The unlucky child

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector
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Introduction

Good morning and welcome. Can I first of all say what a delight it was to visit Lilian Baylis, the school you've just seen on that film. It's a great example of an outstanding school where children, more than three-quarters of whom are on free school meals, get a superb education. They are lucky children. That word 'lucky' is important and I'll return to it later in my speech.

I am also speaking a week after the PISA results were released. Although these results were chastening, as we all know. they came as no surprise to me as Chief Inspector. They confirmed what I already knew.

Indeed, one of my first statements as Chief Inspector was that 'mediocrity' had settled into the system. Too many children went to lacklustre schools and poor children were consigned to the worst of them.

My report this year seeks to explain why we are still mediocre, but also shows why there are significant grounds for optimism. How can I use that word optimism against a backdrop of disappointing PISA outcomes for our country? Let me tell you why.

There is no question that the system has responded positively to the tougher frameworks we introduced in September last year. The abolition of the word 'satisfactory' from the Ofsted lexicon and the introduction of the 'requires improvement' grade have had a galvanising effect. Coasting schools now know that mediocre standards will no longer be tolerated.

Our statistics this year show that more schools are now getting to good at a faster rate than at any other time in Ofsted's 21-year history. Some 78% of schools are now good compared with 70% last year.

Primary schools in particular are getting better. Last year there were 23 local authorities where fewer than 60%t of primary-aged pupils attended a good or outstanding school. This year there are only three. The FE sector shows similar improvement: 71% of all providers were judged good or outstanding - an increase of 7% on last year.

Academies are undoubtedly making a big difference. Well-established sponsored academies in deprived areas have made particularly impressive progress. These took over from some of the worst schools in the country, and have improved from dire GCSE performance to achieve results that are beginning to bear comparison with the national average.

I am convinced that if this progress is maintained we will see better outcomes in the next round of PISA results in three years' time.

However, this improvement masks serious weaknesses in our system.

The first of these is the culture in some of our schools. It's a culture of casual acceptance of low-level disruption and poor attitudes to learning – the sort of culture that is a million miles away from what we see in some of the high-performing Asian countries. I will say more about this in a moment.

I am also concerned about the reliability of assessment at Key Stage 1. Unless teachers have an accurate understanding of what children can do at this formative stage, they will not make the progress they need to at Key Stage 2 and beyond.

This is critical. All the research shows that if children cannot read by the age of seven, they struggle thereafter. I'll be saying much more about this in my report on early years next year.

A tale of two nations

Although we have seen standards improve this year, if we really are serious about catching up with the best in the world we have got to address our 'two-nation' educational system. Not between rich and poor, or state and independent schools, or selective and non-selective education.

Poverty is no longer an automatic predictor of failure. There are poor children who are doing much better in schools across the country. Poverty is no longer an excuse for poor performance.

No - this is a tale of a nation divided into lucky and unlucky children. It is about an educational lottery that consigns some children to substandard schools and favours others with the opportunities provided by institutions like Lilian Baylis.

The 'lucky' poor child is born in the right postcode, goes to the right school and has the widest opportunities. The unlucky poor child does not.

The unlucky child has more than poverty to contend with. He was born into an unlucky area, where there are more mediocre schools than good ones, where the teaching is uninspiring and the head believes 'you can't really do anything with children like him'.

The unlucky child never really has a chance. His potential is never realised, his ambitions are never fulfilled. He is really unlucky because the professionals who could and should have helped him have not. He is unlucky because his school and college and local authority have failed him. He is unlucky because we have let him down.

Too many children in our country are unlucky. Children from similar backgrounds with similar abilities, but who are born in different regions and attend different schools, end up with widely different prospects because the quality of their education is not consistently good.

The challenge therefore for our country is to change that. We must ensure that more children are lucky in their education. We should not put up with local authorities that

fail to ask their schools to do more, or with headteachers who find it easier to excuse than expect. We have schools and colleges that provide an excellent education for the poorest children in our society. And their numbers have grown. But there is no good reason why there shouldn't be more of them.

I expect our education system to do more. I am here as Chief Inspector to help turn more of the unlucky children into lucky ones. I want and expect an excellent education for all of our children, not just some – not just those who are fortunate enough to live in the right postcode. If I'm seen as difficult or challenging in this quest, I make no apology. If we don't get this right we will fail the next generation.

So **how** can we achieve this? What are some councils, schools and colleges doing to give pupils of all abilities and backgrounds excellent opportunities? And why are too many not?

Why do so many of our children end up being unlucky?

The lucky child

The lucky child is fortunate in his geography: he attends a school run by a local authority or an academy chain that knows its schools well and knows the people who run them. They know what progress is being achieved and challenge headteachers if there is none. They are not passive caretakers of the status quo.

