

Speech

Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech to the Festival of Education

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke at the Festival of Education held at Wellington College, Berkshire.



It is good to speak on this momentous day in British history when the decision to stay or leave the European Union will have a profound effect on the future of our country.

I do hope though, when the decision is made and the dust settles, people will see that despite the sound and fury, those on both sides of the argument have spoken with passion for what they truly believe.

In the same way, I hope that when my term of office ends in a few months' time, people will understand that what I have said

and done has been motivated by a passionate desire to improve the lives of children and young people.

If I have stirred up emotions from time to time and caused offence by speaking bluntly, then I apologise. But I have been a Chief Inspector in a hurry, impatient to bring about improvement through inspection.

I leave office knowing that, although our inspection frameworks are now tougher and more demanding than 5 years ago, many more children are in good and outstanding schools than ever before. I do hope that this is recognised by those who have, from time to time, questioned my approach and sometimes taken my words completely out of context.

Our education system is miles better than it was 20 years ago when Ofsted came into being. And each year since, we've seen incremental improvement.

Our primary schools, in particular, are doing well, although there is much to do in many of our secondary schools. So why is our education system still mediocre and not up there with the best in the world?

Quite simply, it's because we have largely failed to address the long-tail of underachievement in our country, containing most of our poorest children.

This one constituency has not felt the benefits of the improvements I have just mentioned. And the irony is not lost on me saying this to you in a school like this - bedecked with privilege, with the opportunities that are often denied to our poorest children.

The lot of disadvantaged children in primary schools has improved – a bit. But in secondary schools, the attainment gap between children on free school meals (FSM) and their better-off peers has refused to budge in a decade.

Despite all the good intentions, the fine words and some imaginative initiatives, we are not making a real difference. The needle has barely moved. In 2005, the attainment gap between

FSM and non-FSM pupils in secondary schools was 28 percentage points. It is still 28 percentage points now. Our failure to improve significantly the educational chances of the poor disfigures our school system. It scars our other achievements. It stands as a reproach to us all.

Not long after I started my tenure at Ofsted, we published a report [Unseen Children](#), which looked at the increasing invisibility of underachieving poor pupils as they progressed through our schools, not just in urban areas but also in isolated rural and coastal communities. We wanted to understand why a majority of disadvantaged children consistently underachieved at school.

As I approach the end of my tenure, I'm returning to that theme.

I [spoke earlier in the year](#) about the widening gap between the performance of schools in the North and those in the South. But as I stand in these glorious grounds, in this beautiful corner of Berkshire, I wonder how many people realise just how badly the poorest pupils have been let down in some of the wealthiest parts of the country?

The attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM secondary school children in West Berkshire is 31 percentage points. In Kent it's 34. In Surrey it's 36. In Buckinghamshire it's 39. And, in Reading, it's a whopping 40 percentage points – all far in excess of the national gap of 28. What an appalling injustice. What an inexcusable waste of potential.

And yet, alarming as these figures are, they do not reveal the full extent of our failure. They hide the continuing underperformance of the white working-class, for instance, or the dashed hopes of too many of the most able disadvantaged children, whose early promise is so often left to wither.

As a teacher who has spent his professional life working in some of the most deprived areas of the country, I find our failure perplexing and infuriating. I know individual schools across the country have turned things around, particularly in London, and managed to give children who had been written off a good

education. So why have we failed at a system level? Why haven't we made progress? Why do we keep letting down our poorest children in large parts of our country?

Guilty parties

To my mind there are 5 culprits. The first are the political ideologues of both Left and Right.

The poor have been caught in the crossfire between these two for as long as I can recall. Of course, both claim to be acting in the interests of the disadvantaged. Yet neither accepts the damage they invariably inflict.

The Left's brand of snake oil was very pervasive in the 70s and 80s. They infiltrated scores of local authorities, peddling their anti-academic nonsense and undermining the authority and respect of school leaders.

I know I have talked about this before. But the reason I keep returning to the subject is that their irresponsible, ideological agenda ruined the education of hundreds of thousands of our poorest children – children now in middle-age whose literacy levels are worse than their parents' and grandparents'.

I have been criticised for saying that school leaders should be battle-axes and bruisers. But in the 70s and 80s, headteachers who wanted to stand against this destructive tide had to be educational warriors. It was only those who were prepared to stand up to the ideological bullies, masquerading as pastoral reformers, who survived that terrible period.

Many didn't. I well remember, for example, an experienced and respected headteacher in Newham who was quite simply broken by his experiences of dealing with endless militancy in his school in the mid 1980s, with insults being thrown at him when he refused to allow staff to join the demonstrations during school time to support the miners' strike. There were many others who experienced similar intimidation.

The middle classes, of course, could escape to the remaining grammars and independent sector. The poor had no such option. They had to endure the chaos, the indifferent teaching and threadbare curriculum that passed for education in many state schools of the time.

