

Undiminishing School Governance: Investigating ‘Governance Maturity Theory’ for School Governing Bodies.

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Organizational maturity can inform decision making, build strategy and underpin development. This paper argues that ‘Governance Maturity Theory’ (GMT) can similarly act as a developmental modality for school Governing Bodies - and offers an alternative to disciplinary mechanisms such as inspections. Evidence generated by governors, Chairs and Governance Professionals of Boards in England were used to map the value of inspections for developing school governance and to co-construct GMT. Grounded in organizational maturity theory and governmentality, the project developed two key findings. First, despite inspections driving much of what schools and Boards did, they had diminished the role of governance and had negligible value as either a developmental framework or for ascertaining the value of governors’ work. Second, GMT could support Boards to build their decision making and strategic leadership capabilities and drive their development. The paper concludes that GMT can enable Boards to resist the inspectorate’s gaze and its notions of undemocratic ‘good’ governance and move towards mature strategic leadership.

Keywords: Governance; maturity; governmentality; accountability; development.

Introduction

In their 2024 paper, Andrew Wilkins and Denise Mifsud asked, ‘What is governance’ (Wilkins and Mifsud, 2014)? Here, I contribute to this discussion by arguing that neo-liberal and undemocratic modes of governance prevalent the English Education system can be reset - in some way at least - by reconsidering how school Governing Bodies (GBs)¹ are understood and developed.

For those unfamiliar with the English education system, it is worth highlighting how its funding, inspection and governance are high-profile policy discourses². The task of overseeing schools’ financial performance, developing vision and strategy and holding the Executive to

¹ ‘GBs’ includes the governing bodies for maintained schools, individual academies and academies which are part of Multi Academy Trusts (see DfE, 2020a; 2020b).

² The school budget for England in 2023-24 is over £57 billion.

account, is undertaken by GBs consisting of voluntary members. Exact numbers are unclear, but the United Kingdom's (UK) Department for Education (DfE) estimates around 300,000 governors in England³.

This paper reports on an ongoing project, exploring how 'Governance Maturity Theory' (GMT) can act as a democratic, inclusive and developmental modality for school GBs. In doing so, it offers an alternative to discourses referring to governance as being 'effective', 'good' or 'high-quality' and which are underpinned by inspections currently undertaken by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). The paper argues that GMT is a developmental modality for GBs that can support how they 'think' and - along with tools such as Maturity Matrices - 'do' governance, much in the way that Ransom (2003) rejects performative framing of school governance.

Whilst there has been work exploring education sector governance (for example Clapham and Vickers, 2016; 2017; Wilkins 2016; Wilkins and Gobby, 2022), investigating the value of inspection for GBs, and how GMT can support GBs development, is novel. It is worth noting, that GMT was co-constructed by those that might be called 'experts' in the governance space (governors, Chairs, governance professionals) and as such there is a danger of simply reproducing the performative and disciplinary practices it sets out to avoid. To address this, there is ongoing work involving the stakeholders (pupils, parents and policy makers) for whom GBs work, to further develop GMT. This is particularly important as there is evidence to suggest that school governance in its current form ('skills' based GBs; removal of democratically elected middle tier; smaller centralised MATs boards) has rendered it an undemocratic activity (see Riddle and Apple, 2019; Wilkins, 2019; Hetherington and Forrester, 2022).

³ As education is devolved, the UK government does not have power over education policy in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This paper focuses on England.

The project employed Organizational Maturity Theory (OMT) (Crosby 1979) and governmentality (Foucault, 1982, 2007) as a means of resetting the way school governance is understood and GBs developed. The project was organized across two phases, in the first interview data generated with governors, Chairs and Governance Professionals⁴ (at the time of writing, $n=158$ governors have contributed to the project) was analyzed to map the policy context in which school GBs operated - specifically Ofsted inspections. In phase 2, governor expert groups drew on this policy analysis and OMT to co-construct GMT.

The paper maintains that GMT challenges narratives positioning school governance as a non-democratic technical/instrumental tool (see, Wilkins, 2019). As such, it can support GBs to resist performative, accountability and disciplinary technologies such as the *Education Inspection Framework* (EIF) (Ofsted, 2022a) - technologies which have lessened the importance of school governance (see NGA, 2020; Clapham *et al*, 2023); failed as a developmental framework (NGA, 2022) and led to GBs adopting compliance focused, rear-view modes of governance (Clapham and Vickers, 2017).

The paper concludes that whilst set within the complex policy and accountability space of the English state education system, GMT is applicable to any setting where governance occurs be it locally, nationally or internationally. GMT therefore, not only has the capability to develop how GBs ‘do’ and ‘think’ mature strategic leadership but empowers them to resist the inspectorate’s gaze and its notions of undemocratic ‘good’ governance.