'Responsibility' for these bodies is not a paper exercise. They are not faceless bureaucrats. They have a vision for their schools and they communicate it well. They use their existing powers well. They recruit the best and urge them to support struggling colleagues. They don't wait for an Ofsted report to tell them how their schools are doing.

The lucky child often now lives in disadvantaged urban areas that previously failed their children. Places like Greater Manchester, Newcastle, Sunderland and of course London. These areas have made great strides to improving the chances of each child.

The lucky child's school has governors who hold the headteacher to account, but do not pretend they are the executive. They challenge, they scrutinise and they are interested in the most important aspects of a school: how well children are taught in the classroom and how much they learn and make progress.

The lucky child is particularly fortunate in his headteacher. Such heads are motivated by potential and not daunted by circumstance. They do not concede to vested interests and they do not patronise poor children by making excuses. They do not measure a pupil's ambition by sizing up their parents.

A professional spirit permeates the whole school. There is little argument and no negotiation about what the school stands for. Children understand the boundaries created for them that may not exist in the home. As a result, teachers teach well and children learn.

The good headteacher understands that good behaviour underpins everything. Learning is impossible without it. They know that it is not a question of drawing up a policy, emailing it to staff and leaving it to be implemented by junior colleagues. They accept that it is ultimately their responsibility and no one else's. They patrol the corridors and respect their students, but they never confuse friendliness with familiarity. They do not call pupils 'mate'.

The lucky child is of course lucky in his teachers. They teach effectively, they are not bound by a narrow prescription of what a good lesson looks like. They capture their pupils' attention and they make their lessons interesting. They do not confuse a 'busy' lesson for a good one. They succeed in imparting knowledge.

They insist on high standards of behaviour and they don't allow children to answer back. They buy into the ethos of the school and when they leave, they leave for good reasons. They haven't been chased out by bad behaviour. On the contrary, the culture of the school supports and protects them.

Such is the lot of the lucky child: he is fortunate in his school and his teachers.

The unlucky child

The unlucky child has none of those advantages. He goes to a school that looks bog standard and probably is. This has nothing to do with the state of the buildings and everything to do with a state of mind.

The unlucky child has the misfortune to attend a school run by an inept local authority. These authorities have no idea what goes on in their schools because they rarely visit.

They have no concept of performance because they never ask. They prefer to issue meaningless directives and to make vapid pronouncements about 'opportunity' and 'excellence' without really understanding how to achieve them. They stick their heads in the sand because they are not prepared to embrace change. They do not understand that they are now commissioners of improvement in a more autonomous system.

They wait for Ofsted to point out their failings and then complain when it does. They find it easier to indulge in outrage than tackle underperformance. They excuse inaction by claiming budget cuts make intervention impossible. 'What can we do?' they wail, and then, comfortable in their inertia, they proceed to do nothing.

The unlucky child often lives in places you would not normally associate with underperformance. They live in places like Norfolk or Suffolk or Northumberland or the Isle of Wight. To take just one of these examples, in the Isle of Wight only 14% of secondary pupils attend a school that is good or better.

The unlucky child goes to a school that has litter in the playground and disorder in the corridors. The walls are bare, the classrooms untidy and it's hard to see the

carpets for gum. There is a uniform policy, but pupils get away with flouting it. The governors rarely challenge, and if they do, it's usually to raise marginal issues.

The unlucky child's headteacher is marked by one characteristic above all: they prefer to appease rather than challenge. The line of least resistance is the one they invariably take. Their leadership is founded on excuses: they have 'the wrong type of kids', or 'the wrong type of parents', there's 'too much paperwork', things are 'just too difficult' and there is always 'no money'.

The unlucky child's headteacher doesn't exert or impose authority. They prefer to skulk in their study poring over policies. They rarely protect or guide young teachers, but leave them alone, directionless and besieged.

The consequences of all these concessions are manifest in the classroom: children feel free to challenge teachers, they are disengaged and often bored.

The unlucky child has to endure low-level disruption in most of his lessons. His school hasn't created the calm and respectful culture essential for learning. Lessons are undermined by background chatter, inattention and horseplay. The unlucky child's school has succumbed to indifference, incivility and insolence.

The unlucky child's headteacher mistakes the process of education with its purpose. They talk the language of literacy but neglect the basics: teaching spelling; correcting poor grammar; letting children take books home and insisting they bring them back.

The unlucky child ends up with a threadbare education because he was never given a good one. He leaves school with poor qualifications and enters an FE [further education] college that encourages him to take training that isn't rated or needed by local employers. He isn't one of the lucky one in seven applicants under the age of 19 who gets an apprenticeship. His school and college didn't prepare him to succeed.

