6 Technologies in rational self-management

Interventions in the 'responsibilisation' of school governors

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Introduction

Since 2010, the education system in England has been reformed to help bring about significant changes to the way schools are governed. A key driver of these reforms has been the academies programme – a flagship policy of Blair's Labour government in 2000 that was later adopted and developed by the coalition government (a co-operation between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties) in 2010. Like many education reforms that have been rolled out by national and federal governments across the globe, the academies programme aims to facilitate school autonomy and devolved management through removing the necessity for traditional structures of government, specifically local government involvement in premises management, human-resource management, funding allocation and support services. Similar trends in education management reform can be traced to South Africa (Bush and Heystek, 2003), Australia (Gobby, 2013), New Zealand (Jacobs, 2000) and the United States (Keddie, 2016), albeit the speed and scale of these reforms varies between countries due to the sensitivity of their geographical divisions of administrative–political rule and their historical path as nation states bound to specific cultural and political ideals. In the United States, for example, school autonomy and devolved management as envisioned through the charter school movement has given way to rampant privatisation and commodification of public education in which private companies receive government subsidies to run schools on a for-profit basis (Keddie, 2016). In contrast, schools in England run by businesses, universities and charities are permitted to run publicly-funded schools only as private limited companies on a non-profit basis which means that any surplus or 'profit' is returned to the school budget rather than paid as dividends to shareholders (Wilkins, 2016).

A driving philosophy of the academies programme in England since 2010 has been to 'create a school system which is more effectively self-improving' (DfE, 2010, p. 73) and where schools 'operate in strong, resilient structures that work to drive up standards' (DfE, 2016, p. 16), primarily through shared management structures and improved economies of scale enabled through school clusters, networks and chains. To support this vision of a self-improving schools system, the legal framework underpinning the academies programme makes it possible

for schools to take control of their finances, curriculum, admissions policy (subject to the admissions code), and conditions of employment, among other strategic-management priorities. But the academies programme entails more than a legal or technical redefinition of schools. Organisationally and culturally, the process of converting to an academy can mean displacing or appropriating certain structures and practices to make way for new forms of alternative development that are not always consistent with, and in some cases undermine, democratic principles of stakeholder governance (Wilkins, 2017; 2019) – a model of school governance 'designed to ensure representation of key stakeholders' (DfES, 2005, p. 7) through a focus on 'community cohesion' (Education and Inspections Act, 2006: Part 3, Section 38).

The dramatic shift from a stakeholder model of school governance to a skills-based model of governance (Wilkins, 2016; Young, 2016) is both a condition and consequence of the reforms. As more schools operate as academies with wide discretion over finances, purchasing and staff pay and conditions, the external pressure on schools to reconstitute and depoliticise their governing bodies (with appointments subject to skills and competency assessments) has been overwhelmingly successful in diminishing the agonistic character of school governance with its focus on proportional representation and community participation. In some cases, local governing bodies have been removed completely to make way for Multi-Academy Trusts in which a single board of trustees are responsible for running multiple schools:

> The growth of MATs will improve the quality of governance – meaning that the best governing boards will take responsibility for more schools. As fewer, more highly skilled boards take more strategic oversight of the trust's schools, MAT boards will increasingly use professionals to hold individual school-level heads to account for educational standards and the professional management of the school.
>
> (DfE, 2016, p. 50)

As Rayner, Courtney and Gunter (2018, p. 143) argue, the academies programme is a form of 'system redesign' that not only challenges the role of local democratic accountability as a framing for governance legitimacy, but also introduces and celebrates new cultures of professionalism, managerialism and leadership against which local government bureaucracy is increasingly judged to be too political, unresponsive or inefficient. According to the coalition government in 2010, the academies programme helps to facilitate innovation and organisational responsiveness through alleviating the need for 'automatic compliance' (DfE, 2010, p. 13) and 'the approach of trying to control improvement from the centre' (DfE, 2010, p. 73). Yet, as this chapter will show, the realities of 'academisation' as experienced by many school governors is rational self-management in the shadow of the state. The academies programme can be accurately described as an expression of 'decentralised centralism' (Karlsen, 2000, p. 525) since it shifts power away from traditional structures of government and disperses it outwards and downwards

towards schools and communities, but then compels those same schools and communities to adhere rigorously to centrally-mandated rules, regulations and laws. Rational self-management, therefore, is not something organisations and actors enter into spontaneously or independently. Rather, organisations and actors are trained and enjoined by way of structural incentives, ethical injunctions and rule setting/enforcement imposed by different configurations and species of state (and non-state) intervention.

