

## **Legitimation, performativity and the tyranny of a “hijacked” word.**

Outstanding education is a high level policy narrative in England rehearsed by school leaders, politicians, policy makers and inspectors alike. Lyotard’s (1979) work on the ‘legitimacy’ of knowledge and performativity, and Foucauldian discourse-based analysis (1972, 1991), are mobilised to examine outstanding. The paper explores how informants in the English state secondary education sector described and experienced outstanding. From examining policy documents and empirical data, the paper suggests that outstanding has become a performative tool “hijacked” by inspection regimes. It concludes that, despite the informants’ best efforts, the neo-liberal and performative policy discourses which surround outstanding appear to increasingly wield a disproportionate, even tyrannical, influence upon the English education system.

Keywords: outstanding; knowledge; legitimacy; performativity; inspection; judgment.

### **Introduction**

Stephen Ball (2015, 299) described a ‘tyranny of numbers’ and suggested that ‘numbers define our worth, measure our effectiveness and, in a myriad of other ways, work to inform or construct what we are today’. Whist concurring with Ball’s position, rather than focussing on numbers this paper instead examines what might be called the tyranny of words, and the tyranny of one word in particular, ‘outstanding’.

The paper investigates what outstanding means to informants in an English state education sector school. In doing so, the colonisation of outstanding by performativity (Lyotard, 1979), neo-liberal policy, and discourses of accountability are discussed. The relational nature of outstanding is examined, and how outstanding acts as a signifier within wider structures, practices as well as the manifestations of outstanding as discourse (Foucault, 1972, 1991). This is an approach which reveals power relationships of dominance, obedience, panoptic surveillance (Foucault, 1977) and the correspondence

between outstanding as policy, as discourse, and as structure (see Taylor, 2004; Nicoll *et al*, 2013; Thomson *et al*, 2013).

Key to understanding the policy environment in which it is set, the paper mobilises a distinction between outstanding and outstandingness. ‘Outstanding’ refers to the descriptors employed by the *Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills* (OfSTED) to signal outstanding schools, and outstanding teaching. Outstanding also relates to the myriad of policy discourses rehearsed by successive UK governments which have been directed to school improvement agendas. In contrast, ‘outstandingness’ refers to the emotional and ephemeral traits such as trust, empathy, respect and meaningful professional relationships which the informants in this study highlighted as integral to ‘exceptional’ practice.

It is important to outline that this paper is not critical of those wanting the English education system to be outstanding. The opposite is the case. The focus is upon what appears to be an overreliance on performative measures and conditions - where teachers are merely ‘facilitators’ who ‘deliver’ learning (see Bietsa, 2010; 2012) - which are used to define outstanding, and ignore outstandingness, in English schools.

### **Inspection in the English education system**

The English inspection framework is a confusing one, with the latest of a number of significant changes being introduced in September 2015. Consequently, for those not familiar with the framework, it is appropriate to map out some of the significant inspection policy directives instigated over the last 10 years.

OfSTED inspections are presently conducted under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 amended in 2012. The 2005 act signalled a host of change to the inspection framework with the most significant perhaps being the introduction of ‘short notice inspections’. These inspections gave only two days’ notice in contrast to the previous two

months<sup>1</sup>. Additionally the 2005 Act required schools should complete and update a *School Evaluation Form* (SEF) which outlined and evidenced its strengths and weaknesses (see OfSTED, 2011). The 2012 amendments required inspectors to be provided an even greater range and detail of information (OfSTED, 2014).

From 2012, schools were graded as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate. Within the inadequate ranking, schools could have serious weaknesses or require special measures. The differences in these rankings are high stakes as they impact upon the frequency, and extent, of subsequent inspections. These grades also lead to the school's 'overall effectiveness' (OfSTED, 2012, 17) which is obtained through inspecting four areas:

- student achievement
- quality of teaching
- pupil behaviour and safety
- quality of leadership and management

Schools which graded as having serious weaknesses or those put into special measures face a raft of further inspections and, if improvement is not made, reorganisation and ultimately closure (OfSTED, 2012). This level of examination was in contrast to schools ranked outstanding, which would be inspected within five years of the end of the school year in which its last inspection took place.

In September 2015, the Act was further amended (OfSTED, 2015b) so as to include a *Common Inspection Framework* (CIF) which applied to early year's provision,

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<sup>1</sup> Under the 2012 amendments, schools are usually informed by telephone on the afternoon of the working day prior to the inspection.

schools and Further Education and Skills (FE) colleges. The 2015 CIF outlined how, what were called ‘short inspections’ for schools and FE that were judged good at their last full inspection, would be conducted approximately every three years. The September 2015 amendments also resulted in significant changes to OfSTED’s inspection workforce. It is also worth noting that as well as changes to the inspection system, state funded schools in England can also follow a range of governance, pay and organisational models (see Table 1).

