

Authored article

## HMCI's monthly commentary: October 2015

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)  
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This is the first monthly commentary from Sir Michael Wilshaw. This month's commentary looks at the improving performance of primary schools.



As Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, I am in the privileged position of being able to talk on a frequent basis to hundreds of school leaders, teachers and inspectors from across the country about the important issues facing our education system today. This dialogue gives me a valuable insight into what is happening in the nation's schools and colleges. Along with the evidence from the thousands of inspections that Ofsted carries out each year, it helps me to focus on the issues and challenges that face us.

My Annual Report, which is presented to Parliament towards the end of each calendar year, has traditionally been the main opportunity for chief inspectors to provide a 'state of the nation' view of overall standards in our schools and colleges. In keeping

with this tradition, I very much look forward to sharing the findings of my fourth Annual Report in a few weeks' time.

However, when preparing my Annual Report commentary each year, the most difficult challenge is always deciding what I have to leave out, such is the wealth of material I have to draw on.

This is why I am keen to start commenting more regularly on different aspects of our education system, based on emerging inspection evidence, my own first-hand observations and the considered views of those working in the system.

For the first of these short commentaries, I want to focus on the factors that lie behind the strong performance of England's primary schools and how these need to be carried through to our secondary schools. In the coming months, I will be shining the spotlight on other important issues, including governance, careers guidance and the teaching of science and modern languages in primary schools.

I hope they will serve as useful additions to our collective understanding of these issues and to the ongoing debates in which teachers, governors, education commentators and parents are all engaged.

## **Our primary schools have never been so good**

I am starting my series of short commentaries with some reflections on the state of England's primary schools in 2015.

I think we have real grounds for great optimism here. There can be no doubt that, against a number of measures, primary schools are doing well.

The last few years have seen a steady rise in the achievement of pupils taking the SATs at the end of key stage 2. Compared with 2012, over 60,000 more primary school pupils this year achieved a good level of reading and writing, and a standard of mathematics that will set them up confidently for secondary school.

Similarly, the proportion of 6 and 7-year-olds reaching the expected standards in literacy and mathematics at the end of key stage 1 has also improved over this period and now stands at around 90% for both. However, we do not have to rely on test results alone. Our own Ofsted inspection evidence and judgements very much confirm this upward trajectory of improvement. There were 2,293 more good and outstanding primary schools in the last academic year than in 2011 to 2012 and 219 fewer inadequate ones.

These are highly impressive and encouraging statistics.

## **So what has driven this improving performance?**

I would contend that a key factor has been the greater emphasis on the structure of language in the primary curriculum and its focus on ensuring that all pupils get a solid grounding in the basic knowledge, understanding and skills that form the foundation of children's learning.

Of course, this focus on structure started some years ago with the national literacy and numeracy strategies. However, there can be little doubt that it has been sharpened still further over the past 5 years.

The emphasis on high-quality, effective synthetic phonics teaching from the early years onwards is an integral part of the Teachers' Standards guidance published 4 years ago. Teachers have increasingly got to grips with the rules and the lexicon of phonics. Terms like blending and segmenting, phonemes and digraphs are firmly embedded in the classroom vocabulary.

More importantly, teachers have become proficient in teaching phonics in a way that engages and enthuses the youngest children in primary schools.

While far from universally popular when first introduced, the emphasis on phonics teaching is certainly bearing fruit. As noted recently by Schools Minister Nick Gibb, the national phonics screening check demonstrates continuing, strong progress in

this vital area of learning for the youngest pupils.

Surely nobody can still convincingly argue that systematic phonics isn't the most effective method of teaching children to read. The structured yet engaging way in which this is being done is something my inspectors increasingly report.

Take, for example, the line below from one [recently published inspection report of a nursery and infant school in Devon](#).

“Teachers and teaching assistants take every opportunity during the day to extend pupils’ phonic awareness, for example pronouncing names of plants and leaves correctly.”

As well as developing their skills, many primary schools are taking active steps to instill a sense of joy and enthusiasm for reading among their pupils.

Here’s a line from another [recent inspection report](#), this time a primary school in Cambridgeshire.

“A computer-based reading system allows pupils to practise reading both in school and at home. The school library contains an extremely wide selection of stimulating fiction and non-fiction texts to support learning across subjects and reading for pleasure.”

I believe the flair and fluency with which young children are reading as a result of the now well-established teaching of phonics helps explain the progress we’ve also seen in writing over the last few years. There is plenty of evidence to suggest children’s greater confidence in decoding words is improving their ability to encode them for spelling. In addition, the focus that many schools now place on children reading aloud regularly from books that are well suited to their level of knowledge helps them practise their skills and gain confidence as readers.

The strong focus we now see on higher standards of grammar and punctuation from the earliest years of primary school is also something I welcome.

In one [Manchester primary school, a recent inspection](#) found that:

“Teachers have exceptionally good subject knowledge in English. In class, they focus on developing pupils’ understanding of the structure of the English language and the importance of good grammar. Across the school, including in the early years, pupils are encouraged to use similes, “interesting adjectives” and alliteration to improve their written work. Teachers always check pupils’ spelling and punctuation.”

Generations of adults have had cause to lament the fact that they were never taught the basics of grammar at school. Thankfully, the misguided ideologies of the 1970s and 80s are now being successfully countered. Today’s primary school literacy lessons abound with talk of conjunctions and prepositions, of passive and active tenses, antonyms and ellipses. Children and their teachers are using terminology and concepts that have been absent from the classroom for some considerable time.

This altogether more structured and systematic approach to learning grammar, spelling and punctuation throughout the primary years means that our children are becoming more confident in tackling challenging writing tasks. As a consequence, the vast majority are ready for the transition to secondary school education. This is good for our children and it’s good for the country.

However, [our report last year on provision for the most able pupils](#) and our [recent survey on the effectiveness of the curriculum at key stage 3](#) gave me great cause for concern about the transition from primary to secondary education.

Both these surveys identified that pupils, who have achieved so much at primary school, are not supported well enough to build on that momentum when they enter secondary school. My inspectors tell me that much of the good, structured work done in primary schools on understanding and using correct grammar, both when writing and when speaking, is lost when pupils enter the secondary phase.

Worse still, the rigour with which spelling, punctuation and grammar is being taught at primary stage is often not developed sufficiently at secondary stage, especially in the foundation subjects like history and geography. This slows down all children, but is particularly damaging for the most able pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who disproportionately fail to fulfil their earlier potential when they come to sit their GCSE examinations. In 2014, for example, around 5,000 disadvantaged pupils who attained the highest levels at the end of key stage 2 failed to achieve a grade B in English and mathematics at age 16.

This is little short of a tragedy for the young people concerned and an enormous waste of talent for our country. I know that Ministers are worried about how the move from primary to secondary education is being managed. I'm aware they are looking at the idea of introducing resit tests in year 7 for those pupils who don't achieve the expected standards at age 11. They can certainly count on my full support.

As I made clear in the key stage 3 report, I stand fully behind any action that will sharpen the focus on the vital transition between primary and secondary school.

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