevant today as it was 25 years ago. The Ofsted of today is now, more than ever, focused on what works, and far more outward facing and engaged with the sectors we inspect, than at any point in our history.

Yet there is more to do. Later this month we'll be publishing our new strategy which will underpin our role as a force for improvement over the coming years. And 'force for improvement' doesn't mean we are an improvement agency; rather, we want our work to give others the tools they need to drive improvement and that of course includes BEP. It is clear to me that Ofsted

adds most value when we give an informed, fair and objective view of education standards. And that means giving clear messages: both the good and the areas for improvement.

So I hope we can continue to have the type of honest and constructive conversations that Lorna has already championed in the West Midlands. We all know that in Birmingham you're facing some tough cultural, social and economic challenges. But in my visits I've been really encouraged by the collective will of many heads and teachers to tackle these issues head on.

Common values

That collective will is so well demonstrated by your choice of subject for today: values. Education plays such an important part in establishing our moral codes and standards of behaviour. It opens up our minds to different ways of thinking, to new concepts and ideas, and allows us to be challenged by what we learn.

Good education takes people on a journey of enlightenment, which is far more difficult without democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law, and tolerance of different belief systems. It should go without saying that without being tolerant and open to new ideas you can't absorb them. And without having respect for other people's views you won't listen to them. And that is why what we call British Values are so important.

And we shouldn't be afraid to say that British Values are not universal values. I often hear people react against the word 'British' in this context. But while they may not be unique to Britain, they are certainly not understood everywhere in the world. And even where they are understood and valued they aren't always fully reflected in practice. We know, that even in the UK some children are being brought up in an environment that is actively hostile to some of these values.

So the education system has a vital role in inculcating and upholding them. Most children spend less than a fifth of their childhood hours in schools and most of the rest with their family. And so if children aren't being taught these values at home, or worse are being encouraged to resist them, then schools are our main opportunity to fill that gap.

So, I think education has to be the values anchor in a stormy sea. And the sort of education we are talking about is not superficial displays of British Values, or tick box exercises. I heard a strange one the other day, from a colleague, whose son had come home with a homework: to craft a picture of the Queen out of sequins. A charming task in itself perhaps, but that's not teaching children about our common values.

Instead, 'the active promotion of British values' means giving young people a real civic education. As I have said before, it is the kind of education that teaches young people not just what British values are, but how they were formed and how they have been passed down from generation to generation.

So, a strong civic education includes a rich and deep curriculum in subjects

such as history, English and geography – to name just a few. Learning, for example, through history lessons about the struggle for democratisation in Europe, or about civil rights through studying American literature.

And while we don't necessarily teach these subjects with promoting British Values in mind done well they should encourage those very debates. Through them, pupils should learn how we became the country we are today and how our values make us a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness to the rest of the world. They should emerge as educated adults with a broad, informed perspective on the world. So, to sum up, I don't see British Values as a distraction from the curriculum, but at the very heart of it.

There are many good examples of this across Birmingham. Take Parkfield Community School, where the school's motto of 'No outsiders in our school' helps pupils confront prejudice and stereotypes and where they teach pupils to make a positive contribution to their communities. Or Harborne Academy, where teachers use a 'thought for the day' to openly discuss issues such as attitudes, friendship, tolerance and respect.

But it can also go terribly wrong. And this, I believe, was where the so-called Trojan Horse schools failed. Not only were there issues with promoting British Values in many of those schools, but in some cases members of the community were attempting to bring extreme views into school life. The very places that should have been broadening horizons and outlooks were instead reinforcing a backward view of society.

And while those inspections are a long way behind us, and many of the schools involved have completely transformed since, it is fair to say that the wider social and cultural issues leading to the events still need addressing.

And these issues come into play in another area of concern to me; namely, the continuing risks presented by unregistered schools. Actually most of these are not places that anyone would be happy to call schools: they are places that hide from the rule of law, from regulation by government and from inspection by Ofsted. They often teach a narrow curriculum of just a few subjects, perhaps with a particular single-faith focus, and are often housed in buildings that wouldn't pass the most basic of health and safety checks. Some of the images taken by inspectors that I have seen show places that are filthy and downright dangerous. In short, they put children at risk.

