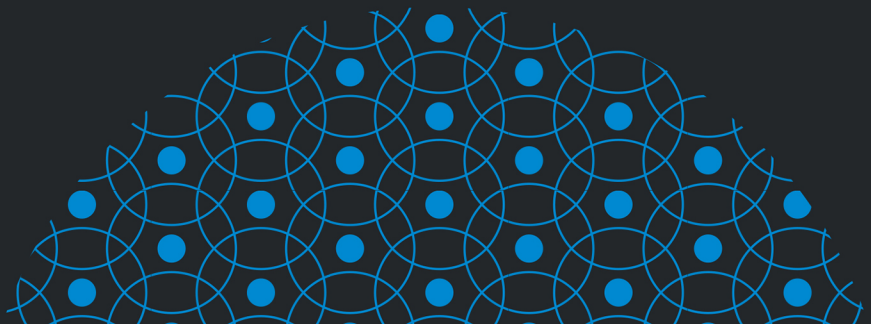
EMERALD POINTS

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PRIMARY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN ENGLAND

Training for Empowerment

SARAH CHUNG



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Training for Empowerment

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my children, Ethan and Connor, thank you for your love, understanding, and constant inspiration. This work is as much yours as it is mine.

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ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

This book begins with a simple but important question: are school governors truly being prepared for the role they are expected to perform? In an education system increasingly shaped by accountability, autonomy, and professional scrutiny, governors carry significant responsibility, often as volunteers, yet the support and training available to them remain inconsistent and underexplored. Drawing on the critical educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, this study views governor training not simply as the transfer of technical knowledge, but as a process of empowerment, dialogue, and critical reflection. Freire's rejection of passive models of learning provides a lens through which to examine governance. If governors are expected to challenge, question, and hold schools to account, training must do more than provide information; it must develop confidence, critical consciousness, and the capacity to act.

Ultimately, this book argues that governor development must move beyond compliance-driven induction towards a more dialogic and transformative model of learning. In Freirean terms, governors should not be positioned as passive recipients of policy, but as active participants in shaping educational leadership and democratic school improvement. Only then can governance become not merely a structure of accountability, but a meaningful force for equity, voice, and change within schools.

Keywords: School governance; governor training; Freirean pedagogy; mixed methods; professional development

INTRODUCTION: GOVERNANCE IN THE AGE OF COMPLIANCE

School governance has changed significantly since the 19th century, with increasing school autonomy bringing with it higher levels of accountability and more complex expectations for those serving as governors (Gann, 1998; Glatter, 2012; Male, 2021). Over time, this has contributed to a clear shift away from a stakeholder-based model of governance (Hughes and Richards, 1975; Taylor, 1977; Glatter, 2012) towards a more professionalised, skills-based approach (Connolly et al., 2017), reinforced by policy developments encouraging the recruitment of individuals with existing professional expertise (Gove, 2012). However, this shift has also raised an ongoing question about sufficiency: whether the skills governors bring from other professional contexts are enough in themselves, or whether additional training is required to meet the increasingly demanding nature of the role. Hill and Husband (2023), for example, suggest that even highly experienced professionals may still have gaps that need to be addressed through structured development.

Despite a growing body of literature on governance more broadly, relatively little attention has been given to how governors develop through training. This study responds to that gap by exploring perceptions of governor training from both governors and senior leadership team (SLT) perspectives, focusing on how training shapes understanding, confidence, and effectiveness in practice.

HISTORICAL PATHWAYS TO CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

It may be surprising to note that school governance is neither a new nor a modern concept, seemingly existing for a number of years (Taylor, 1977; Gann, 1998; Young, 2014). Gann (1998) traces the origins of school governance back to early trusteeship arrangements as far as the 6th century, with Sallis (1993) similarly identifying early forms of governance in the 14th century at

Winchester College. Both illustrate the longstanding presence of governance arrangements within educational institutions.

Historical governance differs markedly from contemporary understandings of the role. Trustees were typically drawn from those considered 'respectable' members of society (Gann, 1998, p. 8) and were far more operationally involved than modern governors, overseeing areas such as staffing, pay, buildings, and finance (Dunford, 1976; Gann, 1998; Baxter, 2017). In the 19th century, school inspectors were even instructed not to interfere 'with the instruction, management or discipline of the school' (Gann, 1998, p. 9) although they could indirectly exert pressure through funding decisions. This, Gann (1998) and Perryman (2009, p. 618) argue, contributed to early forms of performativity, with school managers producing increasingly favourable accounts of performance in order to present themselves as the 'good school'.