## Table 1 Here

Table 1. Governance, pay and organisational models

### **Contextualising outstanding**

The drive for outstanding education is not a new phenomenon. In the 1880’s, the Board responsible for schools in the English city of Liverpool highlighted that no matter the support given, or experience attained, could ‘a person of poor ability’ develop into what they called ‘a first rate teacher’ (Liverpool School Board, 1881). Fast forward over 100 years, and ‘first rate’ has been supplanted by outstanding, the stated goal of an increasingly neo-liberal, marketised and performative education system (see Ball, 2003).

The use of outstanding has been high profile in the education policy narrative of successive United Kingdom governments. In June 2015 (no page), the then Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan hailed that ‘there are a record numbers of children in good or outstanding schools’. Similarly, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010-2015 published *The Importance of Teaching, the Schools White Paper*. In this document, it outlined how the white paper would lead to the employment

of outstanding schools and practitioners in teacher education programmes as part of the drive to raise standards in state education.

In 2012, the coalition instigated the House of Commons Education Committee (CESC) inquiry *Great Teachers: Attracting, Training and Retaining the Best*. Part of this inquiry was to examine the impact and definition of outstanding teaching and highlighted that:

...the impact of a good or outstanding teacher, compared with a mediocre or poor one, is both tangible and dramatic...having an 'excellent' teacher compared with a 'bad' one can mean an increase of more than one GCSE grade per pupil per subject. (CESC, 2012, 14)

In 2014 Michael Gove, Nicky Morgan's predecessor as Secretary of State for Education, spoke of his 'personal crusade' to close the educational gap between rich and poor students in England. Central to Gove's argument was the need for higher standards and the position of schools rated as 'outstanding' in raising these standards:

Eight hundred thousand more pupils are now being taught in schools ranked good or outstanding by independent inspectors compared to 2010 - and around 50 of those schools didn't even exist 4 years ago. (Gove, 2014, no page)

Implicit and explicit in these discourses, is how outstanding has been used to both defend and champion educational policy initiatives such as academies, free schools and teaching schools. For example, in 2013, the Department for Education (DfE, no page) indicated that 'three-quarters of free schools [were] rated good or outstanding by OfSTED at first inspection'. On closer inspection however, only 4 out of the 24 free schools were rated outstanding at this time with 5 rated requiring improvement and 1 inadequate.

Correspondingly, an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* (Exley, 2014, no page) quoted Sir Michael Wilshaw, OfSTED's Chief Inspector, who claimed that "...if

you talked to outstanding heads... they enjoy inspectors coming". The claim that head teachers of schools ranked outstanding enjoyed the process of inspection caused significant debate in forums such as the *National Association for Head Teachers* (NAHT). In late 2014 Russell Hobby, the NAHT General Secretary, stated that 'OfSTED shouldn't decide which schools are outstanding. Teachers should'. Moreover, Ward (2015, no page) reported how the head teacher of an outstanding school suggested that the outstanding OfSTED grade created a "false impression" about school quality whilst having a disproportionate influence upon the education system.

Wrapped up in the discourse about outstanding therefore is the narrative of proof. The ranking of education as outstanding relies upon, as Gove (2014, no page) said, 'rigorous evidence' which rejects the 'faddish adherence to quack theories'. The other side of the rigorous evidence coin however is the 'datafication' of education (Roberts-Holmes, 2014, 302) where teacher's work is increasingly constrained by 'performative demands to produce appropriate data'.

### **Legitimation and performativity, power and discourse**

The paper employs three elements to analyse outstanding through examining (a) which knowledge is 'legitimate' when evidencing outstanding (b) the role of outstanding as a performative technology and (c) the discourses of outstanding.

For the first of these elements, the paper mobilises what Lyotard (1979) described as the 'legitimacy' of knowledge and the pragmatics of narrative (18) and scientific (23) knowledge. From examining policy discourse - such as those rehearsed prominently by successive Secretaries of State for Education for example - outstanding appears to be located within scientific rather than narrative knowledge. **When considering outstanding therefore, the relationship between the 'truth' of outstanding practice and the pragmatics of scientific and narrative knowledge becomes key. Whilst accepting that, as Foucault**

(1972, 118) suggests, truths are ‘...produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false’, the paper seeks to tease out how outstanding is increasingly broached in terms of ‘hard’, ‘true’ scientific knowledge.

Examining the legitimisation of knowledge highlights the distinction between the pragmatics of narrative and scientific knowledge with the later leading to the de-legitimisation of the former. For Lyotard (xxiii) such de-legitimisation stems from the conflict between the two forms:

...science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables.

