BOOK REVIEW

Modernising School Governance: Corporate planning and expert handling, by Andrew Wilkins, London, Routledge, 2016, 188 pp., £36.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0815360674

With a view across the shifting field of education policy in Britain it appeared that the pace of privatisation in school governance had outrun attempts to address issues of accountability. Andrew Wilkins has stepped in to present the issues emerging from an altered landscape of governance in the post–2010 era. *Modernising School Governance* tracks the effects of recent policy changes in their historical context. Local authority governance has become a truth construct of the past as academies and free schools are now building what Wilkins terms an ‘oligopoly’ (p. 123) of umbrella structures to demonstrate management capability. So what does this mean for the forms of governance in operation in schools? Or for the types of interaction between governors and school communities? This book presents an eloquent investigation of such questions with a Foucauldian analysis that provides visibility through the two-way mirrors of current models of governmentality.

The task of addressing what appears to be the guarded supervision of tight clusters of schools is ambitious in scale. Wilkins’ relation to literature in the field of governance demonstrates a rigorous critical approach, which locates this study within a significant band of research, connecting particularly with Ball on performativity and Springer and on neo-liberalism. This research also retains the interpretive integrity of a qualitative approach, therefore countering the depersonalisation of neo-liberal forms of governance. The empirical basis is drawn from an 18 months study in nine state schools between 2013–14, in which Wilkins was assisted by Anna Mazenod. Wilkins has achieved a great advance for the field in gaining access to academies as discrete systems of governance and in tracking the intricacies of forms of discourse in use.

Readers with all levels of experience in the field will benefit from the author’s clear writing style and the well-signposted structure. Chapters 1 and 2 situate this study of governmentality in its historical importance for education policy, presenting a ‘genealogy’ of layers of reform. Through the data analysis chapters 4, 5, and 6, key observations are exemplified through qualitative data. Voices are included from respondents with different levels of authority within hierarchies of school governance.

A central issue at stake is the investigation of how the education sector is responding to ‘the hollowing out of the state’ (p. 5) by recent policy changes in Britain since 2010, which have encouraged the move towards self-governing ‘academies’. Among the observations of importance for the field, Wilkins notes that we are currently faced with the need for ‘improved democratic accountability’ (p. 2) as this is not provided in the state’s withdrawal to the position of a distant lever of power. He provides an informative critique of the removal of democratic processes in school governance, documenting the scoops and hauls of privatisation. This book raises questions about how we could best address the situation in which parental involvement and stakeholder governance is being devalued by a new breed of ‘expert’ strategists.

Wilkins’ refreshing application of concepts of genealogy and observations of the socially regulated ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980, p.131), that Foucault terms a ‘truth game’ (2007, p.164), adds to understandings of how systems of governance previously seen as ‘requisite features of a democratically robust education system’ (p. 10) have now been relegated. *Modernising School Governance* offers insight into the methods for subversion of democratic processes that private sponsors of academies are now free to exert.

**Developing contexts**

Wilkins presents the historical context to contemporary forms of governance in Britain. There is an interesting account of changes in the processes of government from the Clarendon Commission in 1861 and the 1868 Public Schools Act, to the 1944 Education Act and its concretisation of social inequality through the tripartite system that was administered by local authorities. This genealogical approach counters the sense of policy intangibility with an in-depth and multi-faceted perspective that enables readers to get a purchase on the central contemporary issues.

In Chapter 1, Wilkins’ draws attention to the regional experimentation in social governance in Sheffield in the 1970s ‘with greater numbers of parent, community and student voices introduced to the governing body’ (p. 20). This observation forms a focal point of difference with the current lack of representative participation in school governance. Such collective forms of participation, along with the original ‘free schools’ of the 1970s, were the experimental foundations for what have now become the firmly tailored academies run by ‘experts’ and ‘free schools’ of the twenty-first century.