The late 19th century saw the beginnings of a more democratic governance structure through the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, which required board members to be elected for fixed three-year terms. Despite this shift, school managers remained heavily involved in operational matters, including fundraising and supervising teachers (Gann, 1998; Gear, 1999), responsibilities that would now be seen as crossing the boundary between strategic governance and operational leadership (Allcroft, 2016). Representation within this emerging democratic system was also limited. Under Section 15 of the 1870 Education Act, boards retained the right to appoint school managers, reducing true democratic participation (Gann, 1998). This lack of representation was reflected in board composition: in 1896, only 3% of 500–600 board members were working men, and by 1903, women made up just 2% of approximately 18,000 members. This imbalance was recognised as problematic even at the time, with Rev. Norris, an inspector with Her Majesty's Inspectorate, criticising the lack of representation (Gann, 1998).

In the early 20th century, governance became more formalised through the 1902 Education Act, which created a hierarchical structure linking central government, Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and schools. School managers acted as an intermediary layer between LEAs and individual schools, providing local oversight while maintaining alignment with national policy. Attention also turned to who could serve in governance roles. The 1918 Fisher Education Act prevented teachers from acting as managers within their own schools, a position later reinforced by the 1944 Butler Act and one that contrasts sharply with the modern inclusion of staff governors. By this stage, governors were appointed by the LEA or co-opted and were expected to provide the 'general direction of the conduct and curriculum of the school' (Gann, 1998, p. 15). However, despite this formal responsibility, their role remained

poorly defined, often resulting in ineffective governing bodies and strained relationships within schools (Gann, 1998).

Between the 1944 Butler Act and the 1970s, there was increasing pressure to strengthen school governance and make governing bodies more representative. Groups such as the Campaign for the Advancement of State Education (CASE), the National Association of Governors and Managers (NAGM), and the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) all advocated for stronger, more inclusive governance structures. This emphasis on representation was also reflected in the 1975 British Educational Administration Society conference, where parental involvement was highlighted as particularly important (Glatter, 2012). Boynton argued that 'a strong and vigorous local government is a good cornerstone for any truly democratic system' (cited in Hughes and Richards, 1975, p. 6). Building on this, the Taylor Committee (1977) recommended that governing bodies should include LEA representatives, staff, parents, and members of the local community. This marked the development of the stakeholder model of governance, which has largely continued into contemporary governance structures, with governors holding responsibilities for curriculum development, financial oversight, and the appointment of staff and headteachers.

During the 1980s, school governance underwent significant reform. The 1980 Education Act formally replaced the term manager with governor (Wilkins, 2016), signalling a shift in how school leadership roles were understood. The 1980 Education Act and the 1986 Education Act (No. 2) also introduced a statutory requirement for governing bodies to include parent and local authority representatives, with specific proportions set for each stakeholder group (Balarin et al., 2008; Wilkins, 2016). Furthermore, the 1986 Education Act established a four-year term of office for governors and emphasised the responsibility of LEAs to provide governors with information and training. However, while governing body composition became clearer, progress in defining governors' responsibilities remained limited.

This period also marked a major shift in power distribution. For much of the post-war period, schools were largely controlled by LEAs, while governing bodies were dominated by 'local politicians or church representatives' (Balarin et al., 2008, p. 10), reflecting limited stakeholder representation. The 1986 Education Act (No. 2) began to change this by giving governing bodies formal oversight of key operational matters, including expenditure. This shift accelerated with the 1988 Education Reform Act and the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS), which devolved significant financial and managerial responsibilities to governing bodies, increasing school-level autonomy and accountability (Balarin et al., 2008; Woods and

Simkins, 2014; Wilkins, 2016). As governors took on greater responsibility, the need for clearer role definition became more pressing. The School Standards and Framework Act (1998) sought to address this by emphasising governors' responsibility to promote 'high standards of educational achievement' and to 'facilitate open dialogue with parents' (Wilkins, 2016, p. 43).