Ofsted

It is useful to give readers not necessarily familiar with Ofsted some background to the inspectorate (see also: Ball, 1997, 2003; Clapham, 2015a, 2015b; Jones *et al*, 2017; Perryman, 2006; Perryman *et al*, 2018). Ofsted is a non-ministerial, independent body that undertakes inspections of educational institutions including independent schools, state schools, academies

⁴ The term ‘governor’ is used to describe these roles collectively.

and childcare facilities in England. Although independent of government, it is accountable to Parliament because central government provides its funding and Ofsted's actions must also be explained to the education minister. Currently, Ofsted uses one of four 'one word' rankings to grade schools: 'Outstanding'; 'Good'; 'Requires Improvement'; and 'Inadequate'⁵ (see Clapham *et al*, 2016).

Since its inception in 1992, Ofsted has attracted significant criticism, comment and debate. This has heightened after the suicide of headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023, with the coroner for the case ruling that an Ofsted inspection had contributed to Perry's death. In June 2023, the UK Parliament's Education Select Committee instigated an inquiry into the way Ofsted inspected schools (particularly in terms of workload and wellbeing), the usefulness of its reports, the impact of Ofsted's judgments (particularly the one word ranking system); the effectiveness of its complaints procedure; and the effect of the EIF. Whilst at the time of writing the Inquiry is yet to report, there have been some changes in the inspectorate's discourses. For example, in January 2024, the incoming Chief Inspector Sir Martyn Oliver admitted Ofsted could be "far more empathetic" (Jefferys and George, 2024).

It is also noteworthy, that despite its support by successive UK governments, the Ofsted model has not been adopted internationally (Jones *et al*, 2017). Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015), examined how school inspections were completed in seven European countries and found that the Ofsted was unique. Of the seven, only England made inspection reports publicly available; had thresholds for judging if schools were failing; published examination results; or used sanctions as a mechanism to improve standards. That Ofsted remains so high profile in England - despite its failure to be adopted by other jurisdictions - is all the more intriguing

⁵ At the time of writing, these 'one word' judgments - along with the 'value' of Ofsted – are part of a Parliamentary inquiry. <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7761/ofsteds-work-with-schools/>

considering that its impact on standards is inconclusive (see for example Jones and Tymms, 2014).

Ofsted's operations

Ofsted inspections are conducted under Sections 5 and 8 of the *Education Act* (2005). A Section 5 inspection is a 'full inspection', whilst a Section 8 is a 'monitoring visit', however if inspectors identify serious concerns, a Section 8 inspection can become a Section 5. Schools are typically notified the working day prior to the start of an inspection, however, Ofsted can undertake 'no-notice inspections' in certain circumstances. Both types of inspection report on the achievement of pupils; the quality of teaching, leadership and management (including governance); and the behaviour and safety of pupils. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is also considered, as is the extent to which the needs of all pupils are met.

Although maintained schools, individual academies and academies that are part of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) are all state schools, key aspects of their governance vary (see DfE, 2020a; 2020b). Nonetheless, they all share the common feature in that along with the EIF, their governance is inspected in accordance with the *School Inspection Handbook* (Ofsted, 2022b); and *Governance Handbook and Competency Framework* (DfE, 2017).

The *Handbook* is a significant policy text consisting of 459 sections (section 320 is concerned with governance). Sections 321 and 322-324 indicate the technical differences between the governance of maintained school and of academies in a MAT along with the statutory requirements for GBs such as the Equality Act 2010, Prevent duty⁶ and safeguarding (section 328). Sections 405 to 427 outline the judgements Ofsted can make, with section 416 providing the grade descriptors for the Leadership and Management of schools which includes

⁶ The 'Prevent Duty' relates to the prevention of children, young people and adult learners from being drawn into terrorism' and safeguarding them from extremist ideologies and radicalisation.

governance. Only the ‘good’ and ‘inadequate’ descriptors specifically mention governance and there is not a separate judgment or grading for it. Nonetheless, inspectors are required to include a section on governance in the final report.

Ofsted and governance

Much like the inspectorate in general, how Ofsted inspects governance has also attracted debate and criticism (see the National Governance Association 2020, 2022 and evidence published by the Education Select Committee, Clapham *et al*, 2023). In the NGA’s 2020 report, governors claimed some inspectors misunderstood school governance and conflated operational matters with strategy. Governors were critical of the quality and length of inspection meetings and the focus of questions. Governors were particularly critical of inspection reports which were seen as often ‘tokenistic and unhelpful’ and ‘too brief, simplistic...and patronising’ (NGA, 2020, 6). The NGA reports concluded that Ofsted had weakened the role of school governance and must do more to ensure that governance, and the work of GBs, are recognised more fully.

Clearly, Ofsted inspections are extremely high-stakes. Despite being contested for over 30 years - and its failure to be adopted by other jurisdictions - Ofsted has remained imbedded in the education policy of every government since its inception. However, at the time of writing, with a newly incoming Chief Inspector in place; the Government’s response to the Parliamentary Inquiry published; and Ofsted announcing the [Big Listen](#) consultation, the way Ofsted operates is perhaps at a point of change.

