

# Academisation and the law of 'attraction': an ethnographic study of relays, connective strategies and regulated participation

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## Introduction

During the 1980s, radical reforms were introduced in many Western and European countries to scale back the welfare state and sell off public utilities to private companies (Keat, 1991). In England, wholesale transfer of public assets to the private-sector occurred on a massive scale, albeit limited to selling off already profitable public entities. Staunch opposition to privatisation from trade unions, the Labour Party and the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was sufficient to stave off private takeover of some public utilities, including health and education services. Yet despite opposition, new mutated forms of privatisation began to take shape during the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. During this time successive governments have adapted models of service delivery to complement a 'differentiated polity' (Rhodes, 1997: 8) or what Newman (2001: 163) describes as 'new forms of co-steering and co-governance through partnerships and community capacity-building'. Designed to open up service delivery to community interests and business influence, these developments signal, on the one hand, the arrival of distinct forms of 'networked governance' in which state power is disaggregated and dispersed outwards and downwards to devolved executive authorities to improve cooperation between service users and providers (Davies and Spicer, 2015). On the other hand, these developments appear to facilitate (and make a necessity of) the technocratic embedding of business practices and actors within public administration and therefore reflect the continuation of privatisation through different means.

To make sense of these developments in the context of education, Ball and Youdell (2007: 14) helpfully distinguish between what they call 'exogenous privatization' (privatisation from outside) and 'endogenous privatization' (privatisation from inside). Exogenous privatisation refers to 'the opening up of public education services to private-sector participation on a for-profit basis' (Ball and Youdell, 2007: 14). Yet privatisation management

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of education services in England does not always mean private companies occupy the role of public-sector management groups on a for-profit basis. Businesses and charities set up as private limited companies typically manage public services on behalf of the government on a non-profit basis, but typically do so through 'the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private-sector in order to make the public sector more like businesses', or what Ball and Youdell (2007: 14) call 'endogenous privatization'.

England has long been a 'laboratory' for experimenting with structured incentives to compel, amongst other configurations, the organisation of schools as businesses. The focus of this chapter concerns a recent market-based experiment in education in England called the academies programme. The academies programme makes it possible for schools to operate outside their Local Authorities (LAs) as private enterprises or 'state-funded independent schools' with significant responsibility for management and accountability delegated to school leaders and governors. From this perspective, the academies programme is a continuation of the idea of 'co-steering' or 'co-governance' inasmuch as academy status removes the requirement for the administration of 'needs' through the bureaucracy of LAs and instead empowers schools to consensually work with stakeholders to produce flexible, responsive models of service delivery. Yet, as this chapter shows through a 'critical ethnography' (Madison, 2011) of the different technical judgements, diagnostic tools and monitoring practices through which governance is practised, academies require the attraction of suitably skilled, professionally experienced school leaders and governors to deploy prescriptions and solutions for 'effective governance', which includes conditioning certain people to stay out of governance. In some cases, academy structures resemble the same techno-bureaucratic settlements they were meant to replace and improve, namely LAs, albeit lacking the mandate or incentives to provide strong democratic accountability based on principles of citizen participation and community voice (Wilkins, 2016, 2019a). The suggestion here is that the academies programme has become a target of political control from the centre and business saturation despite claims that academy status works to depoliticise and deregulate schools.

### Critical ethnography and governmentality research

To empirically trace these connections, this chapter draws on qualitative data taken from a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Grant Ref. ES/K001299/1, 2012–15) and assisted by the support of senior research officer Dr Anna Mazenod. The chapter draws on anonymised interview and observation data taken from



a study of a London-based secondary school academy called Richmond (pseudonym) operated by a large Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) called T-ALK (pseudonym). Combining elements of critical ethnography (Madison, 2011) with perspectives borrowed from the field of governmentality research (Lemke, 2007; Rose, 1999), this chapter examines and evidences the prevalence of specific forms of expert administration considered to be operationally necessary to performing school governance. Furthermore, it considers the effects of these calculative rationalities and technologies, namely the creation of forms of epistemic injustice that include restricting school governance work to the knowledge claims of certain authorities and actors. Building on and complementing these insights, the chapter also focuses on the connective strategies through which claims to knowledge are articulated and reproduced through everyday practices of school governance. This includes a focus on the relationship or 'relays' between these everyday practices and the demands of external regulators and funders. Lastly, the chapter considers the success of these everyday practices in terms of limiting governance participation to those who are bearers of relevant knowledge or claims to expertise.

Ethnography as a method and methodology is useful to this end as it concerns using thick description based on observations to document the interface between structure and agency and the resulting contingent formations we might call 'culture' or 'sociality'. A similar focus in this chapter concerns documenting the relays and connective strategies linking the political will of government to the mundane habits and attitudes of school leaders, trustees and governors. Moreover, the adoption of a critical ethnography approach serves as an important tool for rethinking the possibilities of the present, specifically to challenge the ways in which the politics of governance is masked by an appeal to requirements for technocratic rationalism or what Davies (2014: 4) calls 'the disenchantment of politics by economics'. In other words, it is important not to underestimate but instead make visible the extent to which the political will of government is realised through the kinds of bureaucratic proceduralism and claims to neutral expert administration used to characterise and dominate governance practices.

