Unsure start

Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector
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Introduction

I am very pleased that today sees the launch of Ofsted’s very first annual report dedicated to early years. I remember being a parent of young children, even if it was a long time ago, and I know that a child’s early years pass by all too quickly. But as a society, if we let a child’s early years slip by, we miss a unique opportunity to shape a child’s future.

This is the time in children’s lives where they have the greatest capacity for growth and development. All the research evidence, including the work done by Graham Allen in his recent report on early intervention, demonstrates the dramatic potential for development in the brain structures in the youngest children. And yet there isn’t sufficient focus on this phase in a child’s education.

You have just heard from Nick Hudson on why we are taking this so seriously in Ofsted. But today I want to focus on the poorest children, because they are the ones for whom it makes a real difference. If we are serious about social mobility in this country, we have to tackle underachievement at the earliest possible stage.

In my view, the most important measure of success for the early years sector is whether the poorest children are doing as well as their better-off peers by the time they start school.

I launched my report Unseen Children: Access and Achievement 20 years on in the summer of last year. Since then, I have been pressing policy-makers, practitioners and the public to do more to tackle the long tail of underperformance that blights too many of our poorest children and our country.

The importance of the early years in setting the pattern of a lifetime was highlighted in that report. Many children enter formal schooling already behind. Once behind, their disadvantage often becomes entrenched.

No one questions the importance of investing early in a child’s education. Successive administrations have spent significant amounts of public money on extending provision for under-fives but there hasn’t been sufficient focus on narrowing the gap.

In 2007, the government devised a simple benchmark for five-year-olds. By age five, children should show a ‘good level of development’ and be ready for formal schooling. It found that the gap between the poorest children and those from more advantaged backgrounds was around 20 percentage points. Six years later in 2013, the gap had not closed: it was still around 20 percentage points.

Let me tell you what these points represent. The poorest children are less likely to be able to follow instructions, make themselves understood, manage their own basic hygiene or play well together.

By age five, many children have started reading simple words, talking in sentences and can add single numbers. But far fewer of the poorest children can do these things well.

Children from low-income families are far more likely than their better-off peers to lag behind at age three, and they are even more likely to stay behind as they grow up. Too many do badly by the end of primary, and carry on doing badly at the end of secondary. Many of them, of course, end up not in education, employment or training [NEET] – unskilled and unemployable.

If the gap isn’t closed, the costs to our nation will run into the billions. The Sutton Trust estimates that the UK’s economy would see cumulative losses of up to £1.3 trillion in GDP [gross domestic product] over the next 40 years if the country fails to bring the educational outcomes of children from poorer homes up to the UK average.

It does not have to be like this. There are steps we can take as a society that will improve the life chances of our poorest and youngest citizens. Yes, it will cost money. But the cost of doing nothing will be far, far greater.

There are areas of the country, particularly London and some pockets outside, where the majority of children do well and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged is closing.

There is nothing inevitable about the link between poverty and failure. Indeed, we have to ask ourselves why, if this is being done well in some places, it isn’t being done everywhere else? We have to ask ourselves, if there is a political consensus on the importance of a sure start in life, if so much money is being spent on it, why on earth has so little changed?

Too many of our poorest children are getting an unsure start because the early years system is letting them down. So today, I want to highlight those problems in provision and suggest how they might be rectified.

There are three big structural problems as we see it:

- First, early education is confusing and the poorest families have the least ability to navigate it to their children’s advantage.
- Second, too much is being delivered without a strong enough focus on the essential skills that children need to start school.
- Third, accountability is weak because of poor data, poor accountability to parents and poor oversight by local authorities and others.
For children to benefit from early education, they need to attend the provision that is on offer and take advantage of the subsidised places. Too few of the poorest actually do. The bewildering complexity of provision is a major impediment.

Let me put myself in the position of a poor parent living on an estate, possibly with little education of my own, who struggles to deal with complicated bureaucracy and with no one to turn to for advice and support.