They and we are still living with the consequences. Those who are fundamentally opposed to the academy programme should remember why it happened in the first place. Academies were a response to the failure of so many local authorities. They let down the very children they were supposedly supporting.

The market-based laissez-faire approach of the Right can equally damage the chances of the poor. Schools will wither on the vine as they did 20 or 30 years ago if a more liberal and autonomous system is not subject to strong central and local intervention when early decline sets in.

The market will not stop the strong getting stronger and the weak getting weaker. Teachers and leaders will always gravitate to the places where it is more attractive, comfortable, more leafy and easier to work.

The figures for teacher training speak for themselves. The prosperous South East region has over 458 trainee teachers per 100,000 pupils. Yet the East Midlands manages only 362 per 100,000 pupils. The East of England fares even worse, with only 294 per 100,000. No wonder these last two regions are poorly performing. Schools in these areas find it more difficult to get good staff. Teacher supply follows well-resourced demand, not educational need.

Hastily rebranded schools in deprived areas soon find that the magic of the market hasn't eradicated underlying problems. But when they fail, as so many do, it is the system, or reactionary leftists, or those old hippies in Ofsted that are to blame.

Free marketeers forget, or perhaps they never cared to think, that without the semblance of a strategy, without meaningful accountability, or early intervention, the system risks repeating all the mistakes of the worst local authorities. They forget that it's

easy to destroy a school and so much harder to build one up. And once again, it is the poor who ultimately pay the price.

Structural vandals

The second group that has helped hobble the poor are the structural vandals, those who argue that children don't need structure in school.

In educational establishment circles it was argued in the 70s and 80s, and still is in some quarters, that structure stifles. It kills childhood creativity; it dictates mindless conformity. This argument rears its head most often today in the endless whines about 'petty' uniform rules or the insistent shriek that testing is inhumane. And again, it is the poor who have to bear the consequences.

Many middle-class children, of course, are less reliant on structure in the school and classroom. They get implicit support and direction at home. But many of our poorest children don't. A rule-based classroom culture helps compensate for a chaotic home life. Take it away and the poorest children rarely swim; they sink.

Even when home structures are in place, the poor's expectations and potential are often constrained by limited cultural horizons. Through no fault of their own, many simply aren't aware of what is possible. Why should they be? Few of them have had access to the life-enhancing opportunities a good education brings.

Middle-class children always have a head start. Their cultural hinterland is usually rich. Their parents are usually well educated. They tend to do well in school. And when they don't, their parents can always hire a tutor.

To those who bleat about the tyranny of testing, let me say this. Testing isn't a burden; it's an opportunity. It allows teachers to know where a child stands and what help they need. It gives the poor a passport to the prospect of a better life.

Weak heads often complain about testing. But in my experience, a good head never tells colleagues to teach to the test. They insist on good teaching, which invariably leads to good results. The tests take care of themselves.

We can see what happens to progress when there aren't any tests. It is one of the reasons why there is such a gap in attainment between key stages 2 and 4. It is the reason why I called for a return to testing at key stage 3, so the poor, in particular, can benefit from formal assessment.

Take testing and exams away and the poor can't rely on the cultural capital or family connections that middle-class children possess. The irresponsibility of the anti-testing lobby in this regard is breathtaking. It is the disadvantaged who suffer from their thoughtless crusade.

A constricting curriculum

The third culprit is our continuing failure to develop a curriculum pathway for those youngsters who want a strong route into an apprenticeship, especially after the age of 14.

Let me be clear. You will find no stronger supporter of a core curriculum and strong literacy and numeracy programmes than me. I was insisting on the primacy of subject knowledge and the importance of an academic bedrock when many latter-day evangelists were negotiating their way around a Wagon Wheel.

Nor have I ever made the mistake of thinking that the poor wouldn't benefit from access to the canon, to that rich corpus of knowledge that underpins all learning. The poor have as much right to – and capacity to appreciate – the works of Shakespeare and Newton and Austen and Macaulay as their better-off peers.

This I do not dispute. But what about those youngsters who would benefit from a technical education? What about those employers who, year after year, say that school leavers are not equipped with the technical skills that they are crying out for?

The figures are shocking. In the UK as a whole, there are now 210,000 vacancies as a consequence of skills shortages across the economy – an increase of 43% from 2013. In key sectors such as manufacturing, construction and utilities, over 30% of vacancies exist because there aren't enough people with the right skills to fill them.

I have taught in disadvantaged communities for most of my professional life. And I can tell you that there will always be some children who will respond better to a technical curriculum than others.

