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## More Outstanding Nonsense: a critique of Ofsted criteria

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**ABSTRACT** The Office for Standards in Education's most recently published criteria for 'outstanding' teaching are scrutinised and found wanting. They are seen as unrealistic for teachers to meet and equally unrealistic as criteria for use by inspectors. An explanation is offered as to why they are framed as they are and an alternative, more realistic and meaningful way of categorising schools and reporting findings is outlined.

In a previous issue of *FORUM* (Volume 54, Number 2, 2012) I characterised the criteria of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) for 'outstanding' teaching as nonsensical. Consequent to that critique but not necessarily because of it, a subsequent revision of the inspection handbook removed or modified the most egregious of those criteria. However, two years on those salutary lessons appear to have been forgotten or ignored.

The latest version of *Inspecting Schools: handbook for inspectors*, published by Ofsted and dated January 2015, lists the following criteria for 'outstanding' teaching (p. 61):

*Outstanding (1)*

- Much teaching over time in all key stages and most subjects is outstanding and never less than consistently good. As a result, almost all pupils currently on roll in the school, including disabled pupils, those who have special educational needs, disadvantaged pupils and the most able, are making sustained progress that leads to outstanding achievement.
- All teachers have consistently high expectations of all pupils. They plan and teach lessons that enable pupils to learn exceptionally well across the curriculum.

- Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils’ understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with notable impact on the quality of learning.
- The teaching of reading, writing, communication and mathematics is highly effective and cohesively planned and implemented across the curriculum.
- Teachers and other adults authoritatively impart knowledge to ensure that pupils are engaged in learning and generate high levels of commitment to learning across the school.
- Consistently high quality marking and constructive feedback from teachers ensure that pupils make significant and sustained gains in their learning.
- Teachers use well-judged teaching strategies, including setting appropriate homework that, together with clearly directed and timely support and intervention, match pupils’ needs accurately.

Its criteria for ‘good’ teaching begin with:

*Good (2)*

- Teaching over time in most subjects, including English and mathematics, is consistently good. As a result, most pupils and groups of pupils on roll in the school, including disabled pupils, those who have special educational needs, disadvantaged pupils and the most able, make good progress and achieve well over time.

Echoing the pronouncements of the chief inspector, the handbook emphasises that ‘teaching must be outstanding for overall effectiveness to be outstanding’ (p. 38). At first sight that seems self-evidently ‘right’. Certainly many so-called ‘outstanding’ schools have gloried in that linkage and in the accompanying accolade accorded their teaching, but what if the criteria for outstanding teaching are fatally flawed? This would throw into question not just that linkage or the standing of those schools but the whole notion of what I call ‘outstandingness’ and with it Ofsted’s current way of categorising schools.

There are two aspects to this issue. How far is it possible for the teaching (and therefore teachers, however skilled and experienced) to meet the criteria for ‘outstanding’; and how far is it possible for inspectors, however skilled and experienced, to judge that these criteria are being met? I have severe doubts on both points.

Each one of Ofsted’s ‘outstanding’ criteria is problematic– albeit in different respects – but here I want to concentrate on the first three. In sharp contrast to Ofsted’s first criterion for ‘good’ teaching, where it is characterised as ‘consistently good’, the first criterion for ‘outstanding’ teaching begins, ‘Much teaching over time in all key stages and most subjects is outstanding and never less than consistently good’. Taken literally (and how else should it be taken?) this is less rigorous than the ‘good’ criterion since it implies that despite the overall ‘outstanding’ descriptor *some* teaching is not consistently good. But

maybe this apparent inconsistency is the result of sloppy drafting? In all probability the authors of the handbook meant to assert that 'much teaching ... is outstanding' and that '*all* teaching is never less than consistently good'. But if so, then two issues arise. How is it possible for the teaching (and the lessons that contribute massively to the judgement of that teaching) to be always at least 'good' with virtually no lessons or teaching that require improvement? And equally importantly, how could inspectors ever know that that is the case, given that they are in school for only one or two days, that they can observe teaching only over that period and that they cannot possibly know that it is always consistently good at other times?

The criterion continues: 'As a result almost all pupils ... are making sustained progress that leads to outstanding achievement'. But is it realistic for almost all pupils to make continuous progress with neither a pause nor a relapse? Are they forever highly motivated? Do none have 'off days or weeks'? Does real learning take place in this sustained, 'forever onward' fashion? Equally importantly, how would inspectors ever know of this sustained progress? How can they possibly examine all, or almost all, teachers' and pupils' records in 'most subjects' and how can they be sure that all the assessments made are valid and that almost all pupils' achievement is 'outstanding'? There are further problems. 'Achievement' is said to be 'outstanding', but in relation to what or whom? Is it achievement in all areas of school life or only in tested subjects? The first criterion for 'outstanding' teaching cannot be met – either by the teachers and pupils themselves or by inspectors.

The second criterion is equally problematic and unrealisable: 'All teachers have consistently high expectations of all pupils'. How realistic is it for every single teacher always to have high expectations for each and every one of their pupils, whatever the subject or subjects being taught and whenever during the school year (even the very start?) they're being taught? If taken literally (and if not, how is it to be taken?) it is an impossibility. It is equally impossible for an inspection team to be able to come up with a judgement supporting the achievement of that criterion. For it to be met, every single teacher, whether in a 20-, 200- or 2000-pupil school, would have to be observed a number of times in a variety of teaching situations, their expectations of each and every one of their pupils elicited and these then judged 'high' or otherwise by omniscient inspectors. It's a second example of 'outstanding' nonsense.