Four out of 10 of all parents feel that there is too little information about early education. So what are the chances that I, on my estate, will know how to find the best early education for my child?

To start with, the language we use is all too confusing.

Let me give you one simple example. If I were to ask you, where do children go to learn aged five, what would you say? You would say a school. And if I asked that question around the most deprived estate in the country, everyone I met would say the same.

Almost anyone you meet could tell you where the school is. It’s not a difficult question. It’s the big building at the heart of the community with the sign that says ‘school’.

But what if I asked you, where do you send your two-year-old to learn? What would you say then? You might say any of these:

- Nursery, child-minder, pre-school, pre-school play group, play group, play school, day-care nursery, day care, wraparound care, kindergarten, after and before school clubs, childcare, children’s centre, crèche, prep, primary school, early years provider...

I could go on. Isn’t this all too confusing? What chance do parents on the estate have of getting their heads around all these terms?

Let me give you another example of how the sector lets the poorest parents down.

Anyone offering early education has to be registered and inspected. Moreover, government funds hundreds of thousands of places each year. Early years provision is officially very visible.

So it would seem straightforward to expect that a parent could find a high-quality local nursery or childminder as easily as they could order a takeaway online. As 97% of households with children now have access to the internet, what could be easier?

But it’s not easy. The information online is patchy, it varies in quality depending on locality, and can be hard to find with a basic search. Even if a parent manages to find a local provider online, it won’t always be possible to tell how good that provider actually is.
Even Ofsted’s own website is limited by data protection laws, which means, for example, that parents can’t always access the name and address of a childminder in order to find and read their inspection report.

Parents who know what to look for can find out what they need. But parents who lack confidence and don’t know where to start may simply give up or rely on local word of mouth.

The language of provision only serves to confound and confuse. The better-off and well educated find ways to navigate the system and hunt out the best. The poorest children have what is left. If every child is to be given a sure start in life, the system must be made easier to access and also to understand.

We also need a solution that is focused on the right things. It is no good a child experiencing early education if, when they get there, the provider isn’t effective. And what is most effective for the poorest children is the opportunity to learn.

I have said before that I believe firmly the family is the great educator. The evidence from research in early years demonstrates this convincingly. It is how parents interact with small children that more than any other factor shapes how youngsters develop and grow.

Researchers talk about parenting style, the home-learning environment, or parental involvement in education. But boiled down, this means one simple thing: some parents teach.

I know there are those, and some will be in this room today, who dislike the words ‘education’ and ‘teaching’ when it comes to very small children. They fear that teaching the smallest children will inevitably lead to less play and less freedom. To them, it signals the erosion of childhood, the beginning of the end of innocence.

I cannot disagree strongly enough.

Setting up play and learning as opposites is a false dichotomy. The best play is challenging. The favourite game is the one that promises mastery of a new skill. The most soothing story is a familiar one. The regularly repeated nursery rhyme stays with us for life. Learning, even at the earliest stages, can be an exciting experience – why deny that excitement to our toddlers?

Play in many families is inherently educational. When a child interacts with an adult it is an opportunity to learn. Children naturally absorb new skills, words and ideas. The parents, rich or poor, who teach their child every time they hold a one-way conversation with a baby, convey lifelong advantages.

They teach when they count the stairs as they carry the child to bed. They teach when they read a toddler stories and sing nursery rhymes. They teach good behaviour by loving their children, showing their affection at every available moment, but also by setting clear boundaries and acting as good role models. They guide them so that they can play with other children.
Many parents, regardless of income, do this intuitively because their parents did it for them. But some do not, and they pass on generational disadvantage. The impact on their children is profound. So let us not pander to those who think children’s childhoods are being stolen.

It is a middle-class prejudice for which some of the most disadvantaged pay the price. The chattering classes will never have many problems in bringing up their children and finding the best ways to educate them from the earliest age. This prejudice prevents us naming the problem, let alone tackling it. Some children are taught. And some are not.