Narrative knowledge is a ‘traditional knowledge’ (19) which make no attempts to be legitimised, other than in the moment itself, as it is ‘critical, reflective and hermeneutic’ (14). The pragmatics of narrative knowledge are located within culture and as a result are ‘legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do’ (23).

For Lyotard, there is no need for the scientific, and therefore legitimised, proving of narrative knowledge as there is no need for narrative knowledge to be proved. Lyotard stresses however that narrative knowledge is not superior to scientific knowledge, ‘I do not mean that narrative knowledge can prevail over science’ (1979, 7). The crucial point in the legitimisation of knowledge, is that both the scientific and narrative act to balance out what is understood. The hermeneutic and reflective elements of narrative knowledge have as significant a part to play as that of scientific knowledge when attempting to understand the world.

Narrative knowledge is in stark contrast to hard, ‘truthful’ and legitimised ‘scientific knowledge’. In scientific knowledge, only knowledge that has been legitimised - through the scientific method of experimentation, repeatability and generalisations - is legitimate. Central to the legitimisation of scientific knowledge is Lyotard’s (1979, 8) claim

‘that scientific and technical knowledge...is never questioned’. Scientific knowledge is built upon ‘conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification’ (8) which is the proof of its legitimacy and status.

From considering the policy discourses of inspection, performance and outstanding rehearsed over the last 10 years, it seems clear that they are located within the pragmatics of scientific knowledge. The narrative of outstanding practice neither feature in the inspectorates criteria for the outstanding ranking, nor in policy discourses of successive governments. Consequently, Lyotard’s plea that both the scientific and narrative need to be examined, understood - and perhaps most importantly valued - has been uniformly ignored.

Examining the legitimation of knowledge leads to the second area of analysis, ‘performativity’ (Lyotard, 1979, Ball, 1997; 2001, 2003). Performative systems require quantifiable scientific knowledge (which is highly valued) over unquantifiable (and therefore of little value) narrative knowledge. Performativity is the ‘optimisation of the global relationship between input and output’ (11) and requires the implementation of measurable indicators or regulatory mechanisms. Such mechanisms are necessary due to the constant ‘self-adjustments the system undertakes in order to improve its performance’ (15). It is the global relationship between what is input into a system, and what the system outputs, which requires hard facts, objective evidence and the ‘truth’ of scientific statistical analysis.

It is the hard evidence of scientific knowledge, which underpin the regulatory mechanisms fundamental to performativity (Lyotard, 1979). Lyotard highlights that so as to hold those within performative systems accountable, metrics are used to represent the efficiency of production against benchmarks and competitors. In performativity, disciplinary and transformative elements lead external regulatory systems such as

inspection to be embedded in the practice of those within the organisation (Perryman, 2009).

The ensuing cross-over between regulatory mechanism and surveillance signals the 'fit' between Lyotard's work and that of Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). For Foucault, the Panopticon prison design is a powerful metaphor for the constant surveillance of those in prisons, schools, factories and hospital, and ultimately, of society itself. Consequently, self-regulation - and surveillance of the self, by the self - are as much a part of performativity as external regulation. Indeed, performative self-regulation has given rise to what Perryman (2006) calls panoptic performativity.

Within performativity, success is evidenced by conforming to the ways in which 'others' - inspectors, governors, government and the market - define such success (see also Ball, 2003). Self-regulatory measures, support the dominant neo-liberal system of production as they supply it with the 'increased performativity it forever demands and consumes' (Lyotard, 1979, 15). In practice, the self-regulation inherent in panoptic performativity means that the inspector is present even when not physically present. Regulatory measures such as mock inspections, or 'mocksteads' (XXXX), have become increasingly prevalent as schools aim to be 'inspection ready'.

The final analytical lens is that of the discourse of outstanding. So as to address the limitations of a solely political and policy analysis - which focusses upon the contest between the 'accuracy' of different actors' word-world alignments (see Foucault, 1991) - the paper examine the relational meaning of outstanding and outstandingness. Underlying this discourse-based approach is recognition that meaning is relational. The meaning of outstanding and outstandingness are derived from relations between signifiers like 'outstanding', 'good' and 'satisfactory'. This relational meaning is in contrast to that

which derives from the correspondences between the word as a signifier and the world as signified. For Foucault, (1980, 118):

...the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false.

Consequently, rather than solely framing outstanding and outstandingness in terms of which is more 'true', the paper develops a relational understanding of how these terms play, and are played, out for the informants.

### **Positioning outstanding**

The introduction highlighted how for this paper makes a distinction between outstanding and outstandingness (Table 2). Such a distinction however raises fundamental questions regarding the philosophical framework upon which it has been made.