Foucault (1982, p. 790) characterised 'government' as 'modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people'. The suggestion here, among others, is that the exercise of state power is not strictly coercive nor is it confined to the actions of specific organisations and agents or traceable to discrete 'events', 'structures' and 'cultures'. Rather, the exercise of modern state power, according to Foucault (1997, p. 82), functions through 'techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour' which 'seek to purport 'truths' about who we are or what we should be' (McKee, 2009, p. 468). Following this line of argument, this chapter explores the ways in which government and para-government organisations and actors intervene to shape the conduct of school governors through perfecting the design of technologies of rational self-management. These technologies, as evidenced and discussed in the sections that follow, function at three interrelated levels. On one level, they seek to carve out professional spaces that limit participation to those school governors who can satisfy narrowly bounded judgements about 'educational excellence' and 'good governance' and who can consolidate and manage the ever-deepening marketisation of education and its consequences. On another level and viewed from a different perspective, these technologies function to produce school governors that are more knowable and predictable from the perspective of external authorities. Technologies of rational self-management are pre-emptive tools designed to mitigate the worst excesses of unregulated markets and moral hazard. Finally, these technologies establish a convergence of interest between political authorities and the strategies of school governors, in effect strengthening relations of accountability between schools and central government. Technologies of rational self-management therefore constitute 'key fidelity techniques in new strategies of government' (Rose, 1999, p. 152).

In what follows, I examine the increasingly technical and bureaucratic role of school governors as custodians of public accountability. Specifically, I outline the criteria and evidentiary requirements against which persons are judged to be effective school governors, the multitude of responsibilities to which school governors are bound as a condition of their role, and the variety of evaluation tools and bodies of expert knowledge through which school governors are guided to carry out their role and make their actions defensible. In the final section, I pull together these observations and arguments to reflect on some of the contradictions of school governance, namely a movement that liberates school governors from certain externalities and accountability infrastructures, specifically those linked to local government structures, while simultaneously implicating them in new forms of institutional reflexivity that contribute to the realisation of certain policy aims,

key among them being 'a general regulation of society by the market' (Foucault, 2008, p. 145).

The academies revolution

Alongside Chile, the US and Sweden, England has long been considered one of the leading countries in market education experimentation (Ginsberg et al., 2010; Lubienski, 2013; Lundahl, et al., 2013; Wilkins, 2016). For almost 40 years, successive governments in England have introduced a system of incentives and punishments designed to compel schools, teachers and parents to make decisions about the welfare and education of children on the basis of explicit economic models which include, but are not limited to, a narrow, rational, instrumental focus on data and datatification (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Williamson, 2017), performance efficiency and performativity (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2006). Like many education systems around the globe, parents in England are encouraged to navigate the education system as consumers by using league table results and performance indicators as framings for their school choice while schools, as transparent, publicly accountable organisations, are expected to organise themselves in response to such demands through improved systems of internal monitoring, self-evaluation and impression management (Wilkins, 2012). The application of economic theories to previously non-economic domains and practices are nowhere more evident or widespread than in the field of national and global education policy where market techniques operate as guiding principles for education governance (see Gobby, Keddie and Blackmore, 2017; Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2014; Hangartner and Svaton, 2013; Ozga, 2009; Ranson, 2010).