Unfortunately, even when the most disadvantaged do access early years provision they rarely find the support they need because too many practitioners are afraid to, or simply don’t know how to, teach. Conversely, practitioners trained as teachers are much less likely to hold this fear.

Year after year, Ofsted has tried to persuade the sector to focus on learning, but our success has only been partial. As long as many in early years provision continue to believe that teaching is separate from play, those children most in need of help will continue to fall behind.

The third factor preventing the poorest parents and children access to good early years provision is our current half-hearted approach to accountability.

Let’s be honest: the accountability systems, including our Ofsted inspection frameworks, have not set expectations at the right level. We focused on compliance rather than education.

In addition, other accountability measures are not good enough:

- there is a paucity of data and little that is nationally comparable
- local authorities are responsible for the allocation but not the quality of funded places
- health and education don’t talk to each other, so that the two-year-old health check is not routinely passed on to schools.

Even when provision is found to be poor and standards wanting, no-one locally is accountable. If there is to be progress for the poorest children, this woeful state of affairs cannot continue.

With that in mind, I welcome the government’s announcement last week that they will be introducing a readiness-for-school test at age four. This is an ideal opportunity to improve accountability. But I think it should go further.

I hope that the published outcomes of these tests will be detailed enough to show parents how their own child has performed. I fear that an overall school grade will fail to illuminate the progress of poor children. I ask government to think again about this issue.
Assessment at the start of Reception will be a powerful predictor of success when the Key Stage 1 assessment is done at age seven. We should redouble our efforts to ensure that progress is good from the start of reception to the end of Key Stage 1, particularly for the poorest children. So I will be asking inspectors to look at this closely.

But these measures will not address all the underlying issues. The problems I have identified are deep-rooted, and will take years to change, even if the will exists. The poorest children do not have years to waste. So which part of the sector is best placed to close the educational gap, to give all our children a sure start?

Are childminders the solution? No, for the simple reason that there aren't enough good childminders with the necessary skills and qualifications in deprived areas.

What about private and voluntary nurseries? They are private businesses. There is absolutely no requirement that they set up in poor areas or take poorer children, though some, of course, do. Consequently, they cannot be expected to provide a comprehensive, strategic solution.

Finally, we have children’s centres. If they are called ‘sure start’, surely we can rely on them? Unfortunately, we can’t.

Let’s be clear: many children’s centres are doing a valuable job, but it is a job focused on working with potentially vulnerable families to provide early social help and healthcare. The proportion of children getting an early education from a children’s centre is tiny.

This is why I have agreed with the Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare to review the inspection of children’s centres. We and the government need to be clear about their role and function.

Whatever else they are doing, children’s centres, in the main, are not closing the educational gap.

Let me get straight to the point.

What children facing serious disadvantage need is high-quality, early education from the age of two delivered by skilled practitioners, led by a teacher, in a setting that parents can recognise and access. These already exist. They are called schools.

Let me go back to my parent on a deprived estate. I would know the local school. I could walk inside and ask someone how to place my child in the school nursery. I would be easily able to find out how the school was doing. I could compare the school to other schools. I would know there were teachers on-site and a headteacher being held to account for making sure my child was doing well.

I could read the Ofsted report on the school website. If my school was an extended school or linked with a children’s centre, I could get support and advice, including
help with my parenting skills. I would know that the school was being held to
account for my child's achievements.

This is all very well for me to say, but let's not underestimate the practical difficulties
in doing this.

Not every school wants to extend its reach and be more ambitious, but for those that
do and are good enough, there are real bureaucratic and regulatory barriers which
prevent them from doing so. The different parts of the state, private and voluntary
sectors need to work together, but the current system makes this very difficult.

Not every school takes younger children, and not every school should. But there are
already over 7,000 schools teaching almost 350,000 two- and three-year-old
children. And some schools are ready and eager to do more.

We know from our inspections that savvy schools are starting to focus their pupil
premium money in Reception classes because the evidence suggests that this is the
most efficient way of narrowing the gap. The earlier underperformance is tackled,
the greater the progress later on.