Critical ethnography is motivated by the ethical responsibility of the researcher to challenge, and where possible transcend, the mundane organisation of social and political life according to moral and economic arguments taken to be natural and self-evident (Madison, 2011). While much of my analysis borrows from a governmentality perspective to understand the ways in which governance is held together through specific programmes and tactics of rule (Lemke, 2007; Rose, 1999), there is a complementary focus on using critical ethnography to perform critical theory. According to Madison (2011: 13–14), ethnographic descriptions are expressive of 'critical



theory in action' since, through theory, we aim not only 'to name and analyse what is intuitively felt' but 'to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power'. This is a key methodological contribution of critical ethnography to this chapter.

The methodological importance of critical ethnography to this chapter therefore is twofold. On the one hand, critical ethnography is used here to show how individual choice and freedom, that is, the ability to connect personal troubles to wider social and political issues, becomes tempered by socially circulating discourses that work to construct and legitimate ways of doing, feeling and thinking, in effect placing limits on self-formation. In this regard, critical ethnography, sometimes called 'poststructural ethnography' (Britzman, 1995), 'takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control' (Madison, 2011: 5). On the other hand, critical ethnography is used here in a practical sense through combining semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, documentary analysis and reflective field notes to capture empirically the everyday work of school governors as situated responses to and negotiations of different external constraints and political pressures, notably the prevalence of new accountability frameworks, business practices and professional guidelines.

### Ethnographic tensions and explorations

Critical ethnography differs from more traditional methods of doing ethnography that include 'embedded' or 'engaged' research, sometimes called 'immersion fieldwork' (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 399). In cases of more traditional ethnography, the researcher typically works directly with those being researched as collaborators and partners in the generation of knowledge, thus helping to adapt research priorities to meet specific organisational priorities and service user needs. Similar to participatory action research (PAR) in which research is directed at progressive problem solving determined by knowledge that is valued by the organisations and individuals being researched, embedded research privileges familiarity – familiarity with the context and personal lives of those being researched – while at the same time requiring the researcher to remain 'detached' or 'independent' in order to provide arguments and perspectives that, if need be, are sufficiently critical. This 'co-presence of independence and familiarity' (Lewis and Russell, 2011: 401) forces the researcher to think and act reflexively as they move through and in-between positions of 'insider' and 'outsider'. The ethnographic approach adopted in this chapter cannot be characterised as



embedded or engaged since it was important for the researchers involved to remain detached where possible given the politically sensitive nature of the research and the cost of becoming immersed as collaborative researchers.

The forced or voluntary conversion of LA-maintained schools into academies has lots of implications for the way those schools are governed, as will be made clear in the chapter. Schools that convert to academy status are required to meet certain directives and provisos in order that they perform successfully as high-reliability organisations. This includes displacing or adapting existing practices to make way for new forms of alternative development which uphold principles of 'effective governance'. Broadly speaking, effective governance, sometimes called 'good governance', refers to the design and management of internal control systems and standard operational procedures to enable schools to meet certain performance objectives and outcomes (Wilkins, 2016). In 2012 when Anna Mazenod and I began recruiting schools to participate in the study, we quickly realised that many schools wanted to participate in order to better understand their own governance practices and the extent to which these practices complied with measures of effective governance as defined by regulators and voluntary-professional organisations.

Immersed research, as described above, would have been suitable to this task, yet we were keen to remain detached from such obligations given our commitment to political neutrality and researcher impartiality. However, we conceded that many schools would only participate in the study if we used effective governance as a proxy measure to determine the value of their internal operations. Therefore, we drew some comparisons of the schools based on how well they documented and appraised the financial and educational performance of the school and communicated these findings to each school in the form of a report. Later we discovered that some schools used these reports to evidence to the school's inspectorate, Ofsted, their commitment to effective governance. At the same time, we maintained a 'critical distance' by not working directly with school leaders and governors when producing these reports. We were careful to provide a set of judgements and perspectives that went beyond an exclusive concern with effective governance (narrowly conceived) and which were more concerned with how academisation, and the political rationalities and technologies of performance upon which it rests, results in certain forms of epistemic injustice, namely the creation of 'enclosures' that limit governance participation to those who are bearers of relevant knowledge, skills and claims to expertise.

Following a broadly critical ethnographic approach of documenting 'repeated patterns of symbolic behaviour' (Fetterman, 2010: 29) through a 'thick description of events' (Fetterman, 2010: 1), this chapter examines how and to what effect school governors are incited and compelled to



behave in certain ways, and therefore, in the tradition of 'critical ethnography' (Madison, 2011), to better understand how 'some powerful groups are able to impose their definitions of reality on others' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 12). Through a critical attention to operations of power and control, this chapter examines the extent to which the everyday mundane habits of school governors reflect the 'constitutive constraints of discourses' (Britzman, 1995: 236), be they externally imposed accountabilities, hierarchically organised structures or professionally oriented behaviours. Yet here the actions of school governors are not reduced to such discourses, even if such actions appear to replicate, more or less in a calculated manner, the ambitions of powerful groups. Clarke (2004: 2) for example cautions against over-deterministic accounts in which 'either systems or subjects function according to the plans of the powerful'. He goes onto argue:

Achieving and maintaining subjection, subordination or system reproduction requires work/practice – because control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects. (Clarke 2004: 3)