Developing Ball’s concept of performativity, Wilkins focuses on what is meant by expertise in this contemporary context. Chapter 2, titled ‘Rituals in truth making’, defines ‘expert handling’ in relation to the performance mechanisms for ushering in or ousting managers of particular strategies for school governance. This is a kind of stylised policy trend that one might term ‘boutique management’: as Wilkins states it is not formed in a ‘culture that is casual, informal and shaped by lay administration’ which is the image of the stakeholder model (p. 31). Instead, we have a ‘new form of control’ (Ball, 2003, cited p. 34) which demands that school governors have a track record of skills in manipulation of resources, both human and economic. Governors now respond mainly to organisations such as Ofsted, which distribute constructions of effective governance as rituals of truth, that are evocatively described as shaping the ‘souls’ of governors (p. 33). Wilkins explains how the activities generated by impending Ofsted inspections, represent the adoption of guidelines for accountability as ‘pedagogies for surveillance’ that demand compliance (p. 82).

This adaptation of the concept of performativity in relation to governance is pursued through discourse analysis of the terms currently used in schools. These terms divide potentially subversive groups of governors through binary signifiers of success and failure such as ‘weak/strong’ or ‘amateurish/professional’ (p. 34). Wilkins’ analysis of the business structures conditioning governance identifies the ‘reculturing’ of governors to implement reforms according to such dichotomous formations of being in role (p. 96). Throughout this work, and developed particularly well in Chapter 2, there is a communication of the different cultural ‘texts’ in operation in school governance in their historically and socially ‘situated usage’ (Foucault, 1970, cited p. 39). The difficulties that governors face in fitting into these narrow and demanding definitions are given timely and appropriate consideration.

Alongside this Foucauldian relation to discourses of governmentality and performativity, Wilkins enters into a post-Foucauldian dialogue that critiques the concept of ‘neo-liberalism’ as it can be related to current practices of governance. For those of us who have ever wondered what ‘neo-liberalism’ actually is, the author provides a well researched critique of the term, which is used extensively for what can seem to be an indeterminate range of purposes.

In his treatment of the term and its usages, Wilkins presents insightful methods of interpretation which focus particularly on an explanation and exemplification of Springer’s four identified perspectives of neo-liberalism which are: ‘Neo-liberalism as an ideological hegemonic project’, ‘neo-liberalism as policy and program’, ‘neo-liberalism as state form’, and ‘neo-liberalism as governmentality’ (2012, pp. 136-137). As a further contribution to the hermeneutics, Wilkins identifies these approaches as having now become ‘porous’ and interconnecting through researchers combining different theoretical influences to analyse the social conditions.

Wilkins observantly connects Springer’s first three forms of neo-liberalism as they may engage with Marxist approaches, and in doing so furthers his exploration of neo-liberalism in the ‘state form’ as it relates to the government’s transference of direct responsibility to ‘quasi-autonomous’ organisations (p. 53). For example, the state is currently distancing itself from social welfare and the management of schools, preferring to enable forms of independent governance that address the agenda of the standards based national curriculum (DfE, 2014). Explaining the fourth perspective ‘neo-liberalism as governmentality’, Wilkins identifies this as a Foucauldian reading:

Here neo-liberalism is conceptualised as mobile assemblages of technologies and strategies utilised for the purposes of managing populations and political structures so that in the absence of direct government control, individuals and organisations may become self-correcting and self-regulating. (p. 54)

This definition provides a clarification of the concept of neo-liberalism so that its usage regains active substance and also explains ‘governmentality’ as it interacts with contemporary discourses. Moving out of Springer’s definitions, Wilkins acknowledges that neo-liberalism will transform again, ‘as an adaptive, mutating force that constructs ‘processes and practices of insertion’ (Clarke, 2008, cited p. 62). This statement relates to the Foucauldian sense that as the subject of governance begins to reflect on their ‘points of insertion’ within institutions, greater agency and mobility become possible (Foucault, 1969). I would argue that through this research Wilkins encourages such emancipating critical reflection.

In defining the recent development of ‘Expert publics’ in Chapter 4, Wilkins explains how the private/public division of classic liberalism has moved towards a more pervasive form of governance as ‘formally autonomous entities or ‘private’ zones, be it people, spaces or institutions, are construed as both subjects of government and objects to be governed’ (p. 70). He considers how this sense of governmentality is rendered viable through its mobilisation of agency: there need to be aspects of choice in order for terms such as ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ to be brought into an equation that still enables ‘capacity to act’ (p. 71). It would seem however from the data referred to, that certain aspects of the self are permissible and others are moulded or trimmed. Through the conditioning presence of organisations such as Ofsted, ‘the proper conduct of governors’ (p. 76) is deliberated and outlying characteristics are kept in check.

