Speech: Pupil attainment

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to talk to you today.

The topic for discussion is one that is very close to my heart - simply because I've spent my entire professional career trying to raise attainment in inner-city schools.

We all know there are thousands of books, reams of research and countless consultants advising teachers on how it should be done. Some are excellent, a lot are mediocre and a few are downright harmful.

Which ivory towered academic, for example, recently suggested that lesson observation was a waste of time – Goodness me!

I think all of us in this room have a pretty clear idea about what raises attainment – high-quality teaching, rigorous assessment, strong intervention when it's needed, effective use of additional funds, including the pupil premium, an aspirational culture where high expectations permeate every aspect of the school, proper differentiation between pupils, particularly at both ends of the ability spectrum - and so on and so forth.

But I think we also know that none of these things happen without good leadership.

So, if any piece of research fails to give due weight to the crucial role that leadership plays, it's simply not worth the paper it's written on.

They say no school is better than the quality of its teachers. What's usually overlooked is that without good leaders, good teachers simply cannot flourish.

Quite simply, without good leaders, there are no good schools.

It has always been difficult to retain and promote excellent school leaders. But, if anything, the challenge is becoming harder as the baby-boomer generation of heads retires and younger, less-experienced colleagues take their place. And this is happening at a time when we are asking so much more of our schools.

So today, I want to return to the central theme of my first Annual Report as Chief Inspector – leadership. What does good leadership look like? And what is preventing too many of our schools from being well led?

Obviously, there isn't one type of good leader. Angela Merkel isn't Alex Ferguson. And neither is like Richard Branson. But good leaders share similar characteristics and have similar qualities. The best leaders work out what is best for them and the institutions which they lead.

So, over the years I've developed Wilshaw's Way. It owes a bit to Nelson Mandela, a bit to Machiavelli, a bit to Clint Eastwood and an awful lot to Frank Sinatra. You know the song.

Let's start with vision. All leadership courses emphasise it. And for good reason: if you don't know where you're going, why should anyone follow you? It is not just about coming up with a natty slogan, shoving it on the stationery and making everyone parrot it.

What **really** motivates you to do what you do - and can you make others believe it?

And it should be pragmatic as well as idealistic. How do you translate your vision into improving the life chances of children in the school? What does it look like on the ground?

After all, be honest: who is your vision for? It has to be for children, and if it's not, you really aren't focused on the one thing that matters above all else.

It's pointless concocting grand plans if the school playground is a mess, uniforms are slovenly, staff are too casual, children pay more attention to their mobile phones than to the teachers, and the school reception has all the charm of the check-in desk at Ryanair.

The best leaders get the details right because they know that these underpin the big issues of student achievement and progress.

This comes across in the obvious pride good leaders have for their institutions. They don't need to usher visitors quickly into segregated areas away from children – they want to show their schools off. They are not nervous about showing children being taught and interacting with each other and with staff.

'Headmasters,' Winston Churchill once said, 'have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never been invested.'

He may have been overstating the case, but people in this room will know that heads have huge authority and power to determine the culture and success of a school.

But authoritative leadership is not the same as autocratic leadership. Staff and students can't thrive in a culture of fear, but nor can they thrive in a chaotic school where there is little authority. Indeed, children who come from homes where there are few boundaries need more structure at school, not less.

It is my view, often expressed, that raising attainment is predicated on a culture in which heads do everything they can to reinforce not only their own authority, but the authority of all the staff in the school.

If youngsters feel that they are in a more powerful position than the teacher, the teaching assistant, or the dinner lady – that they can defy authority and do so with impunity – no amount of theorising on raising attainment will make much difference.

Good schools are staffed by people, including newly qualified teachers and those in the early years of the profession, who feel confident that they can challenge children to behave and achieve without endless negotiation and sterile argument.

If, when I was a head, I saw a member of staff turning a blind eye to a child dropping litter in the playground, I'd first have had a stern word to say to the child. But then I would have gone back to the teacher to ask why he or she let it happen.

In a good school, everyone has a part to play in creating an orderly institution and a good learning environment.

There is absolutely nothing wrong in my view in saying to youngsters 'do as I ask, because I am the adult, I am older than you, I know more than you and, by the way, I am in authority over you.'

Good leaders get the balance right between taking time for the difficult child and the needs of the great majority of children who want to learn and make progress. They understand that schools should not be extensions of social services or education welfare. They should be places of learning in which children get one chance of acquiring the knowledge, skills and qualifications to do well in life. They recognise that every hour spent with 'Jack the lad' is an hour away from the classroom and the monitoring of teaching and learning.

People expect headteachers to be in command, to be in authority. Those who don't exercise that authority in a professional and compassionate manner fail to understand the importance of their position.

Of course, a position of power does not give you licence to do what you want. Good leaders acknowledge and nurture the contribution of others. Talent can be found in the most challenging of schools. Seek out the good people. Build on their strengths.

I could never have achieved what I did at my schools in East London without the support of superb deputies and assistants. Successful heads aren't Roman Emperors – but they do need a Praetorian Guard to support them at difficult times.

You owe it to your staff and students to knit together a leadership team that will strengthen and improve your school even in your absence.

But, however good your staff, you must always challenge them to do better. Complacency is easy to slip into and so difficult to shake off.