Nor does this mean insisting on the ontology of a purely asocial, bounded, detached subject. Rather, each person occupies and invests in a range of positions that mediate a structured social force, making subjects both bearers and producers of a multitude of cultural worlds. As Holland et al. (1998: 45) make clear in their social anthropological work on identity formation, 'It is not impossible for people to figure and remake the conditions of their lives. It [social force] positions persons as it provides them with the tools to re-create their positions'. Tamboukou and Ball (2003) adopt a similar position in their reading and critique of traditional ethnographic approaches to research. For Tamboukou and Ball (2003: 8), traditional ethnography appears to work within a definition of 'power as sovereignty' in which the ethnographer is typically concerned with who holds power and over whom such power is exercised. Moving beyond a focus on power as sovereignty, Tamboukou and Ball (2003) draw on Foucault's theoretical project of genealogy to conceptualise 'power as deployment' (2003: 8) through an attention to 'the micro-operations of power, being sensitive to local struggles and the achievement of local solutions' (2003: 4). A similar ethnographic approach is adopted in this chapter where the focus is less concerned with who occupies positions of power and more concerned with the complex ways in which power is deployed, maintained and co-developed by a multitude of individuals through 'the delineation of concepts, the specification of objects and borders and the provision of arguments and justifications' (Lemke, 2007: 44).



By insisting that power has no origin or permanent settlement, and therefore has no centre or privileged vantage point from which it can be studied, Foucault (1980: 93) insists that power should be viewed as a facile synthesis since 'relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse'. Such a view complements critical ethnography. Similar to Foucauldian analyses with its insistence that 'discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle' (Foucault, 1981: 52–3), critical ethnography aims to 'resist domestication' (Madison, 2011: 5) and challenge self-evidence through thinking through not 'what is' but 'what could be'. Through its commitment to emancipatory goals and projects, critical ethnography appears to conceptualise discourse, on the one hand, as those social practices and modes of objectification which seek to constrain agency and possibilities for self-formation. On other hand, critical ethnography recognises discourse as dynamic, productive spaces in which the contingently normal is permanently vulnerable to change.

Drawing on these insights, Tamboukou and Ball (2003: 8) chart new terrain for ethnographers to explore, namely a focus on 'the complex ways they [subjects] are constituted within historically and culturally specific sites'. This is not to say that subjects are fully constituted through discourse. As Foucault (1998: 101) comments, 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it'. By insisting on the ways that humans actively appropriate the cultural resources available to them and embody those cultural resources through forms of social practice, this chapter explores how school governors are both bearers and producers of systems of signification and configurations of power. This means paying attention both to the ways in which subjectivity is fashioned through forms of 'self-objectification' and 'self-direction' (Holland et al., 1998: 6) but also subject to what Foucault (1982: 790) calls government, namely

legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action of others.

The figure of the school governor is typically celebrated for its autonomy under an academised education system. Yet the freedom to govern is not given or unconditional but instead delimited by a field of action 'inextricably bound to the activities and calculations of a proliferation of independent authorities' (Rose, 1999: 49). At the same time, school governors are crucial to maintaining relations and structures of power through their



everyday performance of and investment in these activities and calculations. On this understanding, it is important to capture why and how school governors invest in these types of work and the different accommodations and negotiations resulting from such work. In what follows I offer a useful excursion into some of the wider political debates and controversies surrounding the academies programme to show why and how in recent years the figure of school governor has attracted so much attention. Following this I combine critical ethnographic methods with an analytics of governmentality (see Brady, 2014) through a situated study of governance in a single academy school. A focus of the analysis is to document the mobile, connective strategies or 'relays' through which the formal autonomous work of school leaders and governors is connected to wider political interests and business influence.

### Risks and vulnerabilities

For nearly 40 years, successive governments in England have introduced a range of policy drivers and structured incentives designed to improve the capacity of schools to self-innovate as administratively self-governing entities. Yet the need to decentre schools from the ambit of traditional structures of government, notably local government jurisdiction and its accountability frameworks, democratic audits and funding arrangements, has grown in proportion to the need to intervene to better steer and regulate how schools self-organise. These interventions have become a matter of government priority since 2010 when the Coalition government (a cooperation between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties) introduced the Academies Act 2010, in effect making it possible for all 'good' and 'outstanding' schools to apply to the Department for Education (DfE) to convert to academy status. Academies refer to 'state-funded independent schools' that are no longer directly accountable to LAs, other than on matters of special needs and exclusions. Instead, school leaders and governors are responsible for admissions arrangements, strategic management, succession planning, compliance checking, performance appraisals, resource allocation and related 'back-office' functions. At the time of publication in 2022, there are 9,752 open academies in England, i.e. 38% of primary schools and 79% of secondary schools (DfE, 2021). In the case of the academies programme, 'endogenous privatisation' (Ball and Youdell, 2007: 14) has not only conditioned and exposed education services to new kinds of vulnerabilities and insecurities but engendered a culture of moral hazard. According to Žižek (2009: 12), moral hazard is 'the risk that somebody will behave immorally because insurance, the law, or some other agency will protect them against