This is a very real problem. And, let me reassure you, our inspectors are working hard to identify and help shut down these illegal operations. But we know we cannot do it alone: all of us have a role to play, whether by being alert when children are taken off the school roll, or by passing on intelligence about where these schools may be located. And part of this is continuing to build confidence in mainstream education, and to make sure parents understand the risks of sending their children to unregistered schools.

Thanks to information passed to us by the Council, we have uncovered 10 suspected illegal schools in Birmingham in the past 2 years. We have either closed or registered 8 of them and the other 2 are now operating legally.

Without the strong and strengthening relationship we have with Birmingham City Council we couldn't have achieved this. And we are continuing to work with the Council and with the government to close down illegal schools.

And while we know differences in values are normal and inevitable – we don't all share the same politics, nor should we – there is a specific issue at play here. There are parents who, uncomfortable with the full and varied education on offer in local mainstream schools, are seeking out alternatives. Usually alternatives that they perceive as fitting better with very conservative cultural or religious values, such that young people in these alternatives are not being prepared for success in modern Britain. It is vital that we expose the risks of these so-called schools and help parents understand the dangers.

A rich curriculum

And it is especially important that a rich and deep curriculum helps to anchor British Values within schools. And by the curriculum I don't just mean subject choices and the timetable – though they are important parts – but the real substance of what is taught in schools. I have said before that I think this is an area we can too easily lose sight of. But it really matters, especially for disadvantaged children, who are less likely to have any gaps filled at home.

This is why I started our thematic review on the curriculum earlier this year. And I'm really pleased about the reaction to this work so far; we seem to have lifted the lid on a huge amount of untapped thinking about curriculum content and design.

But, as is always the way, alongside the enthusiasm come the myths. So I want to explain clearly what we are doing and, importantly, what we're not doing in this review.

First off, we have a good National Curriculum, which has now been in place for 3 years. Most schools are maintained schools that are required to follow it, or they are academies that say they choose to follow it. So our starting point is to see how well it's translating into practice. Other schools should be clear about what it is they are offering. So that inspectors can see whether they are delivering on their promises, as well as how outcomes compare with other schools.

And let me say very clearly, this is not about creating an Ofsted-prescribed curriculum. But inspection must always be able to look at whether a curriculum is coherent and well implemented, particularly with reference to the types of knowledge and cultural capital we want young people to gain in school. And the evidence we collect from the review will shape how we look at the curriculum in the new inspection framework, due for 2019.

And to come on to the second myth, I've talked about my concern with schools shortening key stage 3 to start GCSEs early. This is a real problem, which leaves many pupils getting a year less of the full set of National Curriculum subjects than they otherwise would. Yet this has been reported in some

quarters of the press as if I was criticising the new GCSEs. Actually, it is quite the reverse.

So I want to say quite explicitly that I think the new GCSEs are a good thing. There are many reasons for this, and not just because I was involved in their creation. The first is that they are specifically designed to give schools more time for teaching and less for assessment, meaning pupils have the space to get a much deeper understanding of the subjects they're studying.

And secondly, the new GCSEs have a much better balance of knowledge and skills than their predecessors. To anyone who has swallowed the rather misleading rhetoric about them being just lists of facts, I'd say go and read the DfE-published subject content and assessment objectives: they really aren't.

But these GCSEs are designed to be 2-year qualifications and that is why I am sceptical about schools that extend the course to 4 years: ultimately not about learning more knowledge, but practising exam technique. With the result that children drop whole subjects – history, geography, languages – after just 2 years of key stage 3 study.

So our curriculum review will be looking at how schools think about the curriculum, how they structure and design the content, and how they teach it. And you might like to know we have just finished the first phase of this work, which I'll be discussing in my first commentary of the new academic year later this month.