The formation of the coalition government in England in 2010 not only signalled a continuation of these trends in market education experimentation but represented something far more seismic in terms of scale and reach. Up until 2010 the bulk of publicly funded schools in England were governed under the authority of local government with only a handful of schools operating as 'state-funded independent schools' or academies. Introduced by Blair's Labour government in 2000, the academies programme made it possible for interested charities and private companies to sponsor publicly funded schools pursuant to a contract with the Secretary of State. Between 1997 and 2010 the Labour government under Blair and Brown authorised the opening of 203 academies on the condition that these were under-performing schools that would benefit from a different management model. Not dissimilar to the legal setup of City Technology Colleges (CTCs) introduced under the terms of the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Local Management of Schools, the academy model entails transferring non-executive powers to a separate legal entity known as an academy trust made up of a board of trustees who act as principal manager of the school's assets.

In 2010, the formation of the coalition government brought new impetus to these reforms with the introduction of the Academies Act 2010 which made it possible for all 'good' and 'outstanding' schools (and, for the first time, primary and special schools) to apply to the DfE to convert to academy status. Statistics released

by the DfE (2018) indicate that at the time of writing there are 7,317 open academies representing 30 percent of the total number of primary, secondary, special and alternative provision schools in England. The reasons for these conversions vary, but key motivating factors include a desire to change the school leadership, to reconstitute the school governing body and to gain control over budget spending and improve economies of scale through increased efficiency savings (DfE, 2017). In addition, many schools wishing to remain local-government-controlled have converted to academy status on the advice of their local government. Due to cuts to local government spending and the restructuring and outsourcing of traded services to social enterprises, businesses and community organisations, many schools can no longer rely on local government to take responsibility for their back-office functions, support services and management overheads. Feeling vulnerable and isolated, schools in such circumstances typically form their own MAT by way of pooling resources, jointly buying-in services, sharing expertise, and building collaboration and shared vision through cross-school committees (Wilkins, 2016), sometimes through co-operative structures and practices (Davidge, Facer and Schostak, 2015).

The outsourcing of traditional state functions to citizens and communities is not unique to school governance and should be read as part of a wider economic and political movement in many advanced liberal countries seeking to redefine the role of the state as 'moderator and activator' (Rosol, 2012, p. 241). Grek (2013, p. 696) usefully describes these developments as soft forms of governing that operate through 'attraction', in other words by 'drawing people in to take part in processes of mediation, brokering and 'translation', and embedding self-governance and steering at a distance through these processes and relations'.

Implications for school governance

Academies typically retain both a board of trustees and a school governing body. However, the role of school governors varies according to the scheme of delegation devised by the board of trustees. For example, in a 'converter academy', sometimes called a stand-alone academy, the difference between the school governing body and the board of trustees is less apparent as members of the board of trustees also act as school governors and vice versa. Converter academies are schools which have converted to academy status by choice, usually on the basis that they are academically high-performing schools that wish to acquire greater control over their finances and non-executive powers to enter into contracts and employ staff. In contrast, 'sponsored academies' are previously local government-run schools that have been deemed by the national inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), to be eligible for takeover by a sponsor such as a business, university, other school, faith group or voluntary group.

In circumstances where a school is forcibly removed from local government control to become a sponsored academy within a chain of schools managed by a large foundation called a MAT, the school is typically stripped of its assets and any legal entitlement to self-determination (NCTL, 2014). The decision-making powers of

school governors – assuming the MAT wishes to retain their voluntary services after the takeover – diminishes significantly in these contexts as non-executive powers are concentrated among the board of trustees. In the interests of efficiency and economies of scale, the MAT anchors its schools to a prescriptive command and control governance setup that requires them to adhere to standard operational procedures in terms of teaching, learning and assessment (Stewart, 2016). A government survey of 326 Multi-Academy Trusts in 2017 revealed that just 7 percent of academies in trusts of more than 11 schools have full control over their teaching and learning (DfE, 2017). In most cases, however, schools operating within a MAT are typically comprised of two or three academies, sometimes called a soft federation or 'collaborative trust', in which schools retain their own governing body while strategic-management priorities and decision-making powers are dispersed equitably through the creation of joint, cross-school committees (Salokangas and Chapman, 2014).

