INSTRUCTION TO 'OUTPERFORM': EDUCATION POLICY AND THE ART OF MANAGING APPEARANCES

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Background

The Schools White Paper 2010 cast the relationship between schools in the language of 'outperformance'. Schools now became exhorted to outperforming the national average and each other. The White Paper identified 'greater freedoms' as the key to the success of outperforming schools, citing Swedish 'free schools' and American 'charter schools' as examples. This approach was presented as a reversal of New Labour's highly centralised education policy, evocatively articulated for the New Labour by Michael Barber (2008) as 'instruction to deliver'. Four years on, however, neither the 'greater freedoms' nor the vision of outperforming others seem to be of much benefit to the children who perform below average and are now commonly labelled as 'the tail' (Marshall 2013).

Research focus

This paper focuses on how headteachers and leadership teams negotiate the instruction to (out)perform and how they present the results of their effort for the view of school inspectors and other important 'spectators'.

Research methods

Two primary school case studies were designed to gather data on how the imperative to (out)perform is taken up by practitioners. Data collected through 27 interviews, observation and extensive documentary review were triangulated and analysed by applying critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), within the framework outlined below.

Theoretical framework

This paper turns to MacIntyre’s (1985) exposition of aesthetic and bureaucratic modes of practice and Goffman’s (1959) analysis of social encounters as dramatic performances. As typical characters of modernity, the aesthete and the bureaucratic manager present themselves as 'moral' representatives, whilst at the same time displacing truth with effectiveness (MacIntyre 1985) and glossing over conflicting interests with a 'veneer of consensus' (Goffman 1959, 21). In this context, the task of discourse analysis is that of unmasking the 'management of appearances' and other forms of artistry available to those in the roles of the manager or the politician (Fairclough 2003). Deep moral concerns underpinning the arguments of the three writers illuminate ethical dilemmas which may arise in schools as a result of the emphasis on (out)performance.

Research findings

The findings from the case studies revealed a range of responses to policy, from wholesale adoption to defiance, albeit mainly in private. A great deal of thought and effort was devoted to managing the appearance of consensus with often unrealistic or contradictory policy demands. This created a culture of achievement which seemed to be of little benefit to the pupils who were consigned to 'outperformed' status.