In the following sections, organizational maturity theory and governmentality are discussed.

Organizational maturity theory

Organizational maturity theory (OMT) (Crosby, 1979) argues that maturity ‘stages’ can map an organization’s processes and practices over time. These stages are not destinations but steps that organizations move through, moreover, organizations are not required to be highly mature

in every area of their operations to be effective (Harmon 2009, argues that most organizations are located within the first two maturity stages).

Key to moving through stages, is the relationship between an organization's age and the maturity of its processes (Negron, 2020). Power (2007) argues that an organization can be mature in terms of its age and yet have immature process and practices. Conversely, immature organizations (in terms of age) can have highly mature operations. This is particularly important, as it highlights how organizations must constantly reflect upon and re-assess the maturity of their operations.

Mapping maturity stages, underpins how OMT operates as a developmental, rather than disciplinary, modality (see Negron, 2020). When organizations acknowledge areas of immaturity - and instigate developmental strategies - they immediately become more mature. Similarly, mature and maturing organizations acknowledge that whilst accountability is crucial, a developmental culture (rather than one based upon punishing 'underperformance') is most effective. Due to its popularity OMT - and tools such as maturity matrices⁷ - have continued to be developed (see Jokela *et al*, 2006; Maier *et al* 2009).

Despite the prevalence of research exploring OMT, applying it to the governance space is comparatively under examined. What little work there has been, has employed OMT to explore the governance of private sector companies. Rehman and Hashim developed a framework for measuring corporate governance maturity (2018) and the impact of mature governance on forensic accounting (Rehman and Hashim, 2019), whilst Filatotchev *et al* (2006) investigated governance lifecycles. While these aspects are clearly applicable to the public sector, the specific context that public sector organizations such as schools face – and how these impact on governance - does not feature in this work.

Governmentality

⁷ Maturity matrices gather holistic information to rate levels of maturity (Gajdzik, 2022).

Foucault (1982, 2007) defines governmentality as ‘the conduct of conduct’ and is concerned with making ‘bodies’⁸ governable, the practicalities of ‘doing’ government and the ontology and epistemology of ‘thinking’ government. Foucault uses ‘government’ both in its historical and contemporary senses in that it can be the guidance, leadership and management of the family (see Ball, 2013), as well as the way the State governs ‘at a distance’ (Bailey, 2013). Foucault (2010) views government not as a sole actor, but as an assemblage of ways of thinking and doing, but also cautions that the state has increasingly taken over the role of government via governmentality ‘dispositifs’. Foucault (2010, 108) outlines how ‘institutions, procedures, analyses ... calculations and tactics’ are ensembles which mediate governmentality. Consequently, governance (and in the case of this paper, GBs) is both a governmentality tactic and governmentality ensemble.

Foucault’s ideas around governmentality have been applied to education (Ball, 1997; 2013); school inspection (Perryman *et al*, 2018); and school governance (Wilkins and Gobby, 2016; 2022). Much of this work looks at the intersection between inspection as a governmentality dispositif and the way actors negotiate the inspection landscape. Perryman *et al* (2018, 148), for example describe inspection as both a form of surveillance and governmentality dispositif. Whilst their work focused on teachers and senior leaders rather than governors, much of what they described resonates with research examining GBs of schools and colleges (see Clapham and Vickers, 2017; Wilkins and Gobby, 2022).

For example, Perryman *et al* (2018) argued that the influence of governmentality and disciplinary technologies such as Ofsted, meant that policy decisions were often made to ‘conform to Ofsted’s expectations’ and that the influence on leadership and management was ‘clearly apparent’ (146). Moreover, what Ball (1997) calls the ‘gaze’ of inspection regimes has

⁸ Foucault uses bodies to describe individuals, groups and organizations.

the outcome that teachers - and I would also argue governors - feel under constant observation and therefore act in accordance with normalized models of 'good practice'.

Wilkins and Gobby (2022, 10) suggest governmentality analysis highlights the way such conditions 'are imagined, compelled, incentivised, and regulated' and how 'recalibrations of education governance' (Wilkins and Gobby, 2022, 2) play out. Wilkins (2016) argues that demands from government and non-government bodies for 'strong' school governance, have resulted in increased levels of performance management, monitoring and disciplining of both senior school leaders and governors – with the result that governors have internalized the 'logic of the market as frameworks for guiding their own moral action' (Wilkins, 2016, 146).

Wilkins (2016, 78) goes even further by arguing that Ofsted has resulted in 'isomorphic tendencies among governors' designed to 'win the favour' of inspectors. As he continues, many of the economic and political rationalities that are 'shaping the conduct of governors' are related to high-stakes accountability, disciplinary and governmentality structures (of which inspection is particularly prominent). The outcome of these tactics upon governors are stark, with Wilkins powerfully describing how some governors experienced a sense of foreboding whilst awaiting the inspector's gaze.