The impact of these education reforms is various from the perspective of macro- and micro-level operations and functions. From a macro-level perspective, school funding is no longer funnelled through local government to be distributed to schools but instead is channelled directly to the school and its board of trustees. Moreover, the hollowing out of local government has produced a regulation gap or 'missing middle' (Hill, 2012) coupled with growing public concern over a democratic deficit (Unison, 2010). From a micro-level perspective, namely at the level of the school, the implications of 'academisation' suggest fundamental changes to the way schools organise themselves in terms of making a pragmatic adjustment to the conditions and requirements of devolved management or rational self-management. These changes – what Hatcher (2006, p. 599) describes as a process of 're-agenting' – include increased 'professionalisation' of the school governing body through a focus on expert administration, audit rituals and performance evaluation practised by suitably qualified, skilled, experienced individuals (Wilkins, 2016). Increasingly, school governors face huge pressures to 'modernise' their practices in response to calls for 'professional governance to move beyond the current 'amateurish' approach to overseeing schools' (Wilshaw quoted in Cross, 2014) and for 'more business people coming forward to become governors' (Nash quoted in GOV.UK, 2013; also see Burns, 2018), preferably people with the 'right skills' (Morgan quoted in GOV.UK, 2015), and a focus on 'quality' rather than 'democratic accountability' (Graham Stuart, quoted in Stuart, 2014).

Expert administration

In 2010, the Ministerial Working Group on School Governance (DCSF, 2010, p. 3) put forward the 'requirement that all governing bodies have the necessary skills to carry out their tasks' and 'follow a defined set of principles for good governance'. Building on these recommendations, in 2012 the coalition government (DfE, 2012) produced a 200-page document specifying the role and responsibilities of school governors, this time emphasising the strategic role of school governors in overseeing the educational and financial performance of the school. Later, in 2013,

the DfE (2013, p. 6) further characterised the role and responsibilities of school governors as '[e]nsuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction', '[h]olding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils' and '[o]verseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent'. Ofsted (2011, p. 4) provides a similar characterisation of the role by designating the importance of school governors to 'the school's self-evaluation' and 'shaping its strategic direction'. While the role of school governance in England has remained consistent in lots of ways, with a core emphasis on having a group of elected and appointed volunteers attest to the 'quality' of education provision on behalf of the community it serves (see Sallis, 1988), the new demands placed on school governors have challenged the feasibility of maintaining a stakeholder model of school governance (Wilkins, 2016).

A further design and implication of this narrowing – or 'professionalisation' (Wilkins, 2016) – of the role is that the actions and decisions of school governors can be judged against specific criteria and evidentiary demands. This has made school governors more amenable to external scrutiny and the requirements of various accountability measures, from 'corporate/contract accountability' to 'performance accountability' and 'consumer accountability' (Ranson, 2010, pp. 467–473). These accountability measures are reflected in the various responsibilities to which school governors are bound as custodians of public accountability. Their responsibilities include succession and strategic planning, pupil behaviour and attendance monitoring, admissions arrangements, risk assessment, school-to-school brokering and generating business links and sponsorship, target setting, budget spending, performance evaluation and self-evaluation, skills audit, compliance checking, digital evaluation tools to monitor performance and foster competition, premises management, and purchasing goods and services through competitive tendering, among other responsibilities (see Wilkins, 2016).

Yet despite their legal status as academies and administratively self-governing entities, schools are also required to comply with certain laws and guidance on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as well as adhere to rules for charity status as companies limited by guarantee (academy proprietors constitute exempt charities, for example). Moreover, school governors must provide the 'Memorandum' or 'Articles of Association' outlining the rules for their own internal regulation and management to the DfE and anyone who requests it under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. They must also provide statutory accounts that include an income and expenditure account, a statement of financial activities and a balance sheet. In this sense, the 'responsibilisation' of school governors as agents of effective governance is provisionally secured through the alignment of freedom and obligation, where the freedom to govern is morally and ethically bound up with obligations to compliance and evaluation. As Peeters (2013, p. 585) argues, 'government does not make citizens 'responsible', in the sense that the state steps back and lets citizens deal with societal problems themselves, but rather aims to obligate citizens, to make them 'responsible''.