## **Table 2 Here**

Table 2. Outstanding/outstandingness

The distinction between outstanding and outstandingness examines how actors mobilised these terms and their views as to the differences and similarities between the two. The thrust therefore, was to explore the relationship between outstanding and outstandingness as concept and discourse and the social reality which they reflect and, or, construct.

Making such a distinction does of course suggest that there is some notion of outstandingness, in terms of social reality and social practice that the term, outstanding ought, but fails, to capture. This approach raise the problem therefore, that what underpins

OFSTED's use of the term outstanding is too narrow and too 'scientific'. This is borne out in the informants' comments which suggest that, at least when directed toward OfSTED's definition, outstanding does reference some determinate objective reality, even if they struggled to name that reality.

The difficulty in 'pinning down' what constitutes outstandingness leads to further questions which interrogate how outstanding is mobilised. For example, the relative nature of the term (outstanding in relation to the non-outstanding majority), precludes a situation where all schools were judged outstanding and in doing so renders such a universal judgement as meaningless. However, as Bietsa (2012; 2014) illustrates, education has increasingly been seen in terms of achievement and control of which comparative judgements have become the norm.

Crucially, outstanding does not derive its meaning from its relationship to a set of empirical behaviours and characteristics but from its distinctions in relation to other evaluative terms like 'good' and 'satisfactory'. This analysis highlights the underlying tensions between the normative/comparative and the (purportedly) merely descriptive dimensions of the term as a technology.

### **Methodology and analysis**

The project adopted the British Educational Research Associations (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines and all names of participants and organisations are pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The paper considers two questions:

- How do outstanding and outstandingness play out for different policy actors?
- What is legitimate knowledge when considering outstanding and outstandingness for different policy actors?

The setting for the project was Silvertree School, a state funded secondary community school serving students from a city in the East Midlands of England<sup>2</sup>. Silvertree School was one of a number of schools which were given the opportunity to bid for a funded small scale research project which supported practitioners to develop action research projects. In this case, Shelly a member of the school's *Senior Leadership Team* (SLT), was successful in her bid application. Shelly wanted to examine what constituted outstanding practice and particularly what she felt was an integral part of such practice, that is, the 'buzz' in successful classrooms. Interviews were conducted with  $n = 20$  students (15 year 9 and 5 year 10)  $n = 3$  teachers;  $n = 3$  support staff;  $n = 1$  teaching assistant;  $n = 3$  senior leaders and  $n = 1$  governor.

Grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of interview and documents and a Foucauldian (1972, 1991) analysis of policy discourses was employed. Grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) mediated open coding (Charmaz, 1983) of documents and interview transcripts which were analysed for concepts which were then grouped to form categories.

Discourse analysis developed an understanding of what was, and was not, possible to be expressed and revealed the production and reproduction of power relationships. Examining discourses in this way highlights how power circulates through society and, although hierarchical, is not purely top-down (see Foucault, 2007). Analysing discourse reveals the relationships between power and meaning-making imbued in discourses (Thomson *et al*, 2013). In doing so, meanings that are taken to be 'true' can be juxtaposed with those meanings which appear to have become marginalised (Foucault, 1981).

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<sup>2</sup> Silvertree School was rated as 'outstanding' by OfSTED at the time of writing this paper.

Through this dual analysis, concepts and categories were identified which revealed the prominent discourse and policy narratives in the data - see Table. 3. Due to space restriction only two of these categories will be explored here:

- The buzz - practice outside the scope of techno-rationalist evaluative models
- A word hijacked – what education has been reduced to

## TABLE 3 HERE

Table 3. Grounded theory/discourse analysis categories

The following commentary is split into two sections. In the first, documentary evidence from OfSTED is considered. In the second, interview data is presented which relate to the two categories which the paper focusses upon.

### **OfSTED and outstanding**

OfSTED has been a significant contributor to the standards agenda which ranks outstanding practice. For example, OfSTED provides documents which give guidance and outline the inspection process to schools, parents, governor and inspectors. The most high-profile, and high-stakes, application of outstanding by OfSTED is as one of its inspection judgements. In the *School Inspection handbook*, OfSTED (2015a), the 7 grade descriptors upon which a school is judged are indicated:

1. Overall effectiveness: the quality of education provided in the school
2. Quality of leadership in and management of the school
3. The behaviour and safety of pupils at the school
4. Quality of teaching in the school

5. Achievement of pupils at the school
6. Effectiveness of the early years provision: the quality and standards
7. Effectiveness of sixth form provision: the quality of education provided in the post-16 study programmes. (OfSTED, 2015a, 3)

OfSTED highlights that these descriptors ‘should not be used as a checklist’ and must be adopted as a ‘bet fit approach that relies on the professional judgement of the inspection team’ (2015a, 38). However, it is also stressed that there is an exception to this as ‘teaching must be outstanding for overall effectiveness to be outstanding’ (38).<sup>3</sup>

When considering outstanding practice in the classroom of particular interest is OfSTED’s descriptor 4 ‘quality of teaching in the school’ (see Table. 4).