There are some really interesting findings from this first stage, which is just the start. One thing that has struck me so far is the lack of shared language to discuss the curriculum. Even the most commonly used terms mean different things to different people. And so by doing this research we are starting a national conversation about the curriculum, helping to establish a common language and to build up our collective expertise.

Getting safeguarding right

Another important debate I have been encouraged to see take off over the summer is around safeguarding and safety in schools.

[Writing about this last month](#) I wanted to get across the importance of achieving the right balance when it comes to keeping young people safe. Sometimes schools have a difficult tightrope to walk between making sure children are safe from harm and providing them with valuable opportunities to enrich their lives. I am also well aware that school leaders are obliged to more than half an eye on their insurance policies and potentially litigious parents.

And I am the first to admit that we at Ofsted haven't always got this right. I have heard from heads and teachers how it has sometimes felt as if inspection was a box-ticking exercise when it came to safeguarding – perhaps more worries about the height of a fence or the existence of a specific

written policy, rather than how children at real risk were being identified and supported.

So over the summer our inspectors have been trained to focus on what schools are doing to identify children potentially at risk of real harm; how these children are being helped; and how they manage accusations and other serious problems with staff. Keeping children safe from serious harm should always be your primary concern here.

I hope that with Ofsted more focused on these important elements of safeguarding, school leaders will be empowered to do the same. We want school leaders to make decisions based on their experienced judgement, rather than to feel the need to invent and then conform to prescriptive policies, or to succumb to pressures from overly protective parents. Not just because this limits children's experiences, but because it can obscure the sometimes very real safeguarding risks that children face.

Recognising challenge

Turning to our role as a force for improvement, I said earlier that we at Ofsted add most value when we give a fair and objective view of standards, both for individual schools and at a national level. It isn't easy to explain just how important this is, especially when those teaching in challenging circumstances feel that their effort is not recognised.

Being at the very sharp end of school improvement, as I know you are at BEP, is one of the most difficult jobs in the country. It requires a huge amount of energy and commitment to transform education in some of our most challenging schools. Having been part of ARK Schools through its first 7 years, I have seen how even the most intractably difficult schools facing the biggest social and cultural challenges, where pupils had been getting a very raw deal indeed, can be turned around. I am sure this is all too familiar to you.

But I'm not prepared to lower the bar on our overall judgements for schools in these circumstances. If we did, we would be neither fair nor objective, and we'd end up lowering expectations for disadvantaged children – children for whom underperformance is not and should never be predestined.

Instead, what Ofsted can do, and does do, is recognise that it takes a very effective leadership and management team to turn around those schools. We would fully expect that a school in a disadvantaged area with the same level of pupil progress as one in a more affluent area, to have better leadership and management teams.

And this is borne out by the data on what Ofsted actually does. If you take the Requires Improvement category, you find that schools with the toughest intakes are two and a half times more likely to be graded good for leadership and management than those with the most affluent intake. And if you look at the Good category, schools with the most deprived intake are nearly twice as likely to be rated outstanding for leadership and management as those with the most affluent intake.

So we do recognise the challenge of running tough schools; it comes through clearly in how we judge the effectiveness of leadership and management. And we will be putting more emphasis on this particular judgement than we have done in the past, to make clear that no head, manager or teacher should be penalised for working in a challenging school. I hope that governors, multi-academy trusts, local authorities and school commissioners, who all make important decisions off the back of our judgements, will do the same.

I'd like to ask for your help with this, to tackle the myth that Ofsted does not recognise the challenge of running disadvantaged schools. And to spread the word that we do want to encourage ambitious, talented people to work in our toughest schools.

Conclusion

So, thank you again for inviting me here. I hope you might be reassured by some of the messages I have given, and my determination for Ofsted to be a force for improvement. And while I know things haven't always been easy in Birmingham, I am really optimistic about the future. We will of course be continuing to work closely together, with Lorna and James, and everyone here to build on the good work. Thank you for listening, I look forward to your questions.