A consequence of these wide-ranging responsibilities is that school governing bodies are compelled to engage with new forms of self-evaluation and increase

the stock of their technical-administrative knowledge to cope with the ever-growing demands for improved 'quality of school governance' (DfE, 2016, p. 50). Increasingly school governors are making use of new digital evaluation tools called 'data dashboards', specifically the DfE School Comparison Tool and Analyse School Performance (ASP), to meet ever-growing demands for improved transparency, accountability and efficiency. School governors use these digital evaluation tools not only to improve their performance monitoring as overseers and appraisers of the educational and financial performance of the school, but to enhance the transparency of the internal operation of the school to others and to make themselves accountable as persons effective in this role.

Rhodes (1996, p. 655) has argued that the transformation of the public sector involves 'less government' (or less rowing) but 'more governance' (or more steering)'. The changing role and responsibilities of school governors is a good illustration of this transformation – or what Swyngedouw (2005, p. 1992) calls 'governance-beyond-the-state'. Education policies that promote 'state retreat' naturally give way to wider concerns about 'governance failure' and the desire for improved performance management and 'risk-based regulation' (Hutter, 2005). Governance failure can be characterised in a number of ways but primarily it refers to structures or processes that impede the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal operation of an organisation.

In the case of school governance, governance failure occurs when there is improper and ineffective internal monitoring of the school's financial and educational performance or where there is evidence of statutory non-compliance, lack of challenge and support to school leaders, related party transactions and nominated supplier corruption, and financial mismanagement or scandal (see Boffey, 2013; Mansell, 2016; Perraudin, 2017). Governance-beyond-the-state therefore aims to create a system of rules, regulations and laws designed to compel certain 'professional' or moral behaviours that sustain practices of 'good governance' among different actors and organisations in the absence of direct government intervention. The suggestion here is that, despite new trends in school governance that emphasise school autonomy, devolved management and self-management, the state is no less active in 'setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system's constituent institutions, instruments and markets' (Spotton, 1999, p. 971; also see Levi-Faur, 2005).

The emphasis on schools slimming down their governing bodies, professionalising existing school governors through suitable induction and training and appointing only suitably qualified, skilled school governors, preferably those from the business and financial sectors, has been a key driver of policy rhetoric and policy recommendations following the Academies Act 2010. In their 2011 report, Carmichael and Wild (2011, p. 13) recommended that government should actively recruit governors from the business sector and stressed that 'governors should be appointed on the breadth of skills and experience they would bring'. Echoing this, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools Lord Nash said: 'Running a school is in many ways like running a business, so we need more business people coming forward to become governors' (Nash quoted

in GOV.UK, 2013). From this perspective, a vital responsibility of school governors is the smooth bureaucratic management of schools as 'high-reliability' organisations or businesses. More recently the then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan remarked:

> What that doesn't necessarily mean is a stakeholder model of school governance, and I should be clear now that I intend to look further into how we can move away from that model over this Parliament – because what makes your contribution so important isn't the particular group you represent, it's the skills, expertise and wisdom you bring to the running of a school.
>
> (GOV.UK, 2015)

The direction of travel outlined above suggests that a stakeholder model of school governance envisioned by previous governments (see DfES, 2005) has been displaced or undermined in favour of new arrangements to 'professionalise' or 'modernise' school governing bodies in order to enhance expert administration and quality control of the internal operation of schools in line with the requirements of external regulators and funders. However, the vulnerabilities and insecurities attached to micro-systems of devolvement management does not necessarily mean that proportional representation on governing bodies or a focus on community involvement and civic training as a focus governance is no longer feasible among schools. While the scope of school governance has certainly changed dramatically under reforms to make it more specialised and juridified, there is evidence in England of schools working through co-operative means and structures to 'provide a real alternative to state, private and corporate sponsorship of competition as the only approach to the organisation of the mainstream school system' (Davidge, Facer and Schostak, 2015, p. 61). In what follows I reflect on how the changing responsibilities of school governors already discussed help to illuminate the contradictory logic at the heart of school governance.