By the beginning of the 21st century, the role of the governor had evolved substantially, with the role almost unrecognisable from that of the 19th-century governor. Essentially, governors are now expected to adhere to a strategic role, no longer undertaking activities that could be considered operational, such as fundraising or commenting on teacher performance seen in previous iterations of governance (Allcroft, 2016). In addition to changes in individual roles and increased responsibilities, governance structures themselves also evolved. In an attempt to '…bring a distinctive approach to school management and governance and offer a radical option to raise standards in areas of disadvantage' (DfES, 2001, p. 44), the government introduced city academies, leading LEAs to lose further powers and responsibilities (Purcell, 2011; Brundrett, 2012; Gorard, 2012; Wrigley, 2012; Baxter, 2020). The further expansion of the Academies Programme produced a more diverse governance landscape, with a wider variety of models than ever before, including single-academy trusts, multi-academy trusts (MATs), umbrella trusts, and collaborative partnerships. Further to these structural developments, governors had a notable increase in responsibilities, which included oversight of areas such as admissions.

PROFESSIONALISATION: EVOLVING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF GOVERNORS

As governance structures became more complex and governors' responsibilities increased, expectations of individual governors also grew. Alongside calls to move beyond the 'archaic amateurism of old-fashioned committee protocols…to be more professional' (Gove, 2012, n.p.), there was a clear shift towards viewing governance as a skilled and professional role rather than one based primarily on representation. This can be seen as the beginning of a move away from the traditional stakeholder model of governance, with Gove (2012, n.p.) arguing that governors should be chosen for their 'skill, not because they represent some political constituency'. This marked the development of a skills-based model of governance (Connolly et al., 2017).

Government policy increasingly reinforced this approach, committing to 'continue to help governing boards to recruit skilled people, and place

stronger expectations on them to ensure their members undertake appropriate induction and training' (DfE, 2016, p. 15). As part of this shift, then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan proposed removing parental representation on governing bodies, a role once passionately advocated for in the 1970s. Although this proposal faced significant opposition and was later reversed by her successor, Justine Greening, Baxter (2020) notes that parental representation continued to decline in practice when compared to governors recruited primarily for their professional skills.

Although representation remains an important principle of governance, James et al. (2013) emphasise the need for governing bodies to include a diverse range of skills capable of meeting the increasing demands placed on governors and supporting effective governance. They particularly advocate recruiting individuals with managerial and professional experience, where the necessary competencies are often most evident. They also highlight the potential value of retirees, whose professional expertise can be utilised without the time constraints often associated with full-time employment. In practice, however, recruiting highly skilled professionals can present challenges, particularly in relation to time commitment. This is reflected in Roden and Allan's (2020, p. 134) account of a governing body with 'fantastic' capability, where members nevertheless 'found the time needed extremely difficult to commit to'. While Roden suggests increasing the size of governing bodies as one possible solution, James et al.'s (2013) argument for recruiting professionally experienced retirees may offer a more practical alternative, combining both expertise and greater availability.

While there is considerable emphasis on recruiting skilled professionals, whether actively employed or retired, James et al. (2013, p. 36) also acknowledge the reciprocal benefits of involving 'young professionals', both for the contribution they can make and the development opportunities they gain. However, a group that appears to receive less attention is those 'looking after the home or the family' (James and Goodall, 2014, p. 28). While the value of recruiting professionals is made explicit, there is little discussion of how governors from within the home might be encouraged or supported. James and Goodall (2014) do note that respondents valued governors who could take a broad and comprehensive approach to the role, showing commitment not only to an individual school but also to the wider education system and all pupils. Being a parent from the local school community does not necessarily conflict with this broader perspective, particularly where appropriate training is provided. Indeed, parent governors may demonstrate a heightened level of commitment because of their direct personal investment in the school and its outcomes. However, this contrasts with Hill and Lake (2008), who suggest

that parent governors can be problematic where their focus becomes short term and linked only to the duration of their child's attendance, potentially limiting long-term strategic thinking and creating instability should they leave the governing body when their child finishes.