# Table. 4 here

Table. 4. OfSTED’s descriptor for outstanding ‘quality of teaching in the school’

As illustrated in Table 4, for a school to be ranked outstanding, OfSTED (2015a) highlights 7 elements which map to outstanding teaching:

- Sustained progress
- High expectations
- Check understanding
- Highly effective teaching of reading, writing and mathematics

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<sup>3</sup> From September 2014, OfSTED no longer grades individual lessons.

- Knowledge is authoritatively imparted
- Marking for significant and sustained gains in learning
- Teaching strategies match pupils' needs

Although OfSTED clearly suggest that these descriptors reflect much of what happens in outstanding it could be argued there are some notable omissions. For example, there is no acknowledgment of the importance of relationships, trust, respect or empathy. Nor is there specific guidance as to what 'sustained progress that leads to outstanding achievement' (OfSTED, 2015a, 38) means.

### **Informants and outstanding**

When considering the informants' data, the two final categories presented in Table 3 are explored as they exemplify (a) the differences between outstanding and outstandingness and (b) the consequences of policy decisions which overly focus on performative measures.

### **The buzz - practice outside the scope of techno-rationalist evaluative models**

Prominent in the data was that outstandingness was described as having a "buzz", however, drilling down into what the buzz meant was problematic:

I feel it, see it, and know it when it's there. All the same, it's still mystical to me.  
(Shaida, governor)

This notion of outstandingness being mystical was rehearsed by other informants. Kevin, a Teaching Assistant, discussed the "x Factor" and this was echoed by Mrs Peters, a parent, who spoke of how an outstanding teacher "...has charisma, let's be honest they're born and not made" (see, Scott and Dinham, 2008). Outstandingness was also described as aspirational. Paddy, a member of premises staff, suggested that:

Good is something you can settle for day-to-day. And there's nothing wrong with that...But outstanding is something you are constantly trying to achieve but it's not always possible to achieve. I meant that's what the word means doesn't it...standing out from the rest. (Paddy, premises staff)

Informants spoke of how hard it was to pinpoint what were the elements that took good to outstanding, although both outstanding and outstandingness were not short term achievements.

Conspicuous in the data was the importance of behaviour and outstanding. For the students there was a strong association between behaviour, safety and both outstanding and outstandingness. Similarly, adult informants rehearsed how a safe atmosphere based on respect was crucial to both outstanding and outstandingness. Indeed, without good relationships leading to excellent levels of behaviour, both were seen as impossible to attain no matter how strong teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical approaches might be.

It is important to give some context here. Many of the students interviewed for this project regularly exhibited challenging behaviour and came from often chaotic home lives. However, every student interviewed spoke of how both outstanding and outstandingness trod a fine line between being "too strict", and as Corey a year 9 student said, "being strict but not". Discipline was a key, however, this was not simply enforcing the rules:

Some of our young people have it really tough. Shouting achieves nothing...nor does always enforcing every rule. Being outstanding...it's about knowing the situation and that comes from hard work and relationships. (Kevin, teacher)

Like Corey, many other students were clear that outstanding and outstandingness were based on knowledge, respect, inclusion and the importance of "being nice to each

other and allowing everyone's opinion" (Ailsa, Year 9). This was echoed by Sandra, who painted a vivid picture of her view of outstanding discipline:

Well its total control. What I mean is that an outstanding teacher doesn't have to shout...just a look is enough. And it's not about fear. It's about students respecting teachers, and the other way around. I'm in my late 50's and my school was all about a clip around the ear. That doesn't work anymore. Some of our kids have it really, really tough and being physically imposing is nothing they don't have to deal with day in and day out...outstanding is all about showing that you care. (Sandra, administrator)

However as strongly as discipline emerged from the data so also did the importance of fun:

Outstanding is about having a laugh, enjoying what you're doing...having fun. Miss Elton's a good example, we all enjoy her lessons, and if you enjoy it you're more likely to remember stuff. (Kyle, yr 9)

Kyle's thoughts were almost exactly rehearsed by Sandy:

I know when I've had an outstanding session as everyone's smiling including me. Outstanding is about learners enjoying what they're doing, having a laugh but knowing where the lines are. (Sandy, teacher)

There was a significant difference however between the child and adult data in relation to fun, which was the role of challenge. All of the students interviewed rehearsed that for a lesson to be outstanding they felt that they had to make progress, and the majority felt that they needed to improve their attainment in some way. This was different from adult informants such as Grace who reported that "getting things wrong and learning from failing" was a crucial part of both outstanding and outstandingness. As Grace continued:

Being outstanding is about risk taking. We learn so much from getting things wrong...but everyone's under so much pressure to show how attainment is being improved...no one has the time, or wants to take the risk, of letting the kids get stuff wrong and learning from it. It's great when leaning is fun...but sometimes it's really hard. (Grace, support staff)

For Grace, part of the buzz in the outstanding classroom came from students getting things wrong and teachers having the confidence in their abilities to be able to support their students through this process. Many informants maintained that whilst working with failure was a fundamental part of learning, and integral to a lesson with buzz, the pressures teachers faced in relation to covering content increasingly left little opportunity for their students to 'get it wrong' in lessons.