any loss that his or her behaviour might cause'. Management groups drawn from the private and charity sector to run public services have only limited liability of public assets as they are private limited companies and therefore do not face any personal financial loss in the event those public services underperform. Moreover, privatisation management of public services can have direct consequences for staff pensions, pay and conditions. In England, management groups contracted by government to run publicly funded hospitals called 'hospital trusts' have been accused of setting up 'wholly owned subsidiaries' (WOS) or 'spin-off companies' in order to contract out staff at cheaper wages and cut back pension benefits to reduce costs (Campbell, 2018). Similarly, in education, private-sector participation in public-sector management has in some cases undermined trust in schools as public assets with evidence of nominated supplier corruption amongst academy trusts accused of hiving off public monies. In 2016, it was reported that Wakefield City Academies Trust (WCAT) paid almost £440,000 to IT and clerking companies owned by its then chief executive, Mike Ramsay, and his daughter (Perraudin, 2017).

Further evidence of expenses scandal and financial mismanagement (Akehurst, 2018; Munro, 2018), related-party transactions and conflicts of interest (Cruddas, 2018; Dickens, 2017), unofficial exclusions or 'off-rolling' (Bloom, 2017; Speck, 2019), and excessive pay to chief executives of academy trusts (Bubsy, 2018; George, 2018) has brought the legitimacy of the academies programme into disrepute. This is not to say that all academies are structurally the same and the people who run them are driven by identical motives – a simplistic and unwarranted generalisation that conceals more than it reveals about the complexities of the current education system. Yet there is plenty that is 'dangerous' about these reforms to education, to the extent that the conversion of LA-maintained schools into academies makes possible certain financial risks and opportunities which, if left unchecked, only serve to benefit the providers of education rather than the users. It is for this reason that government and non-government bodies have continually intervened to steer the conduct of governors through the incursion of regulatory frameworks, accountability infrastructures and professional guidelines and expectations.

### **Attraction and effective governance**

Since 2010 various government and non-government actors and organisations in England, from secretaries of state and governance consultants to school inspectors and national leaders of governance, have intervened in the field of school governance as a matter of priority to influence the conduct



of school governors. School governors refer to local volunteers elected or co-opted to the school governing body to assist senior leaders in setting strategy and providing oversight of the school's educational and financial performance. The guidelines for school governors as outlined by government authorities and non-government, independent governor support services remain in principle the same for academies and 'non-academised' schools, e.g. schools under the control of LAs, with the exception that academies are separate legal entities called academy trusts, companies limited by guarantee and exempt charities. The implication here is that academy trusts are granted powers to delegate or deny responsibility to school governors as they see fit, including removing the statutory right of parents to be appointed as school governors, reducing the scope of influence of school governing bodies by reconstituting them as 'advisory boards', and downsizing or removing entire governing bodies so that control is directed by a self-appointed board of trustees. Therefore, while the role and responsibilities for school governors in academies and non-academised schools remain consistent in lots of ways, the academy trust model has created opportunities for a reimagining of the school governor on the basis of new demands to run schools as businesses. This partly explains why the school governor has emerged as a central figure within education policy discourse in England from 2010 onwards as successive governments seek to build 'a school system which is more effectively self-improving' (DfE, 2010: 73). Moreover, successive governments since 2010 have combined this notion of self-improvement with an appeal to greater de-regulation of schools, specifically the removal of local government management of schools by LAs and their replacement or supplement by improved conditions for devolved management and professional autonomy amongst school leaders and governors.

Such 'disintermediation' (Lubienski, 2014: 424) has not only given rise to concerns of a growing 'democratic void' given the reduced function of LAs as managers of schools (Clayton, 2012; George, 2017). Fears of 'amateurish' governance (Former Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Head of Ofsted Wilshaw quoted in Vaughan, 2015) and 'governance failure' have intensified dramatically. Governance failure (broadly defined) may refer to the ineffectiveness of internal control systems and operations to meet certain predefined objectives or outcomes, and typically it is the individuals responsible for reflexively monitoring and enabling those systems and operations that are held to account where there is evidence of governance failure. In the case of school governance, it is the key responsibility of school governors to ensure the smooth functioning of governance procedures, be it compliance or evaluation, and strengthening legitimacy with central government through holding senior leaders to account for the educational and financial performance of the school. Yet the government is concerned that some



school governors lack the skills and experience to discharge such duties effectively. In response, government ministers with the support of charity-based and privately run governor support organisations have called for the attraction and participation of 'business figures' (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education Lord Agnew quoted in Smulian, 2019) and 'skilled professionals' (Education Secretary Damien Hinds quoted in Whittaker, 2018) in school governance. Addressing the Independent Academies Association (IAA) in 2013, former Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools Lord Nash stated

people should be appointed on a clear prospectus and because of their skills and expertise as governors; not simply because they represent particular interest groups ... Running a school is in many ways like running a business, so we need more business people coming forward to become governors. (DfE, 2013)

The academies programme therefore works to set limits on who gets to participate in the business of school governance and who is conditioned to stay out of such affairs. School autonomy is conditional on school leaders and governors deploying prescriptions and solutions of 'effective governance' as defined by governments and charities. Although the concept of 'effective governance' lacks a formal or exhaustive definition, the DfE (2017: 9–10) use it to refer to 'accountability that drives up educational standards and financial performance', 'people with the right skills, experience, qualities and capacity', 'structures that reinforce clearly defined roles and responsibilities', 'compliance with statutory and contractual requirements', and 'evaluation to monitor and improve the quality and impact of governance'. As Grek argues (2013: 696), the reconfiguration and dispersal of state power typically relies on soft forms of governing called 'attraction' that include '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'. Following Grek (2013), the recruitment of suitably skilled, professionally experienced individuals to school governing bodies can be considered an important means through which the government aims to set rules and manage expectations about how school governors, as purveyors of effective governance, should conduct themselves and run their organisations.