At first sight the third criterion seems possible – both to demonstrate and to inspect: 'Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils' understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with notable impact on the quality of learning'. However, closer examination raises a number of issues. Why the reference to both 'systematically' and 'effectively'? Wouldn't the latter suffice? Why the reference to 'throughout lessons' rather than 'in lessons'? Taken literally (and how else should it be taken?), doesn't it mean that that checking has to operate all the time, minute by minute? How could it? It's equally impossible for inspectors to judge the impact of teacher interventions on 'the quality of learning', if by 'learning' is meant

pupils' understanding rather than their observable behaviour. How can such understanding be detected, let alone be judged 'notable'? For that to be possible inspectors would have to know the nature and extent of pupils' understanding before and after the interventions and then make a judgement as to how significant that difference was. Again, it cannot be done.

Without going into detail, there are problems with the remaining four criteria for 'outstanding' teaching. For example, what does it mean for 'the teaching of reading, writing, communication' (whatever that is) 'and mathematics' to be '*cohesively* planned and implemented across the curriculum'? How within the limited time available could all subjects be inspected in sufficient depth for an inspection team to be able to judge whether the planning and implementation have this cohesive quality *across* the whole of the curriculum?

How can teachers engage in 'consistently high quality marking and constructive feedback' to 'ensure that pupils make significant and sustained gains in their learning'? Is it possible for teachers in any school to adhere invariably to such a high standard without any significant lapses? How could inspectors possibly know that they did, without close, very time-consuming examination of masses of written work? How could inspectors possibly know what constitutes 'significant and sustained gains' in pupils' learning without close knowledge of those particular pupils over a considerable period of time?

What is meant or implied by 'teachers and other adults authoritatively impart knowledge to ensure that pupils are engaged in learning and generate high levels of commitment to learning across the school'? Can teachers, let alone 'other adults' (whoever they are), be authorities on every aspect of every subject they teach? Why the use of 'authoritatively' instead of 'effectively'? Is pupil engagement only, or even mainly, secured through the authoritative imparting of knowledge? Are inspectors sufficiently knowledgeable in every subject or aspect they inspect to be able to recognise 'authoritativeness' if it's being exhibited. Doesn't the wording of this criterion imply one best method of securing engagement and commitment – the transmission of subject matter? Not surprisingly, but regrettably, this echoes the preoccupations (some would say 'prejudices') enshrined in recent chief-inspectorial speeches.

Lastly, how realistic is the criterion: 'Teachers use well-judged teaching strategies that ... match pupils' needs accurately'? It is probably realistic for 'good', as well as 'outstanding', teachers to be able to use well-judged strategies that meet pupils' 'needs' if these have been recognised as a result of close interaction with pupils over a considerable period of time. But even then it's difficult to know whether these needs are being met 'accurately' – a strange word to use in this context, as if needs can be stated precisely and unambiguously. What if inspectors and teachers disagree over the nature of those needs? How can inspectors as outsiders in a class for 30 minutes or in a school for two days possibly know what the needs of all, or most, pupils are and then be in a position to judge whether or not teachers are matching strategies to needs accurately? They cannot possibly do this.

Taken literally then, Ofsted's criteria for 'outstanding' teaching are impossible both to meet and to inspect. They are 'outstanding' nonsense. The criteria *do* embody teaching excellence but for a world which does not and cannot possibly exist. After all, everyone involved in education wants schools which have consistently high expectations for all, whose teaching is never less than good, whose teachers intervene with optimum effect on pupils' understanding, and whose marking ensures significant and sustained gains in pupils' learning. And so on for the other 'outstanding' criteria. However, taken literally (and how else should we take them?) the criteria on page 61 of the Ofsted handbook cannot be exhibited or judged by inspectors in any inspection, however good the school or the inspection. And no teacher or school or inspector could ever meet the impossibly high standards expected consistently day in, day out. It follows that no school's teaching can be 'outstanding' as judged by the seven criteria, and if outstanding effectiveness 'depends on outstanding teaching', as page 38 of the Ofsted handbook states, no school can possibly achieve that accolade of 'outstanding'.

This leaves the question of why Ofsted persists in asking the impossible both of teachers and of inspectors. I suspect that the answer lies mainly in the perceived necessity to distinguish between 'good' schools and 'outstanding' ones for the purposes of categorisation and reporting. A reasonable criterion for a 'good' school (e.g. 'Teachers have high expectations', or 'Reading, writing ... are taught effectively') becomes an unreasonable one for an 'outstanding' school ('All teachers have consistently high expectations of *all* pupils' or 'The teaching of reading ... is highly effective and cohesively planned and implemented across the curriculum').

This provides ammunition for those of us who argue that the current categorisation of schools should be abolished and replaced by one of only two overall judgements – whether a school is 'good enough' or 'not good enough' – backed up by engaging, readable reports without 'Ofsted speak' and offering rich, wide-ranging evidence of a qualitative kind, supplemented, but not dominated, by judicious, limited use of quantitative data. This would end the current obsession with obtaining an 'outstanding' judgement made in respect of dubious criteria – an obsession which threatens to undermine what is reasonable and possible in the pursuit of an unattainable perfection that in too many cases demoralises rather than motivates.

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