If he is fortunate enough to get a job, he may have trouble holding it down because no one taught him how to behave professionally. He becomes a statistic, one of the unlucky - unemployed and unemployable.

The consequences of our educational lottery

There are far too many schools and colleges with unlucky children. Almost 700,000 children languish in schools where behaviour and attitude are an issue. A quarter of a million have to put up with totally inadequate schools, and nearly a fifth have to make do with leadership that is less than good.

Poor literacy and numeracy remain too widespread. Around a third of lessons were judged to be less than good in the core subjects of English and maths. More than four-fifths of youngsters who haven't gained at least a grade C in maths and English at 16 still don't have it at 19. It is not unreasonable to expect further education to take students who achieved a D in English and maths and, within two years, make sure they get a good pass in these qualifications.

There are far too many unlucky children in too many parts of our country. Children born in Doncaster, the East Riding and North East Lincolnshire are much less likely to attend a good school than children elsewhere. Students in Doncaster have a particularly hard time: only 61% of its primary schools are good or better and less than half, 42%, of its secondaries.

As I have said, some of the unluckiest children live in Ofsted's East of England region. They have among the lowest chances in the country of attending a good or better school. Primary schools are worse here than in any other region and secondary schools, too, lag behind. Leadership and management is the worst overall in the country and the quality of independent learning providers is poor.

Too many local authorities don't seem to believe that education is their problem. Well, it is. May I remind them that, according to the 2006 Education Act, they have a statutory duty to promote 'high standards and the fulfilment of every child's educational potential. Too few are fulfilling that responsibility.

If local authorities are to play any meaningful part in education, they must raise their game. They have had 50 years to learn how to do it. Yet most wait for Ofsted to pay a visit to discover the problem. I'm telling you now – Bournemouth, Blackpool and Wakefield – we have a problem.

Nowhere are the vagaries of our educational lottery more apparent than in regions that are similar. Children in Suffolk are far less lucky than children in Devon. Students in Middlesbrough are far more likely to be unlucky than those in nearby South Tyneside. And St Helens has the dubious distinction of having very lucky primary pupils - 89% of them attend a good or better school - and very unlucky older pupils - only half as many attend a good or better secondary school.

It would be a mistake to think that unlucky children are only found in deprived areas. Some of our unluckiest children live in relatively affluent areas. The gap in attainment between pupils on free school meals and their better-off peers is vast in Buckinghamshire, West Berkshire and Surrey. Indeed, it is wider in the South East than in any other region of the country. A child from a deprived background is likely to be far unluckier in his school in Wokingham than he is ever going to be in Walworth.

The unluckiest ethnic group is the biggest. White British pupils from low income backgrounds account for 64% of all those on free school meals and they have the lowest attainment of any poor ethnic group. Last year, only 35% of disadvantaged White girls and 26% of White boys achieved five good GCSEs including English and maths - compared with a national average of nearly 60% of all pupils by the same measure.

But even within those depressing percentages, some children are luckier than others. If they attend a school that focuses relentlessly on the quality of teaching, forges strong links with families, intervenes where necessary and reinforces high

expectations, they can get really impressive results. Nowhere is it written that poor White children cannot succeed. It's challenging but it can be done.

How London turned itself around

I am old enough to remember what things were like in London years ago. Most of the inner London boroughs were educational basket cases. The proportion of youngsters getting good GCSEs in the early 1990s was 8%, three times less than the national average at the time.

State education was written off as a hopeless cause. Schools were chaotic: leadership was dire, discipline was awful and meaningful learning often non-existent. The same excuses, the same pessimism, the same weary defeat was trotted out then as now: nothing could be done 'with children like these'.

Well, the pessimists were wrong. Those same inner London boroughs that once lagged behind the national averages now exceed them. Seven London boroughs now have no secondary schools that are less than good or outstanding. The proportion of NEETs[1] is one of the lowest in the country.

Yes, there may be unique factors that favour our capital city. But remember, London was once seen as uniquely awful. Most of the reasons it succeeded are ones that can be applied anywhere:

- determined leadership
- autonomous schools
- focused initiatives
- persistence
- the smart use of data
- a refusal to accept excuses
- a willingness to learn from the best
- an intolerance of bad behaviour
- the belief that no child deserves to be unlucky in their education.

Good practice can travel beyond the M25. It's not like 4G. It doesn't stop working when it reaches Hartlepool or Hull.

In fact, Ofsted has seen these lessons being implemented all over the country. Excellent school and college leaders are putting them into practice. What they are doing isn't a mystery. They focus on the basics: behaviour; literacy and numeracy; high expectations, no excuses; good use of the pupil premium; clear rules; clear

[1] Young people not in education, employment or training.

direction and a clear inspirational ethos. They stand up to vested interests. They expect the best. They refuse to allow their children to be unlucky.