Charities too play a significant role in coordinating such governmental work. In 2018 the charities Education and Employers and the National Governance Association (NGA) intervened to help facilitate the attraction of business people to school governance by launching the government-funded national campaign 'Inspiring Governance' in which they appealed to employers to encourage their employees to volunteer as school governors. Outlining the mutual benefits to schools, employees and their employers,



Education and Employers and NGA highlight the skills acquired through volunteering as a school governor:

employees can develop their professional skills in a board-level environment which they can bring back to the workplace ... They also develop wider skills from working as part of a management team. All of this experience is then brought back into their workplace with obvious benefits to the individuals and their employers. It really is a win-win situation. (Inspiring Governance, 2018)

### **Conditional participation**

At the same time that government and non-government organisations are keen to recruit skilled volunteers to school governing bodies, existing school governors are expected to possess similar professional attitudes, competencies and commitments which are mapped internally by the school governing body against a skills audit and evaluated externally by the school's inspectorate, Ofsted. In some cases, certain people are conditioned to stay out of governance unless they possess the skills and orientation to respond to ever-growing demands for political neutrality, impartiality and non-partisanship (Young, 2016). Elected school governors, namely parent governors, have been identified as 'problematic' for example, principally because of their vested interest in their child at the school. According to some school leaders and governors, such vested interest can skew the judgement of parents in favour of school policies that directly benefit their child or a group of children rather than serving the interests of the school as a whole (see Wilkins, 2016). In other cases, school governing bodies have been displaced to make way for Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in which a single board of trustees is responsible for running multiple schools. While the majority of MATs in England tend to be small and run between two and five schools, sometimes referred to as collaboratives or soft federations due to their distinct shared collaborative models of governance (see Salokangas and Chapman, 2014), there are a number of large MATs called hard federations in which a single board of trustees oversee accountability for lots of schools (see Greany and Higham, 2018; Wilkins, 2017). The DfE favour these governance arrangements for different reasons, a key one being that they successfully attract highly skilled professionals to their boards of trustees:

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: 50)



## Post-panopticism and the conduct of others

From this perspective, school governance can refer to a post-panoptic, albeit 'neoliberal arrangement whereby the market increasingly structures the form and activities of the state' (Gane, 2012: 612). As Peck et al. (2009: 51) observe, the shift towards decentralisation and de-regulation under neo-liberalism is typically accompanied by an 'intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose versions of market rule' (Peck et al., 2009: 51). Similarly, Davies (2011) points to the persistence of rule-bound hierarchies framing models of service delivery despite increasing evidence of the cooperation and co-planning of service delivery through communities, charities, social enterprises, policy networks, businesses and public-private partnerships. In the field of school governance, for example, we can discern a range of tactics and methods deployed by government and non-government authorities to delimit the role and responsibilities of school governors in an effort to effectively steer the actions of school governors towards the realisation of certain goals and outcomes. This is not to say the actions of school governors are the residual effect of some predetermined sequencing in which attitudes and responses flow uniformly and predictably across spaces, places, organisations and peoples. School governors sometimes act in ways that are at odds with the provisos and directives prescribed by government as they seek to balance internal and external accountabilities and achieve a congruence of multiple stakes and interests (Wilkins, 2019b).

On this account and borrowing from Bevir (2010: 437), we can conceptualise the actions of school governors as 'a contingent product of a contest of meanings in action', namely that while school governors sometimes achieve similar results in terms of compliance and evaluation, these practices are the outcome of 'quite disparate motives' (Li, 2007: 13). At the same time, it is important to document the ways in which disparate motives are carved out of 'ways of speaking truth, persons authorized to speak truths, ways of enacting truths and the costs of so doing' (Rose, 1999: 19). To this end, a focus of this chapter concerns the extent to which governmental work has been successful in shaping the 'conduct of others', to borrow a phrase from Foucault (1982: 794).

By conduct of others, Foucault (1982) is referring to the ways in which different authorities, be it the church, the school or the government, seek to guide the actions of individuals by elevating certain kinds of knowledge or 'truths' about the human subject to the point where they are judged to be 'normal' and 'acceptable', even desirable. Such interventions in the conduct of others does not mean to remove the freedom of individuals but, on the contrary, 'to acknowledge it and utilize it for one's own objectives' (Rose, 1999: 4). Hence, Foucault (1982) does not characterise the relationship



between subjects and authorities, freedom and power, in terms of domination or confrontation since power presupposes the freedom of others. For Foucault (1982), the conduct of others therefore cannot be reduced to expressions of political and economic subjugation, especially in advanced liberal societies where governments seek to enjoin citizens to perform certain freedoms and responsibilities rather than crush their capacity to do so.