This is not to say that resisting the gaze does not occur. Foucault (1981) argues that resistance is formative and informative and is directed against 'practices' and particularly the 'multifarious practices of governmentality' (Ball, 2013, 148). However, resistance does not enable GBs to somehow 'escape' the demands of Ofsted, nor to become immune to a neo-liberal model of governmentality. Rather resistance positions mature governance as a function of democratic government that - rather than aiming to make the population 'governable' - is part of an autonomous, self-empowering political landscape.

Mobilizing OMT and governmentality (as both theory and analysis) provides a composite lens on how school GBs - and indeed GBs in any setting - operate and develop.

Combining the two outlines how GBs can develop as a form of strategic leadership, whilst negotiating ever more powerful regulatory and disciplinary modalities.

The next section considers the project's methodology, data and analysis.

The project

The project⁹ consisted of two phases: phase I focused on inspection and governance, whilst phase II developed GMT. Phase I data were generated via one-to-one interviews with informants, phase II data were generated by five expert groups. Informants were governors of maintained schools, lone academies and academies part of MATS as well as Further Education colleges¹⁰. In both phases, a naturalistic interviewing approach (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) was adopted, with data captured in reflexive field notes. Data¹¹ were analyzed via reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) resulting in two main themes (Table 1).

Table 1 HERE

Table. 1. Thematic Analysis

In phase II, the expert groups drew on the phase I data - along with organizational maturity models and matrices - to develop the core aspects of GMT. Expert group participants were provided with a draft version of the GMT stages prior to meeting, so they could highlight areas for discussion. Expert group informants also considered two sets of questions. In the first, they were asked if they agreed with the phase I informants' concerns around inspection and

⁹ The project received favorable ethical opinion from the university Ethics Committee and all participants provided ethical consent (see BERA, 2018).

¹⁰ There was no correlation between types of school governors were trustees for and the themes.

¹¹ The type of school that informants were governors for is indicated in parenthesis.

governance. In the second, they were asked if governance maturity could be a developmental modality for GBs, and if so, what were its key aspects.

Overwhelmingly, phase II informants agreed with the analysis from phase I (that the current inspection system had diminished governance and had failed to support GBs to develop) and that GMT could act as a developmental modality. At this point that the expert group discussion turned to developing GMT - Analysis of the annotated versions of the draft GMT stages and the expert groups' discussions resulted in Table 2¹².

TABLE 2 HERE

Table. 2. Core Aspects of Governance Maturity

Mapping the data

In these ensuing two sections, data from phases I and II are presented along with supporting commentary.

Phase I: Mapping inspection and Governance

Informants described inspection as lessening the importance of governance and failing as a developmental framework or for ascertaining the value of GBs. As a result, some GBs adopted rear-view modes of governance as a way of conforming to inspector's expectations. These concerns reflected how informants considered Ofsted not just in the governance space, but for schools *per se*:

Before I became a governor, I supported inspections. Now...I've changed my view. There're so many structural problems with them [inspections] they really don't help

¹² Table 2 illustrates the 'core' stages of GMT. For the 2023-2024 academic year, a GB is piloting a governance maturity matrix based upon this model.

schools [to develop] ...we're always looking over our shoulders, worrying that Ofsted is looming up from behind. (Informant A, Maintained)

Informants also felt that inspection had negligible value developmentally and that some inspectors were unclear about the lines between the operational and the strategic:

...[governance] isn't about being operational. Day-to-day expertise is held by the teachers not us. I'm not an expert in education, the teachers are...so why are inspectors asking about operational stuff? (Informant C, Academy)

However, the area most frequently criticized by informants was the purpose, quality and composition of inspection reports:

...they [inspection reports] don't make Boards and governors better, I think they do the opposite. (Informant C, Academy)

They're [reports] too short, don't provided insight and are broad-brush...other than that they're fine! (Informant D, Maintained)

Particularly significant, was how one word rankings - and the poor quality grade descriptors regarding governance - was highly problematic:

I don't even know what 'good' means! Describing all the work of a Board, let alone an entire school, in one word is frankly ridiculous. (Informant E, Academy)

These comments reflected informants' wider concern regarding the clarity of Ofsted's role. A minority felt that Ofsted should remain a regulator that checked on compliance. However, the majority argued that Ofsted should become a school improvement body primarily offering developmental support.