### **A word hijacked – what is education for, and been reduced to**

The second category that emerged from the data was how outstanding had been hijacked by performative, regulatory and inspection facing discourses. It is important to highlight here that none of the students used the word hijacked in relation to outstanding. However, the narrative of their data was that they used the word outstanding very much in relation to inspection discourses. During the interviews, all of the students at some point rehearsed terms such as 'progress'; 'attainment'; 'outcomes'; 'levels'; 'inspectors'.

Whilst it could be argued that this evidence does not necessarily map to claims that outstanding has become hijacked, the use of such inspection facing performative terms by the children was of interest. Especially, as many of the adult informants felt so strongly that outstanding as a performative tool had become increasingly a major part of what directed their work whilst also reflecting a fundamental shift in the purpose of what they did - what Bietsa (2014, 124) describes as the 'un-educational ways of thinking about education' influencing macro-scale educational policy .

In spite of OfSTED no longer rating individual lessons, and by extension individual teachers, a prominent discourse was that there were ‘outstanding’ teachers and lessons and this was linked firmly to be inspection. For example, a number of students rehearsed that an outstanding teacher was one that the inspectors had also confirmed to be outstanding:

Mr Tyler is a brilliant math’s teacher...I love how he teachers me. He always does well in inspections. (Keisha, student)

Allied to the ingrained inspection discourses and structures was the importance of grades. The student data had strong elements which highlighted that, in their view, for a teacher to be outstanding there had to be an impact on attainment. This focus on attainment was different to the staff data:

To be outstanding is working with a student who has really low esteem, low confidence and getting them an award...that doesn’t mean a high award and it could mean the lowest pass available. But that’s an outstanding achievement for both student and teacher...as far as the inspectors are concerned it’s still the lowest grade though. (Cindy, teacher)

The student data focus on attainment might be a result of confusion between the terms ‘progress’ and ‘attainment’. However, students confidently, and accurately, highlighted the differences between the two when asked. Overwhelmingly for the students an outstanding lesson, and an outstanding teacher, resulted in “getting higher grades” (Yasmin, yr10).

When asked to develop this point one student, Casey, spoke of how the drive for outstanding in terms of OfSTED rankings was omnipresent in his school day:

...if you look around the place there are all these posters about this being an outstanding school, and how to get the highest marks. And the teachers talk about what we need to do to get our next level and stuff and that the school needs to be

outstanding in the next inspection. This is a really good school and I really like it. But..., well, it's like everything's got to be outstanding all the time. Even the dinners are outstanding! (Casey, year 9)

Like Casey, Kelly a year 9 student, rehearsed how outstanding had become a constant requirement, a requirement which for her seemed to be incoherent: "isn't outstanding about standing out...so how can you always be outstanding"?

The student data which related to how outstanding had become embedded in their day resonated with a similar, and prominent, element in the adults' data. For teachers, parents and governors alike the term outstanding was more than a word. The drive for an outstanding education system rehearsed in policy statements such as those considered earlier in the paper was one which participants felt was increasingly high stakes.

What emerged from interviews was how the term outstanding was a loaded term and one which was specifically related to inspection. As the title of the paper suggests, the word outstanding seemed to have been hijacked by inspection processes. The notion of a hijacked word resonated with other informants:

Outstanding is all about OFSTED (Neal, support teacher)

I want my son to go to an outstanding school. But really it's all about how the government want it's polices to be seen as successful. Outstanding is about the politicians more than the kids (Tracey, parent)

It's crazy to say a school's outstanding because that sort of says it's always outstanding...that doesn't make sense. Things go wrong all the time, (Kimi, dinner lady)

What these comments had in common was how outstanding was a no longer used other than in the very specific context of inspection. This is not to say that the informants would use the word outstanding lightly. However, there was a sense that outstanding had

increasingly become part of the enactment (Ball *et al*, 2012) of policy, as well as a high level narrative for both the inspectorate and government.