In what follows I draw on anonymised interview and observation data taken from an ethnographic study of a London-based secondary school academy called Richmond (pseudonym) operated by a large MAT called T-ALK (pseudonym). Research was conducted at Richmond over a period of seven months during 2013 and 2014 in which interviews were carried out with various school leaders, trustees and governors connected to the school. Several 'non-participant' observations of the full governing body and premises and finance committee meetings were also conducted during this time.

The purpose of these observations was to supplement the interview material and official documentation gathered with a record of how school leaders, trustees and governors interact to resolve complex governance issues within 'naturally occurring settings' that are both formally and informally organised. These meetings can be considered naturally occurring to the extent that they, unlike the interviews, were not instigated by the researcher. At the same time, there was something seemingly unnatural about these meetings: they lacked spontaneity, experimentation and transgression. They were structured in a way that made them predictable, orderly, even circumscriptive, and appeared to be designed to pre-empt digression or conflict in order that evidentiary requirements and suitable, auditable truths could be reached and minuted in a timely and efficient manner. A critical ethnographic approach is useful here in terms of tracing empirically the ways in which governance is reproduced through the social organisation of these events. Moreover, a critical ethnographic approach forces us as ethical researchers to challenge the limiting effects of these arrangements, of 'operations of power and control' (Madison, 2011: 5), both on the self-formation of subjects and on the scope for reimagining governance differently – governance as public pedagogy, civic training and participation, community empowerment or democratic citizenship.

### **Systems, structures and discipline**

The focus of this critical ethnography is Richmond, a Church of England, non-selective, all-through 11–18 mixed secondary school. Surrounded by several large, underused industrial sites, a long elevated dual carriageway and a busy railway line, Richmond is located in what the local council



describes as a 'socially deprived area' – hereafter referred to as Crownsdale (pseudonym). Yet Crownsdale is also a highly commercial, cosmopolitan area in which a large number of creative, retail and media businesses thrive and where various domestic and international students study at the local 'Russell Group' university. Situated somewhere between the slick veneer of an imposing and growing post-modern cultural industry complex and the more traditional sites of a post-industrial, community-dwelling urban landscape, Richmond occupies something akin to a liminal space bordering gentrification and poverty. In many ways the school imagines itself as a bridge or gateway between these two life-worlds as it seeks to transform the lives and aspirations of local young people and their families through its ethos: 'Believe, Dream, Achieve'. Yet there is a fundamental cultural and economic disconnect between the mobile, business-savvy, metropolitan, predominantly white middle-class people who run the school and the young people and families served by the school:

I don't necessarily think that all of them [school leaders and governors] fully understand the needs of the school population, neither do they want to necessarily just because of the background that they come from, and I find that quite frustrating sometimes ... A lot of them make judgments and make sort of throwaway comments about Crownsdale and the local estates without truly understanding those estates. (Angela, parent governor)

Richmond attracts a large number of its student intake from the surrounding housing estates where mainly working-class black African, black Caribbean and white British families reside. Historically and culturally, families in this area have experienced high levels of deprivation relative to income, employment, health and disability, and education skills and training. At the time of the research in 2013, the number of students at Richmond eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and the pupil premium (PP) (both proxy measures for disadvantage) was well above the national average: out of the total roll of 885 students in Year 7–11, 593 students were on FSM and therefore 67% were PP funded (the national average being 16%). Speaking about the student intake, the then headteacher, Joanna, commented:

Schools that do well tend to improve the intake. We haven't particularly improved the intake. We've got far more people applying, so we are massively oversubscribed, but the actual intake in terms of ability or [social] class hasn't particularly changed, because we are still serving this estate.

Rather than describe the student population in terms of a differentiated and heterogeneous whole, the headteacher uses the term 'estate' to invoke a different kind of social imaginary, notably one lacking 'in terms of ability or [social] class' difference. Describing her first impressions of the school when taking over as headteacher in 2006, she comments: 'it was doing really, really badly



at that time. The school was under-achieving and the systems and structures weren't working properly. Discipline was really poor'. Similarly, the deputy chair of the school governing body and academy sponsor appointee, Sam, stresses the importance of 'proper behaviour and having proper discipline' as key reasons for the successful transformation of the school from requiring special measures in 2004 to being rated outstanding by Ofsted in 2013. Yet the roll out of improved 'systems and structures' underpinned by 'proper behaviour' and 'proper discipline' were not only designed to influence behaviour change amongst students. These newly developed systems and structures had as their focus behavioural change amongst school leaders and governors themselves, the idea being that improved organisational change and behaviour at the level of governance would have a trickle-down effect on the educational performance of students:

Controls and balances internally, these are sort of process driven things that we've focussed on, the sort of objective, in a sense, that we can agree what they are and let's implement it. And from that culture, discipline has sort of flowed if you like. So that's the trajectory for us, so I think certainly governance has been very important for operational success of Richmond and also for academic performance. (Sam, deputy chair of the school governing body).