Analysing this conditioning of subjectivity, Wilkins explores how ‘pedagogies of surveillance’ can be observed through ‘new policy technologies’ such as competition, audit culture and performance. These drivers are explained as being communicated by ‘new knowledge workers’ (p. 77) who enact the ‘expert handling’ of the state, such as the administrators of school inspection. Ofsted strikes fear into the inner workings of schools, so much so that governors and senior management rehearse their nightmare through mock inspections, using test materials supplied by ‘experts’ to form their own counter-expertise.

There is an emphasis on demoting choice for governors, as they are allocated certain roles ‘based on their skillset and experience’ (p. 115). Wilkins notes that governors do not have creative freedom to expand the meaning of their roles, but are expected to act according to their ritualised function. At this stage we could consider whether the ‘capacity to act’ is being trimmed to such an extent that the governing experience is that of being expected to respond with an automatic reflex. Wilkins evidences the erasure of differences among governors who are urged to act as one when under pressure. Corresponding with recent studies (Young, 2014), he reveals the almost nominal role in decision-making that individual governors have, in meetings which are procedural re-enactments. Extracts from the data bring to life the frustrations that governors feel, being effectively encapsulated in foregone decisions as ‘compliance officers’ (p. 118).

Wilkins develops our understanding of what I think is a significant point in contemporary policy making and implementation, which is that contemporary systems of governance seek to operate by neutralising factions of disagreement. There is as he says with reference to Rancière (2010), an ‘overreliance on consensus’ which ‘reproduces its own politics of inclusion and exclusion’ (p. 68). When analysing the discourses of governmentality, it would appear that the denial of conflict forms the basis for appearances of due democratic process. Participants can be seen as enacting normative forms of conduct based on competitive institutional agendas that rule out the human affective factor. These findings are of crucial importance as they provide convincing evidence of shifting accountability structures and the evasion of critical voices.

The author builds a picture of the subtleties of dissent as governing forces vie for contested values in a spatialisation of power through school networks. This is an essential aspect of Foucauldian theory, as evidenced in Wilkins’ description of policy discourse as –

a dynamic, productive space in which different governmental regimes intervene through the use of strictures, boundaries, limits and injunctions to help shape and guide the formation of subjects as citizens. (p. 36)

Such articulations breathe through this work with an energy that assists expansive connections with other situations in policy-making; this enhances the transferrable potential of the work.

Wilkins documents how parent governors who are elected by other parents and not by the governing body are ‘sometimes singled out as “problematic” or “difficult” (p. 91). The guiding motivation follows the approach of utilitarianism, and Wilkins convincingly argues that this neutralisation prevents the healthy questioning that is part of creative planning. To illustrate this effect Wilkins provocatively ends Chapter 4 with an extract of data in which a Head Teacher says he finds himself setting up the governors to challenge him, to stir up any form of differing contribution.

The steering of subjectivities in governance towards intended objectives is further illuminated in Chapter 5, ‘Business Ontology’, in which conditions of existence in roles organised by discourses of ‘professional conduct’ are examined through the data. ‘Modernised’ school governance is seen as moving away from a ‘bums on seats’ communitarian approach to appointing governors for their relevant skills. This would also appear to be a *modernist* streamlining of ‘form follows function’ (Yanow, 2010). Wilkins invites us to weigh the apparent benefits of increased school self-governance, against the paradox of additional forms of accountability, which are accompanied by loopholes that escape observation through the removal of critical voices. Extracts from the data register this shift towards professionalisation, or dehumanisation as one may see it, that facilitates schools’ actions to ‘weed out the weak’ as one LEA Governor puts it (p. 107).