Crucially, informants described Ofsted as having a fundamental effect on how GBs 'thought' and 'did' governance. They repeatedly used words such as 'fear', 'terror', 'dread', 'horror' to describe the inspection process. Informants described that these terrors resulted in GBs becoming so fixated on being ranked 'good', that they lost sight of their core purpose:

Inspection is the central topic of discussion...our job [the GB] is to be strategic, but the whole focus of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is on operational stuff and how that will be seen by the inspection. Strategy becomes driven by the operational... (Informant G, Academy)

Much of what the informant described was borne from deep frustration around Ofsted. However, there was also frustration arising from the lack of tools capable of capturing the value (rather than supposed quality) of GBs work. This was compounded in that the value of governance for schools was not evident in inspection reports. Informant W's (Maintained) comments were not untypical:

...there must be a better way of measuring the value of governance [than Ofsted]. Otherwise, what's the point...if we don't know it's value, other than as part of inspections...

Other governors had also considered this point and suggested some alternatives. Most common amongst these was the use of maturity matrices, however two other suggestions kept recurring. First, was mapping the extent to which SLT and GBs views concerning the purpose of governance aligned (a suggestion that resonates strongly with Q methodology, see Coogan and Herrington, 2011). Informants felt that there were often fundamental differences in these views, most notably around operations and strategy. They felt that a lack of highly aligned views was not necessarily problematic. However, what was potentially problematic, was when such a lack of alignment was not evident in discussions between SLT and GBs. Informants felt that an indicator of the value of GBs could be ascertained by was mapping, discussing and embedding these beliefs within the work of both SLT and GBs.

The second alternative also focused on GBs value. Informants felt that in contrast to Ofsted's linear representation of quality, the value of governance should be seen on two different levels. One of these should be on the social level, that is, how GBs work specific

effects teachers, parents and pupils. The second should be on the global ecological level, which maps governance as part of the bigger picture around the value of education at the local, national and international scales (in the way that doughnut economics, Raworth 2017, and Sustainable Development Goals, OECD, 2024, operate).

Informants' data suggests therefore, that inspection had diminished school governance and had negligible value as a developmental framework or for ascertaining the value of GBs work. As a result, some GBs had adopted rear-view models of governance as a tactic for negotiating the inspectorate's demands. Consequently, there was a pressing need for new models for developing GBs and ascertain the value of their work, that went beyond what Ofsted currently offered.

Phase II: Co-constructing GMT

Expert group informants felt there was strong synergy between organizational and governance maturity and that like OMT, GMT can empower GBs to take ownership of their process, practices and vision:

Maturity is about taking ownership of what's going on and making quality central to everything. It's also about understanding that [developing] maturity takes time... (Informant H, Maintained)

Informants felt that like mature organizations, mature GBs are constantly moving through maturity stages and could be effective whilst not highly mature in every aspect of their work:

Mature organizations and GBs are both looking for continuous improvement. But they also know that they don't have to be super mature in everything. (Informant I, Maintained)

Consequently, informants regarded both OMT and GMT as developmental rather than disciplinary mechanisms:

A mature organization or a mature GB develop because they know they must...not because they're worried that an inspector is coming and might give them a bad grade. No matter how big and successful they are...they're constantly aware that strengths and weaknesses won't remain static... maturity ebbs and flows. (Informant K, Academy)

As these data suggest, informants considered that adapting OMT to the governance space offered GBs a range of developmental opportunities as well as supporting GBs to take ownership of how they 'did' and 'thought' governance.

In these subsections, data from expert group informants pertaining to each of the GMT stages are examined.

Immature GBs

The immaturity stage resulted in considerable debate, as informants felt it described failing GBs and therefore required particular attention. They felt that whilst one of the benefits of applying GMT to even failing GBs was its focus on development, GBs - not matter what their stage - must be held accountable. This notion of accountability was important, particularly as Ofsted was considered limited as a useful accountability mechanism. Informants felt that in contrast to Ofsted, GMT was a means of supporting GBs to acknowledge areas of immaturity and to instigate developmental strategies, rather than "ignore problems and hope they'll go away" (Informant Y, Academy).

Like Informant Y, other governors described 'ignoring problems', as indicating GBs immaturity. It also highlighted how the disciplinary nature of Ofsted did little to support GBs to be open about their shortcomings. Immature GBs also lacked structure, vision and strategy and were reactive rather than proactive. They relied on ad-hoc practices and process, which were only made successful by the efforts of key individuals:

Immature governance is chaotic...it doesn't lead on vision or strategy. There's hardly any communication and what there is, isn't effective. There're are a few key folk holding it all together. (Informant M, Maintained)

Crucially, immature GBs failed to ‘think’ governance as much as ‘do’ governance. Without practices enabling them to do mature governance, these GBs were unlikely to move beyond an immature approach toward thinking governance. Similarly, GBs that failed to think governance - in terms of strategy and vision - were unlikely to have strong and effective organizational process and practices. Informants stressed that regardless of whether GBs had immature processes, immature thinking, or both, this lack of maturity had significant implications:

It [an immature GBs] doesn’t have vision or strategic leadership...and probably isn’t even undertaking its statutory duties... let alone the holding the Executive to account. (Informant N, Academy)

Informants acknowledged that supporting GBs (no matter what their maturity stage) to think governance was as complex than enabling them to do governance. Nonetheless, informants felt that GMT afforded immature GBs particularly the means of developing both how they did and thought governance. Furthermore, as soon as immature GBs acknowledged their immaturity - and put into place change processes - they became more mature.