### **Philanthropic ventures in governance**

In its previous incarnation as a voluntary-controlled school operated by the LA and the London Diocesan Board, Richmond was judged to require 'special measures' by Ofsted in 2004, meaning that the school was failing to provide its students with an acceptable standard of education. Later the school was successfully removed from special measures and judged 'satisfactory' by Ofsted in 2006. Yet despite evidence of improving standards of education, the school was deemed by the DfE to be eligible for takeover by a private sponsor and in 2006 Richmond came under the control of one of the largest MATs in England: T-ALK. T-ALK is similar to other MATs in England insofar as it is a registered private limited company and charity that runs schools on behalf of central government and is subject to a funding agreement setup with the Secretary of State. Yet T-ALK differs from most conventional MATs, the majority of which are small and operate between two and five schools, in that it benefits from private donations which help to drive its philanthropic ventures and it is a 'system leader trust' both nationally and internationally.

Nationally, T-ALK operates a network of 38 schools and has developed its own approaches to teacher training, professional development, data collection and performance evaluation, and learning strategies, which it rolls



out across its schools nationally and other programmes internationally. Internationally, T-ALK runs a number of different education and health programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, India, the US and Eastern Europe where there is a strong focus on building capacity and knowledge exchange between the private, public and voluntary sectors. In this sense, T-ALK is a service and training provider but also a 'knowledge broker' or 'boundary spanner' (Hogan, 2015: 317), namely an organisation that is 'proficient at creating inter- and intra-organisational social connections' spanning the interests and involvement of private and public actors and organisations.

A major influence and strategic priority of T-ALK since taking over as sponsor of Richmond in 2006 was the technocratic embedding and routine performance of checks and balances to enhance transparency of the internal operation of the school, or what Sam describes as 'bringing private-sector discipline into the public space'. The following observation recorded during a full governing body meeting reveals the extent to which governance work is increasingly vulnerable to private-sector discipline, specifically the logic and ontology of business:

The chair of governors starts with providing a verbal summary of the developments to date. He comments that he doesn't usually talk much, preferring to leave space for other governors to do the talking, but that in this instance a summary would be useful as the issues are complicated. As in the premises and finance committee, much of the language used is very business and finance-like.

Through establishing various oversight mechanisms, including sub-committees, working groups and audit trails, to control the school's constituent operations and instruments, T-ALK was effective in transforming Richmond into a high-reliability organisation in which the school governing body closely resembled a corporate entity. As Sam recalls, the operational and strategic takeover of Richmond by T-ALK involved

a lot of process, a lot of initially trying to understand what was going on financially, and that took a lot of time because there was poor reporting before, there was no transparency around any of these things. Then imposing structure, and agreeing structure, and from that you can then start to hold people accountable, and from that culture those, because there's now an agreed framework for how we communicate, what we communicate on financially and how we do so.

### **Business saturation and endogenous privatisation**

While these developments may seem little more than an administrative process, they are far more profound in cultural terms. As Herman, a Diocese



representative school governor, explains, 'the governance is much more like corporate governance'. These developments necessitate what Hatcher (2006: 599) describes as a process of 're-agenting' in which old social actors and their preferred practices are displaced to make way for the control of schools through new epistemic communities who embody the kinds of knowledge and expertise valorised by central government:

we pay a lot of attention to financial control in governance, proper reporting, and my own background is actually private equity, so I've spent a lot of time working with management teams on systems and strategy and the like, and some of those skills also apply to what we are doing at Richmond and elsewhere. Not all of it. Our objectives and ambitions are different, but the skill set and how we apply that is quite similar. (Sam, deputy chair of the school governing body)

At the time of the research in 2013, the school governing body meetings were noted for their 'business-like' approach to school governance. 'Just as it would be in business, if there is no drive for achievement or to improve, or do better, then things stagnate', remarked Garfield, support staff school governor at Richmond. Regardless of the agenda item under discussion, be it teacher retention, premises expansion, admissions policy, or information and communication technology (ICT), the tropes and repertoires used to communicate and frame these issues was typically couched in the language of economics. Key words and phrases typically used during school governing body meetings included 'human capital', 'cost-neutrality', 'contingency funds' and 'operating costs', amongst other financial jargon. Such language was the 'agreed framework for how we communicate', as suggested by Sam. The school governing body also made consistent use of competitive-comparative frameworks and performance-related data on educational attainment to draw parallels with other local schools. 'The core business is educational outcomes and everything else that's discussed effectively supports that', remarked Wendy, governance manager at T-ALK.

School governors are therefore prized for their technical expertise and 'governance capital' (Gobby and Niesche, 2019: 75), namely individuals who are adept at navigating, gaming and securing advantage from a market-disciplined education system that values and understands output controls, performance indicators and private-sector styles of management practice. These performances in effective governance are also embodied through the leadership qualities of headteachers, notably so-called 'heroic', 'exceptional' or 'inspirational' leaders who are technicians of universally prescribed models of 'what works' (also see Kulz, 2017). Like the headteacher at Richmond, Joanna, these new educational leaders are less interested in democratic solutions than in 'best practice' models as responses to educational problems.



Described by the parent governor, Angela, as an 'autocratic head' who 'runs the business', Joanna is precisely the kind of leader sought after by large MATs and central government for their effective role as translators for the realisation of government-mandated initiatives, especially performance-driven objectives and targets (Courtney et al., 2018).