Some schools have taken this evidence to its logical conclusion and chosen to use
their pupil premium in early years, well before the government's announcement of a
pupil premium for three- and four-year-olds.

To encourage this trend, to incentivise schools and build on the government's
initiative, we need to be more ambitious still.

- First, we need to tackle the funding gap. With only 15 hours of funded
  places available, many of the poorest families will not be able to afford to
top up the cost of childcare in the way other families can. And without
added financial help, schools will not be able to subsidise the costs of
educating these additional pupils. Is 15 hours for the poorest children really
enough?

- Second, although the new pupil premium funding for three- and four-year-
  olds is welcome, I urge the government to direct this funding to school-led
  provision.

- Third, admissions policy should change to give the poorest children priority
  in securing places in Reception at the best schools. But to get this priority, it
  would be on condition that they take up their funded early education place
  there at the school from the earliest age possible and attend regularly.

- Finally, inspection and regulation should be streamlined. It should be
  simpler for schools to take younger children. No extra registration,
  regulation or inspection, regardless of how many hours the school is open,
or how young the children who start there are.

We also have to tackle the question of leadership. I've talked before about
exceptional leadership in the context of taking over failing schools.
Identifying and motivating inspirational leaders is crucial if we want better chances for our poorest children. There are schools providing inspirational leaders in the early years sector, but there is little acknowledgement of what they do and too few rewards when they do it.

When we talk about exceptional leadership in schools, we usually think about the work they do with other schools. But for primary and nursery schools, we need to think ‘down’ as well as ‘across’.

It has to be about taking responsibility for seeing more children arrive on the first day of Reception. That means working with feeder nurseries and childminders so that there is no doubt about what is required in order for children to be school-ready by the start of Reception.

We know some schools are starting to do this. I want to see this happening across the board. So I will instruct our inspectors to look for evidence of leadership teams making a difference for the poorest children and encourage them to reward those efforts accordingly.

A simpler school-based system, with incentives for low-income families to use their entitlements, would make an enormous difference. But it also needs to be clearer to parents that every child must be ready for school, and that high-quality, early education will make sure that they are.

Unfortunately, it seems that there is no agreement among practitioners about what it means to be ready for school. How can parents be clear if professionals are not? Government needs to provide a clear, simple and consistent message that all parents and practitioners can understand.

A child who is ready for school must have the physical, social and emotional tools to deal with the classroom, as well as the basic groundwork to begin to develop academically.

The minimum requirements that every child needs to have should be so familiar, so well established, so obvious, that you could stop anyone in the street and they could tell you the basics.

In this report, we use an example first given by Frank Field in his 2010 report, ‘The Foundation Years’.

‘Ten ticks’ that any parent could understand:

- To sit still and listen
- To be aware of other children
- To understand the word ‘no’ and the boundaries it sets for behaviour
- To understand the word ‘stop’ and that such a phrase might be used to prevent danger
- To be toilet-trained and be able to go to the loo
- To recognise their own name
- To speak to an adult to ask for help
- To be able to take off their coat and put on shoes
- To talk in sentences
- To open and enjoy a book

I believe that the best way of ensuring that the most disadvantaged children are ready for school is to put schools in the driving seat.

In the report, we make a series of detailed recommendations for a simpler, more flexible and accountable system. I hope that government will give serious consideration to the solutions and recommendations we have identified.

Today, I am also calling on government to look to school-led provision to improve educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged children.

Making this a reality will require firm action from government. Let me conclude with a brief reminder. I am calling on government:

1. to review whether 15 hours a week is enough for the poorest children to make the necessary progress
2. to direct the new pupil premium for three- and four-year-olds to more school-led provision
3. to give the poorest children an advantage in the admissions criteria for primary schools
4. to work with us to streamline inspection and regulation of schools who provide for younger children.

These are all important recommendations which we hope government will act upon.

Thank you.