The consequences of an inflexible curriculum are plain to see. We see it in the demotivated youngsters who leave school with few relevant qualifications and an antipathy to learning. We see it in the ranks of the unskilled unemployed. We see it in the hundreds of thousands of skilled vacancies that go unfilled and are eventually filled by those from abroad. We see it in the 40% of youngsters who don't get 5 good GCSEs.

Poor teaching

The fourth reason why the poor continue to languish at the bottom of the educational pile is that they are often lumbered with the worst teaching. Despite excellent initiatives such as Teach First, poor communities are still more likely to have less access to good teaching than better-off ones.

According to the Social Market Foundation, schools in deprived areas are more likely to have fewer experienced teachers, more likely to have teachers without formal teaching qualifications, more likely to have teachers without degrees in relevant subjects, and more likely to have higher teacher turnover than schools elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, these problems have been exacerbated as teacher recruitment becomes more difficult. Last year, Ofsted's own [Annual Report](#) acknowledged that recruitment was toughest for schools in deprived areas.

A recent snapshot survey my inspectors carried out of secondary schools in Kent and Medway has found that the situation is at least as grave now as it was then.

The problem in Kent is compounded by selection. As you know, the proportion of FSM eligible children attending selective schools nationally is only 3%, way below the national figure of 15%. Yet many of the good and outstanding schools in Kent are grammars and, according to research from [Education Datalab](#), grammar schools in this area are more likely to attract and retain many of the best teachers.

As a result, secondary schools in Kent with the most disadvantaged children have more unqualified and less experienced teachers. They are also less likely to be judged good or outstanding for teaching, learning and assessment. Kent is an example of what happens to the poor nationally when market forces predominate.

As heads of non-selective schools told our inspectors: “The few good teachers that there are around prefer to go to the grammars,” and “We end up having to appoint unqualified or less experienced teachers. This places just more and more demands on experienced staff.” While another said: “There are just no incentives for teachers trained in Kent to stay in Kent and teach in more challenging schools.”

As I said earlier, the lack of a national, strategic approach to teacher training means that there are challenging areas of the country without ready access to the best newly qualified teachers. Outstanding schools train and retain the best candidates, leaving schools where the need is greatest to scramble for the rest.

In Kent, as in the rest of the country, challenging schools are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit the best teachers. We can roll out as many new shiny, well-intentioned educational initiatives as we like. But if we don't have the people to carry them out, the disadvantaged will remain where they are – at the bottom of the heap.

Poor leadership

The same thing is true of leadership. The final culprit, the final reason why we continue to let down the poor is our inability to deliver strong leadership to those who need it the most. The poor disproportionately attend schools that are strangers to good leadership. Yet we know that good teaching can only thrive when leadership is strong.

Why have we not given greater priority to developing good leadership in our country, particularly in the most difficult areas? Why has the National College for Teaching and Leadership fallen on such hard times? Is the Talented Leaders programme enough?

As things stand, only 6% of schools in the most prosperous areas of England have leadership and management that are judged less than good by Ofsted. In the most deprived areas, almost 4 times as many schools – 23% – suffer the same.

Unless we resolve to get more of our best leaders into the most challenging schools, the poor will continue to be short changed.

What is to be done?

We don't have to dig too deep to understand why we have failed our poorest children.

We can see it for ourselves in increasing alienation, the bitter resentment as others arrive to do the jobs the badly educated cannot do. "Blame the parents," say some; "Blame the immigrants," say others. Well, we should really blame ourselves, because it doesn't have to be like this.

We should start by refusing to patronise the poor. There is nothing wrong in insisting on structure in school. We should be tough on feckless parents who allow their children to break the rules. I appreciate that many of them were let down by the education system. But they need to be reminded – through

letters, meetings and sanctions – that the way they bring up their children has profound implications for us all.

We should have a curriculum that not only has a strong core but is flexible enough to meet the needs of those youngsters who want a technical pathway.

The government should insist that every major multi-academy trust should have a University Technical College. Every multi-academy trust should be inspected to ensure that the University Technical College does not become a dumping ground for the difficult or disaffected and that it delivers high quality pre-apprenticeship programmes to the age of 19.

Finally, the government must do more to direct good people into the most challenging areas. There have been some laudable initiatives. But they have been late, small and piecemeal.

Conclusion


I came into teaching, above all, to make a difference to the lives of our poorest children. As Chief Inspector, I have attempted to show how the educational underperformance that blights the lives of disadvantaged pupils in reality beggars us all. Of course, the poor suffer the worst consequences. But we are all the poorer for their missed opportunities and wasted potential.

We know that it does not have to be this way. We know that their life chances would be greatly improved if they had the best teachers, the best leaders and a better curriculum.

As I begin my last few months as Chief Inspector, it saddens me immeasurably to say frankly that we are still letting down our poorest children and that if things do not change fundamentally, we will continue to do so.

Thank you

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Ofsted

Sir Michael Wilshaw

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