Fundamental GBs

Whilst fundamental GBs were significantly more mature than immature GBs, they were nonetheless almost exclusively focused on compliance:

...compliant Boards are doing what they’re supposed to do...but no more than that...being compliant isn’t where governance stops. It’s the starting point. (Informant O, Maintained)

However, GBs at the fundamental stage were beginning to understand their role regarding vision and strategy and have process and practices in place to articulate these:

[Fundamental GBs] ... are beginning to know what they don't know...so, they're asking for the information needed to make informed decisions. They've started to get leadership infrastructure in place...they're beginning to 'do' governance. (Informant O, Maintained)

Even so, GBs at this stage were mostly undertaking their statutory requirements and no more. Many informants were more critical of GBs content to remain at the fundamental stage, than immature and non-compliant GBs that actively set out to develop. Despite these concerns, informants felt that fundamental GBs were beginning to 'do' and 'think' mature governance. They were starting to hold the Executive to account and 'push-back' when necessary; developing strategic approaches toward asking for and analyzing data and becoming resilient regarding pursuing answers to questions they had asked. Overall, fundamental GBs were becoming a proactive and strategic form of leadership.

Maturing GBs

Informants described two significant differences between GBs at the fundamental and maturing stages. The first of these related to the strategies and processes that enabled GBs to challenge the Executive. The second pertained to GBs membership, specifically, the way that maturing GBs utilized governors' abilities and had diverse memberships.

Maturing GBs had clear and established processes and practices in place that enabled them to both do and think mature strategic leadership:

...everyone knows their roles and responsibilities, there're good structures in place, things are well run and efficient. That leads to confidence, so a Board starts to look forward, to lead and to move beyond just being compliant. (Informant Q, Maintained)

Maturing GBs also regarded holding the Executive to account as a core function of their work:

It's not about giving her [the Head teacher] a hard time but making sure she can tell us how the school's doing. And if she can't... we keep asking until she can. (Informant R, academy)

Rather than 'firefighting' day-to-day operational matters - or worse, undertaking 'tick-box' exercises designed to satisfy Ofsted - maturing GBs had the structures in place to look forward and set direction. Key to maturing GBs therefore was the quality, expertise and diversity of their membership. Such GBs recognized not just that the recruitment and retention of a diverse set of governors was crucial, but also how governors' abilities were best utilized¹³:

Mature GBs know that governance isn't about auditing [governors] skills...it's about how people can apply their expertise [as a school governor] ...it's got the right people, in the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time! (Informant S, academy)

Maturing GBs recognized that successfully recruiting and retaining good people - a significant challenge for many GBs - was only the starting point. This notion of 'good' people was explored, as it was potentially problematic. Informants were clear that good people did not mean 'people like us'. Indeed, the opposite was the case in that maturing GBs valued a diverse membership that had diverse attributes. Maturing GBs therefore sought governors who were representative and knowledgeable of the local community and were able to provide diverse experiences and viewpoints.

Maturing GBs therefore went beyond utilizing tools such as skills audits to map governors' capabilities. Indeed, the notion of skills based GBs is challenged by mature GBs who value a far more holistic and sophisticated understanding of governors' experiences, learning and capabilities. Similarly, maturing GBs adopted a holistic approach toward understanding the diversity and abilities of their members and mapping these toward different

¹³ Informants reported that GB increasingly failed to have full membership and that the recruitment of new governors becoming more problematic.

aspects of governance. Crucially, maturing GBs had structures in place ensuring that governors' understandings, experiences and relationships - rather than merely their 'skills' - were best employed.

Advancing GBs

Central to GBs at the advancing stage, was their acknowledgement that this was remained a stage not a destination. Advancing GBs were constantly aware of the need to develop, look forward and be proactive. Informants felt that whilst advancing GBs undertook the processes of governance consistently and effectively, they also demonstrated a sophisticated strategic awareness toward their own development. Perhaps most importantly, they were confident and tenacious in holding the Executive to account:

...[an advancing GB] is almost the complete package. It's got the right people and has a strong relationship with the Executive. It has the confidence to do what it believes in. But if a GB believes it's got all its 'bases covered', then it's not mature! (Informant T, academy)

Advancing GBs "did the simple stuff really well" (Informant U, academy) and understood how maturity was not static but an ongoing process:

...an advancing Board has clearly identified its goals ...it's got processes to solve problems and to review what's going on. It's always asking, "how do we improve", "what do we need to do better". (Informant U, academy)

However, developing maturity was just as challenging for advancing GBs, as for those at the less mature stages:

Mature GBs don't just happen, they take time and thought...for example the Head [Teacher] mightn't be happy with a Board that's becoming more confident and which challenges them more. So, they [advancing GBs] are always thinking about the next steps. (Informant V, academy).