Wilkins’ writing adds pin sharp observations which analyse the sociological motivations for new forms of governance. He states that:

Short termism or myopic thinking constitutes an impediment to strong governance. Instead governors are guided towards embracing the sovereign character of the resilient, agile, flexible, entrepreneurial self, in order that they may absorb disturbances, mitigate risks and overcome precarity. (p. 110)

Of course here the parent-governor would become associated with short-termism, in the duration of their children’s school experience. On the other hand the parental voice raises the authenticity of experience, and reprising the sense of the ‘truth game’ in operation Wilkins analyses the production of replacement ‘auditable truths’ through the data. Respondents document the importance of ‘transparency’ in auditing processes (p. 111) exacted through the micro-division of governors’ roles towards their areas of expertise.

Corresponding with the concept of ‘points of insertion’ for strategic changes in truth discourses and the relocation of resources, Wilkins identifies that the removal of local authorities has resulted in a ‘missing middle’ tier of governance (p. 27). Detailing the extent of cuts in funding which have siphoned away the functions of regional provision, he identifies the void in the distribution of cultural discourses of policy-making. The production of the regional vacuum and attempts to replace this middle layer through alternative systems of governance form a central theme in *Modernising School Governance*.

Wilkins seeks to explain what has happened in the absence of the middle layer of local education authorities, and finds there is a movement towards ‘repopulating the middle’ with alternative provisions – as detailed in Chapter 6. Of particular note is his observation that these alternative structures are in some ways replicating the purposes, and the faults, of local authorities. Wilkins weighs in with an original consideration of schools’ actions to combine and survive in multi-academy or ‘umbrella’ trusts. In forming alliances, schools can pool resources, increase cost-effectiveness through economies of scale, and maximise a sense of security. However Wilkins finds that in this choice there are still exertions of interest among senior management: few schools want to be out on a limb shoring up high risks on low budgets, without the safety net that was previously afforded to them via the authorities. Large-scale confederations are increasing in popularity among schools, without recourse to democratic elective processes. This is indicative of what Wilkins in relation to Clayton (2012) terms the ‘democratic deficit’ of such neo-liberal competitive clusters (p. 124). The ‘experts’ in governance are instead ‘free’ to practise strategic incisions in the forms of collective authority that used to be included in the governor’s role.

In concluding this far-reaching and very well evidenced articulation of the ‘complexity of accountability’ (p. 9), Wilkins explains his intentions in directing attention away from criteria for performativity in governance towards considering how we define the factors that combine to produce effective governance. He stresses the need to move away from the depersonalisation of governors as ‘compliant operatives’ (p. 135) of disembodied knowledge. Concluding statements are a space for authorial arguments to strike key notes and Wilkins does this particularly well as he draws together the factors which impact the shift away from people-centred approaches to governmentality through actors as units of expertise

*Modernising School Governance* has a powerful presence, as a communicative and interpretive text that raises our awareness of the screened activities which remove democratic processes and silence critical voices. Wilkins demonstrates the currency of Foucauldian theory, extending our understandings of performativity as it operates throughout the hierarchy of school governance. The combination of historical accuracy and empirical analysis is particularly robust and the candid expressions of participants in the research remind us of the human impact of recent changes. Wilkins documents the rapid normalisation of idiosyncratic approaches as ‘truth constructs’ in multi-academy trusts and free schools; this is arguably an important area for further research.

*Modernising School Governance* sets out initial intentions of forming ‘spaces for critiquing and problematising’ (p. 8) the meaning of school governance; these intentions are maintained consistently throughout. In portraying the shift towards ‘expert handling’ of schools Wilkins does not invite reminiscence about conditions under previous governments. We are encouraged to face the complexities of the audit culture that is replacing the stakeholder model, and in doing so to really analyse the processes involved. Wilkins recommends that this pervasive ‘reculturing’ of accountability could be redressed towards agential and dialogical actions of governance, moving the role of overseeing accountability to ‘a small band of paid experts’ in ‘regional teams’ (pp. 149–150). I wonder how we would convince the swathes of umbrella trust experts to relinquish their auditing and give space to the more humanising aspects of governance? Perhaps as Wilkins suggests, this could be achieved in reconfiguring what we mean by ‘effectiveness’ and allowing these different less dichotomous definitions to reach school cultures.

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