The contraction and expansion of state power

Since 2010, the importance of school governance to education in England has steadily increased as large numbers of schools choose to become academies or, due to poor academic performance, are deemed eligible for takeover by a new management structure operated by large academy trust or MAT. The insecurities and risks attached to these reforms mean that government and non-government actors and organisations, from secretaries of state for education and governance consultants to business leaders and national leaders of governance, have intervened as a matter of priority or opportunity to influence the way schools govern themselves, primarily through technologies of rational self-management.

Rational self-management (broadly conceived) is a condition for 'good governance' since it aims to foster the adaptive capacities of subjects to navigate and calculate new risk environments as administratively self-governing management groups or leadership teams. At the same time, rational self-management tends to

cohere around poles of efficient/inefficient, professional/amateur, active/passive – what Foucault (2000, p. 326) calls 'dividing practices'. Technologies of rational self-management rely on these dividing practices to compel certain behaviours and attitudes defined as acceptable or 'normal', preferably those that are amenable to audit and 'modes of objectification' (Foucault, 2000, p. 326). These modes of objectification then make it possible for the self to be externally assessed, sorted and ranked according to which behaviour is performed, thus providing unique opportunities for external authorities, in this case government and para-government organisations, to assess and guide how public organisations govern themselves – what Cooper (1998, p. 12) calls 'governing at a distance'. Rational self-management, therefore, can be considered both a technology of government and a technology of the self since it 'implicates citizens as co-operators of political will formation' (Peeters, 2013, p. 589).

These modes of intervention or 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw, 2005, p. 1992) are designed to establish vital albeit 'fragile relays' (Rose, 1999, p. 50) that help to connect the formally autonomous operations of school governors with the political will of the government, in effect opening up spaces for 'linking political objectives and personal conduct' (Rose, 1999, p. 149). To fully understand the responsibilities of school governors, therefore, means looking beyond what government mandates school governors to do and instead conceiving responsibility as a spectrum or modality that is negotiated at the intersection of national government policy imperatives and locally situated dilemmas and normative commitments.

A key priority of government and non-government organisations and actors is to develop strategies and tools for 'coping with complexity' (Jessop, 2003, p. 3). Audit cultures (Power, 1997), performativity regimes (Ball, 2003) and other related techniques of government, namely inspection, managerial deference and high-stakes testing, are central to such complex management, albeit requiring local actors like school governors to implement them. Superficially and provisionally, these technologies of rational self-management help to produce schools that are amenable to capture from meta-analyses and systems and relations of 'commensurability, equivalence and comparative performance' (Lingard, Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2016, p. 542). The idea here is that all schools, regardless of their specific social arrangements and value structures, can be subject to like-for-like comparisons using 'impersonal market reasoning' (Dean, 2015, p. 139) to determine their transparency, accountability and efficiency.

The development of education policies like school autonomy and devolved management, epitomised by the academies programme, has meant that schools to varying degrees have been both liberated from and ensnared by different hierarchies of knowledge, regulatory frameworks and modes of governance. A key consequence of this shift towards greater school autonomy and devolved management has been what Peck (2010, p. 23) calls 'an explosion of 'market conforming' regulatory incursions'. This is especially evident among the work performed by school governors whose primary responsibilities now include maintaining the financial integrity of the school as a competitive business, providing a strategic

role in future-proofing the school against multitudinous risks and governance failure, and making the internal operation of the school amenable to scrutiny and appraisal by external regulators. From this perspective, school governance can be regarded as a self-contradictory movement that flits between modulated social adjustment based on a pragmatic acceptance of state authority *and* creative appeals to spontaneous, intuitive self-organisation.

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