## **Discussion**

This paper examines both outstanding and outstandingness in relation to documentary evidence and empirical data. From this process there seems to be one headline finding, that is, outstanding (although not outstandingness) is a high profile and high stakes policy narrative for students, teachers, support staff, parents, managers and governors. This in itself is important to consider. The data could have suggested that, at least in the cases reported here, outstanding was not a prominent part of day-to-day occurrences. Overwhelmingly, this was not the case.

What was most the stark finding perhaps, were the differences between OfSTED's definitions of outstanding and the informants' definitions of outstandingness. Before examining these differences, it is important to stress that there were many similarities. For example, one area of agreement was the importance of discipline. For OfSTED, outstanding school practitioners 'authoritatively impart knowledge' (2015a, 38) - statements which were, in principle, supported by informants' data. However despite these similarities, OfSTED definitions failed to recognise what informants rehearsed were the crucial emotional parts discipline played in outstandingness:

- Relationships
- Respect
- Humanity
- Fairness
- Consistency

The first of these, relationships, perhaps perfectly reflected the difference between the

informants' data and OfSTED's descriptors. Relationships do not feature at any point in the school descriptors which raises questions as to why this is the case; a question which will be returned to later.

The paper focussed on two categories which emerged from the data - 'buzz' and the hijacking of the word outstanding. Describing a lesson with a 'buzz' would be familiar to those who have taught. As the informants reported, the buzz is almost tangible, the atmosphere in the room crackling with energy and concentration. The outstanding lesson has buzz, so to the outstanding teacher.

What the buzz does seem to consist of is a complex set of interrelated emotional conditions and events. These conditions and events can be replicable and transferable but not always so. The more experienced teacher might recognise the particular mix of conditions necessary for achieving the buzz with a particular student, or group of students, at a particular time. This is no guarantee however that the buzz will occur. Nor are there any guarantees that the mix of conditions successful with group A will also be successful with group B.

The difficulties in trying to 'pin down' the elements of the buzz poses a significant challenge if one is trying to develop a coherent and replicable policy leading towards increasing outstanding rankings. Of course, a fundamental question therefore asks if an outstanding lesson always has the buzz. The scope of this project cannot answer this. However, even if the buzz could be successfully identified the lack of any acknowledgment in the descriptors highlight that it is not part of OfSTED's remit.

The parameters, and power, of inspection lead to the second concept explored here. Much of the informants' data, explicitly or implicitly, appeared to relate to outstanding being hijacked by OfSTED. What emerged from the data was how the discourses rehearsed around outstanding related to inspection. Whether the informant was

a year 9 pupil or a chair of governors the same process occurred in the interview. Firstly, the discussion would focus on what might be called the 'hard' traits of outstanding - consistent high attainment; measurable progress over time; high test scores; low absences and lateness; little or no discipline issues - all of which could be measured. Secondly, and it must be stressed without prompting, informants then spoke of the 'soft' emotional traits of outstandingness - smiling; fun; enjoyment; excitement; respect and relationships - which were far more difficult to measure.

The distinctions between the two were unambiguous with the result that there was an inherent tension in what outstanding meant. On one hand the hard metrics of accountability, on the other the soft, ephemeral and emotional. Earlier in this section the question rose which asked why relationships, and indeed all the emotional concepts which emerged from the data, were absent from the inspectorate's descriptors of outstanding. It is here, that the paper returns to the legitimisation of knowledge.

From a Lyotardian perspective, the quality and understanding of relationships are examples of narrative rather than scientific knowledge. The legitimisation of outstanding, at least in relation to OfSTED, is overwhelmingly evidenced through scientific rather than narrative knowledge. The result therefore is that soft, emotional, narrative data such as that of relationships are simply ignored in OfSTED's description of outstanding. This does not apply only to relationships of course, as all that falls outside of scientific knowledge is de-legitimised and therefore not considered.

Again, it is important to stress that Lyotard does not advocate a hierarchy between narrative and scientific knowledge. What he does advocate is that these are two different types of knowledge are applicable to different ways of understanding events. What this paper suggests is that outstanding has been reduced to a set of criteria which could be

measured, not because this was the best way of understanding outstanding, but because it was the easiest. In doing so, fundamental elements of outstandingness were missed.

For Lyotard, narrative knowledge is 'critical, reflective and hermeneutic' (1979, 14). The issue for an education system which is attempting to embed outstanding through performative tools such as inspection is that the critical, reflective and hermeneutic are difficult to quantify and therefore legitimise. Moreover, elements of narrative knowledge such as these do not fit into the model of scientific and technical knowledge built upon 'conditions of internal consistency and experimental verification' (Lyotard, 1979, 8).

Central to Lyotard's thesis is how performativity has had a fundamental impact upon the legitimisation of knowledge. In performative terms, to categorise a teacher as outstanding it is necessary to give a score which relates to the attainment of pupils she has taught on a test for example. Again in performative terms, this is a highly valued relationship - the higher the grades attained the better the teacher. What is much harder is giving a score as to the relationships between her and her students, or the fun had, or the trust exhibited.