Constantly question; constantly demand. This won't make you popular. But if you wanted applause you would've joined the circus.

And ask yourself hard questions, too:

'Was that worth it?'
'Am I doing the right thing?'
'What would I do differently next time?'

But take care: do not confuse careful reflection with self-doubt. Do not be seduced by the latest teaching fad or be swept away on a tidal wave of new initiatives.

As a head, my guide was always that, if something wasn't going to impact on classroom performance then I wouldn't introduce it.

You know the path you must follow. Stick to it. And be brave. Confront issues head on.

It helps that your priorities are pretty straightforward: the children always come first. If anyone is preventing them from getting the education they deserve – be they unreasonable union reps or foot-dragging local politicians – fight the good fight.

And lastly, don't forget to have fun. Yes, you heard that right: Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is lecturing you on the importance of fun.

I was watching an episode of *Educating Yorkshire* a few weeks ago and there was a clip of the head dancing alone down the corridor.

Now, I didn't do a lot of carefree skipping when I was a head in Hackney. But I understood how he felt. Whatever the stresses and strains of school life, teaching children is an absolute privilege. And leading a school has moments of sheer joy.

So it's good to remember: when the boiler has packed up, the fire alarm has gone off, and a fight has just had to be broken up in the playground – the good times are never far away.

My guide for school leadership will, I hope, resonate with many of you and should give confidence to those who aspire to become the next generation of future leaders. And, what is really good to see is that organisations like Teach First and Future Leaders are now beginning to attract the brightest and the best to our schools.

But despite the increased attractions, increased pay and the extra freedoms heads now enjoy, school leaders still face significant obstacles. And if we are to have a consistent and improving education system, they need to be confronted.

I'd like to take some time to explore a few of them.

The first is training. It is certainly the case that support programmes for would-be school leaders have been transformed in recent years. This is an excellent development.

But the existing system is too fragmented and not consistent at all levels. As I have said, there are examples of excellent practice in some parts of the country, but there are not nearly enough, particularly for middle leaders.

Robust performance management is not just the responsibility of the headteacher, but of the middle leaders and those with curriculum and pastoral responsibilities.

The close relationship, the head of department has with his or her team around the coffee table at break time, should not get in the way of having those tough conversations where these are necessary.

Too many schools are failing to nurture and develop the next generation of school leaders. And too many governing bodies are failing to appoint the best. In seeking successor heads, governors too often appoint what they know and what is familiar, not what the school needs. If we're serious about long-term school improvement, this has to change.

That's why I have argued that arrangements for governance need reform. We need a more professional approach in many governing bodies – especially in our most challenging schools serving our most deprived communities - people who are able focus on the central issues which lie at the heart of school improvement and strike the right balance between supporting and challenging the executive.

I have said it before and I do so again today: where there is a lack of skills and capacity at a voluntary level, we should not rule out professional governance with the necessary expertise to tackle underperformance.

We all know that many more schools have greater autonomy and freedom than they've ever had before. But these things aren't in themselves a panacea. We need headteachers who can handle autonomy and who use their freedoms to drive improvement. That is why from September, inspectors will be much more focused on whether the leaders of academies are using their freedoms to raise attainment. It wouldn't be sensible for Ofsted to be prescriptive about what we expect to find, but we'll want to see solutions that are making a difference.

So - if leadership and headship is so important, especially in an increasingly autonomous system, does it receive the necessary level of support? Do heads and school leaders have the legitimacy to manage in a way their colleagues in other professions do? How many teachers not only grumble about their managers' decisions (which is natural) but also question their right even to make them?

This is partly historical. In the past, some local authorities not only didn't care about installing good heads, they actively undermined them if they offended vested interests. This was certainly the case in the disastrous decades of the 70s and 80s.

Even today, too many teachers still think that school leaders do not have the right to tell them how to teach or what to do. The staff room, in their minds, is just as capable of deciding the direction a school should take as the senior leadership team.

Now, I accept that some SLTs are not as good as they could be. I accept that too many implement the latest management gobbledygook without thinking things through. But I've come to the conclusion that many of their efforts are undermined by a pervasive resentment of all things managerial.

Some teachers simply will not accept that a school isn't a collective but an organisation with clear hierarchies and separate duties. While it's true that we all share a common purpose, our responsibilities are not the same.

What's worse, far too many school leaders seem to believe that they don't have a right to manage, either. They worry constantly about staff reaction. They hold endless meetings to curry favour. They seem to think they cannot act without their employees' approval.

Yes, you should consult with staff. Yes, you should explain. But never confuse consultation with negotiation. We must take the staff with us at all costs, the misguided say. No, you mustn't. Not if it means leaving the children behind.

The challenge for the future is finding heads that can confront these obstacles and overcome them.

Ultimately, though, I think we can be optimistic. Nationally, schools now are improving at a rate unprecedented in Ofsted's history. And we have the best new generation of teachers coming into our classrooms.

If the National College can identify and nurture this potential, we can be confident of having great school leaders in the years to come.

If there is one final lesson I would give leaders and aspiring leaders it is this: be careful, be vigilant, and never be complacent.

A lifetime of hard work can be undone very quickly. To build a successful school takes a leader years, and to destroy, as Winston also said, can be the thoughtless act of a single day.

Thank you.