To sum up, informants described advancing GBs as acknowledging their maturity stage, implementing strategies to develop over time and enacting direction setting and proactive governance models on their own terms.

Discussion

In the following section, governmentality (as both theory and analysis) is used to theorize around the inspection landscape and to understand how GMT can support GBs development.

Inspection as governmentality

The informants' data illustrate the complex accountability and policy landscape GBs faced and how these had diminished governance. Directing governmentality analysis towards this finding, highlights both inspection as governmentality (Perryman *et al*, 2018, 148) and the prevalence of 'governmentality of school leadership' (214). One of the many outcomes of this, was the ever present 'gaze' of the inspectorate and its impact on GBs. The gaze was a key driver for some GBs adopting rear-view governance models that were compliance rather than strategy focussed. However, the gaze was compounded by poor practice by the inspectors themselves. Frequently, lines were blurred between operations and strategy; inadequate meetings took place; and inspection reports were too short, failed to describe in depth the complexity of governance and were of little or no use as a developmental tool.

The gaze also meant that Ofsted's version of 'good' governance was normalized. This normalization of 'being good' - or more accurately, 'outstanding' as good was no longer good enough (see Clapham *et al*, 2018) - resonates with Foucault's (1991) argument that institutions 'educate' people about the requirements of success. Informants described how the stakes of inspection - and consequences of the gaze - were so high, that some GBs would focus almost exclusively on demonstrating that they had performed 'good' governance. Consequently, some

GBs adopted the tactics of ‘second guessing’ - or ‘gaming’ (see Perryman *et al*, 2018) - what Ofsted might want to see, despite this leading to rear-view governance.

Not only did such gaming result in rear-view governance, but it also meant that the whole inspection process became a performance (see Perryman, 2006). In contrast to immature governance that focuses on ‘performing compliance’, mature GBs regard mid and long-term strategy as central to their work - and are cognizant that developing maturity takes time; is not a linear process; and cannot be performed for an audience (be it the inspectorate or otherwise).

This point around mature governance not being performed, reflected some of the challenges GBs - no matter what their maturity stage - faced when governmentality and inspection become interlinked. These challenges were exacerbated by Ofsted’s version of ‘good’ governance failing to reflect key aspects of GMT. For example, GBs might be uncertain and immature in some areas and yet advancing in others. Unfortunately, Ofsted inspections (most notably the one word rankings) failed to reflect the complexity and sophistication of this movement through maturity stages. Consequently, and much like Wilkins’ (2016) findings, inspections are still ‘shaping governors’ conduct’ and resulting in tendencies designed to ‘find favour’ with inspectors.

Governmentality and governance maturity

Much like Crosby’s (1979) original work on OMT, mature GBs shared many of the core principles, outcomes and benefits of mature organizations. Mature GBs develop over time; recognize that maturity consists of stages not destinations; and understand that they can be at different maturity stages for different aspects of their work. Nonetheless, whilst this synergy is useful, governmentality analysis illustrates the unique complexities facing school GBs within the current political and governmental context - and illustrates how GMT can offer GBs a developmental framework to negotiate them.

This negotiation resonates strongly with Foucault's (1981) later work around resistance and its role in self-government, self-formation and care of the self (see Ball, 2013). It is important to stress, that employing GMT as a mode of resistance does not remove the demands of Ofsted, nor negate the 'multifarious practices of governmentality' (Ball, 2013, 148). What it does do, is support GBs to make strategic and tactical responses to these mechanisms. Self-governing and mature GBs therefore can counter pressures to internalize and adopt the logic of high-stakes accountability and disciplinary mechanisms.

This is an important point when considering how GBs should themselves be held accountable. Mature GBs acknowledge the limitations of Ofsted's model of accountability and its failure as a form of democratic accountability. Similarly, mature GBs are wary that accountability all too easily becomes concerned with 'ticking-boxes' and being compliant. Mature GBs regard accountability as occurring at the local level (the value of governance for pupils, parents, teachers, SLT), and ultimately, at the global ecological level (the value of governance for a fairer and more equitable world) which renders it democratic and developmental, rather than disciplinary.

Of course, GBs must also be cognizant of the power relations between themselves and accountability and disciplinary mechanisms - and acknowledge that they are both governors and governed. Mature GBs appreciate their role as a governmentality mechanism but see governance as a democratic activity adding value to schools' work. They develop informed, proactive and forward-looking strategy decision based upon what is best for school, not what plays best for inspectors (this is particularly timely, as at the time of writing evidence submitted to the Education Select Committee's inquiry has called for Ofsted to be restructured or replaced).