We need more battlers like them. Every teacher and every headteacher should ask themselves this fundamental question: would I send my own child to my school? If the answer is 'no', then the next question should be 'what should I do to ensure that I can?'

To those local authorities that say they cannot improve, I say visit Coventry. Last year, it had one of the lowest proportions of good or better primary schools in the country. After we shone a spotlight on its underperformance, the council grasped the nettle, shook things up and demanded that school leaders improve or leave. This year, the percentage of primary schools that are good or better in Coventry has increased from 42% to 64%.

If Coventry can do it, so can others. If heads in coastal areas, like Cheryl Wolf in Southend-on-Sea, can succeed, so can heads in Blackpool and the Isle of Wight. If heads in rural areas, like Rachel de Souza in Norfolk, can make their schools outstanding, so can heads in rural areas elsewhere.

If heads in post-industrial towns, like Michael Gosling in Halifax or Karen Bramwell in Bolton, can make a real difference in very challenging areas, so can heads in Middlesbrough and Barnsley.

What should happen next?

So what should happen next?

We can make more unlucky children lucky. Ofsted is now shining a spotlight on those parts of the country and those sections of society that remain unlucky: disadvantaged children and those with special needs who are not getting the education they deserve; able pupils who aren't being stretched; local authorities and academy chains that duck their responsibilities.

But progress is slow and the country needs to do much more if it is to graduate from academically average to excellent. There is too little focus on underperformance across the system, including in many well-regarded schools.

Too much teaching and leadership remain mediocre. So we need to ensure that more of our best teachers and school leaders are incentivised to go to the areas that need them most. As I said at the launch of our 'Unseen children' report, the government should urgently consider the idea of introducing 'National Service Teachers'.

We must improve the way we nurture the leaders of tomorrow. If blue-chip firms like Marks and Spencer and BP can identify, train and support promising candidates over several years, why can't we do the same in our education system?

We also need to improve the standard of governance. Governance was so poor at more than 400 schools last year that an external review was recommended by inspectors.

It is, of course, too early to make a judgement about the performance of the increasing number of converter academies, because many were previously good and outstanding schools. But it is important that they use their new-found freedoms to raise standards further. This is something we will be looking at in the year ahead.

To ensure that those responsible for the many academies in multi-academy trusts are held to account, Ofsted will conduct focused inspections of constituent schools in the weaker academy chains.

For all the reasons I've already mentioned, inspectors will focus more on culture and behaviour in the coming year. In this context, I am announcing that, from January, inspectors will make no-notice visits to schools where we have identified behaviour as a particular concern.

And today, I am calling on the government to re-introduce more formal external testing at the end of Key Stage 1. Indeed, I would strongly urge the government to re-introduce external testing at Key Stage 3 as well.

Talk to any good headteacher and they will tell you it was a mistake to abolish those tests. That's because good teachers use those tests to make sure every child learns well. In getting rid of the tests, we conceded too much ground to vested interests. Our education system should be run for the benefit of children, and no one else.

With the proposed abandonment of national curriculum levels, it is vital that children's progress and outcomes are benchmarked at regular intervals in their school career. If we are serious about raising standards and catching up with the best in the world, we need to know how pupils are doing at seven, 11, 14 and 16.

That was one of the salutary lessons of PISA last week – one of the best European performers was Poland, which has introduced more national testing and strong accountability systems.

Conclusion

As it stands today, too many children, especially deprived White children, are being written off. Too many schools and colleges are failing to turn their students into responsible, employable adults. Too many local authorities are allowing it to happen. Far, far too many children remain unlucky.

No child starts school thinking they're unlucky. I've never met a youngster yet who said he couldn't do well because he lived in a post-industrial community. I've never met a youngster who said he couldn't progress because he was one of the rural poor. We stifle children's ambition with our labels. They don't smother it themselves.

There will be those who say nothing can be done, that it's too difficult to improve education in the areas I've mentioned. That's nonsense! Children are children are children.

There is no good reason why unlucky children should not be luckier. There is no acceptable reason why weak leaders cannot become strong ones. There is no rational reason why one region or ethnic group, should perform worse than another. **These things can be done because we have seen them being done.**

I don't underestimate how challenging this is. Improvement is tough, grinding, hard work. I applaud heads and teachers who have done it.

Every child deserves the type of education that the best schools, colleges and teachers already deliver. I am determined as Chief Inspector that more will have one.

We must not excuse the mediocre because doing better is too difficult. No good teacher would do that to a pupil. And no country that aspires to an excellent education system should say that to itself.

Thank you.