The legitimisation of scientific knowledge is a fundamental part of performativity. Measurements of outstanding based on scientific knowledge become part of the regulatory mechanisms which Lyotard (1979, 15) maintains underpins the constant 'self-adjustments the system undertakes in order to improve its performance'. As outstanding becomes increasingly justified by scientific knowledge it becomes a regulatory and, crucially, self-regulatory performative mechanism.

There is one final point to be made. Clearly outstanding is a value judgement. The act of describing something, or someone, as outstanding is to give an elevated status and this was clearly rehearsed by the informants. Not one person interviewed suggested that

there should not be inspections. Not one person suggested that outstanding should not be aspirational. Not one person suggested that every student should have access to outstanding learning and teaching. The difficulties arose when informants were asked to define what outstanding actually was.

## **Conclusion**

This paper suggests that ‘outstandingness’ signifies the ‘real-world’ qualities which outstanding ought, but in many ways fails, to reflect. However, this hypothesis, has to be considered via the deep-seated analysis required to understand both the policy and discourse of outstanding. As Ball (2013) highlights, discourse analysis examines the structures and rules which constitute a discourse as opposed to those texts and utterances which it produces. Consequently, it is necessary to return to the two research questions which asked:

- How do outstanding and outstandingness play out for different policy actors?
- What is legitimate knowledge when considering outstanding and outstandingness for different policy actors?

It is perhaps best to answer the first of these last. The data reported here indicates that scientific knowledge was the legitimate form with regard to outstanding although not outstandingness. Indeed, from this analysis it could be argued that narrative knowledge had little or no place in outstanding. This, despite the importance of narrative knowledge in understanding outstandingness.

From a policy viewpoint, it could be maintained that there need to be some sort of empirical understanding as to what outstanding is. Consequently, there must be some sympathy given for policy makers trying to identify conditions which can lead to outstanding. However, if it is proving so difficult to identify outstanding then why bother?

The high stakes policy discourses examined at the start of this paper answers this question. As long as it remains politically expedient to do so politicians, and policy, will focus on outstanding.

These considerations of performativity and legitimation lead us to the final question - how are outstanding and outstandingness defined? The answer to this appears to be with some difficulty. OfSTED's descriptors of outstanding cover a lot of 'common sense' ground and reflected much of what the participants rehearsed. However, the crucial emotional nuances of outstandingness were completely absent from the documentation. Lyotard's narrative knowledge was sadly lacking from the policy of outstanding.

So, has outstanding become a hijacked word? The cases reported here suggest that if not hijacked then certainly it was legitimatised by narrow descriptors that lent themselves to, relatively, easy assessment. **Ball highlights that discourse is the 'conditions under which certain statements are considered the truth' (2013, 19). The preeminent position of the 'truth' of scientific knowledge in evidencing almost every element of school life was brought into plain focus. What constituted outstanding practice was just one such example of this. As a result, outstanding had to increasingly be evidenced in crass, reductive and counter-productive ways. Outstanding was reduced to a binary true or false which fattened the very nuances which made outstanding practice outstanding.**

The legitimisation of scientific, and de-legitimation of narrative knowledge in relation to defining outstanding appeared inextricably linked to performativity. As Lyotard (1979, 46) points out 'the fact remains that since performativity increases the ability to produce proof, it also increases the ability to be right'. This is a central consideration. As outstanding is linked to high-stakes accountability, then the least policy makers and the inspectorate can be is confident as to exactly when practice is outstanding or not.

Performativity is about ‘clear minds and cold wills’ (Lyotard, 1979, 62). It is also about the ‘crisis of discourses’ (xxiii) inherent in the postmodern condition. It could be argued that outstanding perfectly illustrates such a crisis. On the one hand is the legitimization of outstanding through scientific knowledge. On the other, is the de-legitimation of the narrative knowledge which many of the informants rehearsed were integral to outstandingness.

There is one final point to be made here and it concerns etymology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2015, no page) defines outstanding as something ‘that stands out from the rest; noteworthy. Also: remarkable, exceptionally good’. This definition brings into question the drive for all schools, all teachers, all students and all learning to be outstanding. Grammatically this does not appear to make sense - if everyone is outstanding then what of those that fall below, or exceed, the criteria.

Putting aside the difficulties in defining what the word actually means, outstanding appears to be having an increasingly disproportionate, even tyrannical, influence upon the English education system. A tyranny, stemming from its hijacking as a performative technology, that appears to play out at both the macro level of national education policy as well as in the micro level relentless pursuit to become, or maintain, being heralded outstanding.

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