Again, it is crucial to stress that developing the maturity of GBs is not without challenges, nor is it a short term 'quick fix'. Embedding GMT within GBs operations, process

and practices occurs via policy enactment which is often a complex, unpredictable and conflicting undertaking (see Ball *et al*, 2012). Similarly, and all too easily, policy can become ‘hyperreal’ (Baudrillard, 1994) and idealized to such extent it loses all reference to its original context (see Clapham, 2023). Mature GBs therefore recognize that enacting such policies and developing maturity require significant reflection, awareness, resources, resilience and commitment. However, they regard the outcomes as worth the effort. Mature GBs resist pressures to perform compliance for inspectors; develop strategy in the best interest of pupils and schools; and have the confidence and expertise to reject rear-view governance models. Perhaps most importantly, mature GBs recognize that if they are to successfully undertake their core purposes, they must not be driven by the inspectorate’s gaze.

Mapping the value of governance

As much as informants described GMT as mediating GBs development, they also highlighted a pressing need for tools to capture the value – and complexity – of GBs work. There was a deep frustration around Ofsted, but also in the lack of availability of such tools. Whilst maturity matrices were capable of operationalizing GMT, they were unable to link the value of governance with school performance. Informants suggested two possible alternatives to do this.

The first of these focused on the level of alignment of views around the value and purpose of governance. Informants felt that, most notably concerning operations and strategy, there was often a lack of such alignment. This became problematic when SLT and GBs thought that there was alignment - or more concerning - had not even considered that mapping such alignments was useful. Informants felt that ascertaining how closely (or otherwise) SLT and GBs’ views aligned, could also be employed as a means of ascertaining the value of governance.

The second suggestion was that in contrast to Ofsted’s linear representation of quality, the value of governance should be seen on the social and global ecological levels. Much in the

way that doughnut economics (Raworth 2017) and Sustainable Development Goals, (OECD, 2024) operate, informants argued felt that the value of GBs must be reset from the over simplified and diminished way offered currently by Ofsted. Rather, the value of school governance should be a part of a complete reset of way education systems are valued *per se*.

Both suggestions are the focus of ongoing work in this space. However, of relevance here is that GMT was seen as part of a suite of new ways of valuing not just school governance, but education more widely. Whilst developing these alternatives is at early stages, what is clear from the cases in point is that the *status quo* cannot remain if school governance is to flourish as a mature form of strategic leadership.

Conclusion

The stories recounted here paint a sobering picture of school governance in England, a picture where accountability is becoming higher-stakes and yet developmental opportunities reducing. Informants powerfully described how Ofsted drove much of what schools did and yet had diminished the role of governance and was of negligible worth as a developmental framework or for mapping the value of GBs work. Governors were starkly aware of the high stakes involved in inspection and desperately wanted to do the best for their schools and pupils. For many, it was unsurprising that some GBs adopted rear-view governance in an attempt to attain the ‘good’ inspection ranking - despite doing so being counterproductive for how those GBs both ‘did’ and ‘thought’ governance.

There was some optimism however. Informants wanted a framework that enabled GBs to develop proactive, strategic leadership. Whilst not a ‘golden-bullet’, GMT was considered a modality through which GBs could achieve this. Similarly, whilst the current inspection system failed to ascertain the value of GBs, there was creative and innovative thought about new models that could do so.

Of course, it could be argued that GMT could be co-opted to become a disciplinary technology. However, doing so means that it ceases to be either developmental or concerned with governance maturity. Similarly, GMT does not enable GBs to somehow ‘escape’ the demands of Ofsted, nor to become immune to a neo-liberal model of governmentality. What it does do, is enable mature GBs to be a function of democratic governance that contributes to an autonomous, self-empowering political landscape. Mature GBs can therefore resist disciplinary technologies such as Ofsted (remembering that Foucault considered resistance as both ‘formative and informative’).

There are three more general points around GMT to consider. First, the age of an organization should not be conflated with the maturity of its governance. ‘Young’ organizations can have mature governance and ‘old’ ones anything but. Second, any governing body - be it public or private sector - can be at any point in the maturity stages. Third, whilst this project was set within the English state education system, GMT can be applied anywhere governance structures exist.

GMT is clearly not the ‘finished article and at the time of writing, there is ongoing work involving the stakeholders (pupils, parents and policy makers) for whom GBs work, to further develop GMT. Nonetheless, the cases reported here suggest that GMT can support GBs to undertake forward-looking and strategy-setting governance; to have a clear and long term focus on development; and to move beyond merely being compliant. Perhaps most crucially, it can mediate GBs to not only ‘do’ mature governance, but also to ‘think’ mature governance. Doing so, enables GBs to resist the way ‘good’ governance has become conflated with compliance and all too easily reduced to an undemocratic act performed for the inspectors’ gaze.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this project did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

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