I kind of had to be not particularly democratic, but more like this is what we are going to do, trust in me, it's going to work, follow me, and all that kind of thing. So it wasn't democratic or consultative at all, but I tried to bring people on with me by kind of getting them to believe in me, I suppose, that I could do it. So it was a bit like kind of being on that charger, and charging forward, and not against the children but against the obstacles and the barriers, and breaking things down. (Joanna, headteacher)

In the spirit of 'breaking things down', only two members of the previous school governing body were retained after T-ALK took control of Richmond in 2006. These school governors were retained as part of a discrete selection process managed by the board of trustees following the academisation of the school. The majority of the members of the new school governing body consisted instead of T-ALK appointees, namely people employed by T-ALK. At the time of the research in 2013, Richmond was one of the few schools operated by T-ALK that had its own school governing body called a 'local governing body'. Local governing bodies differ from conventional school governing bodies, however, in that the statutory rights of school governors are rescinded by the academy sponsor. Under arrangements where a cluster of schools are operated by a large MAT, it is typical for those schools to lose their autonomy since non-executive powers are shifted to the MAT's board of trustees.

I think ultimately because all the major decisions are made at the sort of trust level that, you know, I feel we are quite powerless, so because we are powerless I don't see how there is any accountability if that makes sense. (Angela, parent governor)

This is not to say that there was no evidence of a 'constructive tension between the executive and the advisory', as Sam explained it, but such tension was the result of exchanges between like-minded professionals with a shared mandate for effective governance and rational self-management, and therefore who already operated within a limited 'field of action' (Foucault, 1982: 790) determined by business directives and provisos framed as forms of rational account giving. Understood from this perspective, claims to 'constructive tension' typically conceal a deeper, more political appeal to consensus and the regulated participation of school governors with shared priorities and commitments who can contribute to the smooth functioning



of the school as technicians of compliance and evaluation. Discussing the composition of another school governing body, the headteacher, Joanna, commented: 'their governors are very unprofessional, they are all members of the local community. They are lovely, lovely people, but they have got absolutely no idea about running a school'.

### Reflections on the shadow state

In this chapter I have combined elements of ethnographic research methods with a governmentality perspective through a situated study of governance in a single academy school to reveal how political rationalities and governance technologies overlap and interact through the everyday work/practice of school governors to produce certain kinds of effects. Through a general focus on how 'some powerful groups are able to impose their definitions of reality on others' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 12), the analysis draws on Foucauldian perspectives to develop the concept of power to trace the ways governance is assembled through the 'production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse' (Foucault, 1980: 93). The suggestion is here is that, following Foucault (1980), power and truth as signifying practices in the formulation and imposition of different realities operate in unsettled, impermanent ways as the struggle to maintain hegemony, at least in post-authoritarian settings, is always a discursive accomplishment made possible by practices of fact construction, the management of stake and interest, and the authorising of certain speaking positions and reactions. As detailed in the analysis, what comes to stand in for truth is rational self-management or effective governance, rational account giving underpinned by auditable and actionable truths, and routine performance of checks and balances, amongst other business tropes and practices. Working within a critical ethnography approach, it then becomes important to 'demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of [such] power' (Madison, 2011: 13). Demystification here means denaturalising that which is taken to be self-evident, necessary or unavoidable. It means rethinking governance as the attempt to produce within specifiable limits and finalities the production of available solutions and speaking positions. Moreover, it means both challenging the kinds of everyday practices that diminish the scope for struggles of meaning over governance and opening up those everyday practices to new epistemic communities and voices.

The kinds of everyday practices described above make a necessity of regulated or conditional participation in which the management and operation of schools has been successfully co-opted by certain powerful groups who win favour with central government through their claims to optimising



structures and processes in ways that uphold government-prescribed definitions of 'effective governance' (DfE, 2017: 9). From this perspective, large MATs, like T-ALK and others, can be viewed as a shadow state who operate on a scale similar to that of some local government authorities, albeit modelled more explicitly on the corporate competitive enterprise. Viewed from a governmentality perspective (Rose, 1999), these new powerful bureaucracies and professional entities provide a vital set of relays for linking the formally autonomous operations of the school with the requirements and objectives of the state apparatus (see Wilkins, 2017).

It is evident from this study and others (see Gobby and Niesche, 2019; Wilkins, 2019a; Young, 2016) that when viewed as an instrument used to strengthen accountability between schools and central government, the school governing body is likely to encounter problems when trying to introduce and sustain participatory, democratic forms of governance (Wilkins, 2019a), especially under the academies programme. This is because effective governance is increasingly conditional on the ability and willingness of school governing bodies to create themselves in the image of corporate boards. On this account, school governance can be described in terms of a 'post-panoptic' arrangement (Gane, 2012: 612) since school leaders and governors operate beyond the immediate disciplinary gaze of external funders and regulators. School leaders and governors possess certain professional discretion in terms of how they run their organisations, which they typically do through adopting self-evaluation strategies in their monitoring and appraisal of the school's financial and educational performance. Yet, the self-evaluation strategies employed by school governors, be it output controls, performance indicators or skills and competency audits, are not designed to improve teaching or learning so much as providing evidence to external regulators and funders that a culture of 'performativity' exists in which school governors, like staff, 'organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations' (Ball, 2003: 215). As Lemke (2007: 55) argues, 'governance is about steering and regulating a world without radical alternatives, it is animated by the search for "rational", "responsible" and "efficient" instruments of problem management'.

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