Concerns regarding the role of parent governors extended beyond issues of potential instability resulting from parents leaving before completing their term, or assumptions about their ability to adopt a holistic perspective. Bauch and Goldring (1998) highlight the difficulties associated with implementing a 'parents as partners' ethos, noting concerns that parents may be perceived as 'overstepping' professional boundaries by questioning those in positions of authority. However, they also suggest that increasing parents' knowledge of how schools operate can lead to more effective interactions between parents and education professionals. This implies that appropriate training may enable parent governors to develop the confidence and capacity required to act as effective partners in school governance.

Reflecting again on the introduction of academies and free schools, and the associated increased level of autonomy, levels of accountability and external scrutiny have intensified (Wilkins, 2015). The expectation of being held to a professional level of accountability by Ofsted, 'one of the most punitive and high-stakes models in the world' (Baxter, 2020, p. 40) subsequently led to the development of a more professional model of governance, replacing the 'safe, comfortable, and informal environment of a "bums on seats" culture' noted by Wilkins (2015, p. 183). Moreover, Wilkins (2015) argues that increased scrutiny of governing bodies reflects a degree of institutional insecurity within the Department for Education following the expansion of school autonomy. As a result, there has been a growing expectation that governors and governing bodies, despite being composed largely of volunteers, should operate to higher and more explicitly professional standards than previously required. In seeking to fulfil these expectations and discharge their significant legal responsibilities, governing bodies have been encouraged by the government to recruit 'high standard' governors. In this context, those who bring pre-existing skills and knowledge developed through professional development are frequently viewed as an example of a 'good' governor (James et al., 2013; Gann, 2015; Wilkins, 2015). However, despite the emphasis placed on recruiting and retaining highly skilled, professional people for governance roles, Baxter's (2017, p. 35) study challenges how governors are perceived, with Baxter noting that headteachers see them as 'well-meaning but ineffectual volunteers'. This would appear to be in direct opposition to the government's public stance on school governors.

A notable development in the wider professionalisation of school governance is the reconsideration of its volunteer basis, driven by increasing responsibility and complexity. Sir Michael Wilshaw, former Chief Inspector of Ofsted, proposed that governors should be paid, arguing that schools should remunerate them 'as much as the school budget could afford' (House of Commons, 2014, p. 27). Finch et al. (2016) similarly suggest that both maintained and academy schools should have the option to remunerate governors. Although often presented as a contemporary proposal, paid governance has historical and international precedents. Forrest et al. (2023), for example, note that in some Northern Irish colleges, governing board Chairs can receive up to £20,000 per year, reflecting the increasing complexity, time demands, and specialist expertise required of governance roles, as well as challenges around recruitment and retention. Paid governance is also evident in parts of English Further Education (Fino, 2019), with the Association of Colleges (AoC, 2022) providing guidance on its use. However, the AoC (2022) emphasises that remuneration remains an exception to the general principle that charity trustees are unpaid and sets out a series of eight considerations for institutions introducing payment. These include whether payment improves skills or diversity, whether unpaid recruitment has been attempted, whether the role remains that of a governor rather than an employee, cost-effectiveness, risk and conflict management, and systems for monitoring performance and terminating payment if necessary.

Three examples of FE college groups that had adopted some form of paid governance, albeit of varying amounts, are NCG, LTE Group, and the East Kent Colleges Group (Fino, 2019). LTE Group, for example, paid seven governors £11,833 and three co-opted governors £3,000, while NCG had a single paid governor who received £15,000. The East Kent Colleges Group also listed only one paid governor, but this individual received £20,000 (Fino, 2019). For both Fino (2019) and later Forrest et al. (2023), the payment of governors organically arose from the extension of the expected responsibilities of the role and the impact this would ultimately have on the time commitment needed. For Fino (2019), there was also the possibility that a paid role would further support both recruitment and retention.

Despite suggesting that remuneration may support recruitment and retention, Fino (2019) also highlights concerns raised by Louise Thompson, Head of Policy at the ICSA Governance Institute, regarding the reconfiguration of a role historically rooted in volunteerism. As reported by Fino (2019), Thompson further reflects on the possibility that courts may hold paid governors to a higher standard, thereby increasing the level of legal accountability to which they could be subject. This reflects the broader shift towards the

professionalisation of governance, where the introduction of remuneration not only reframes the role as a form of professional service rather than voluntary contribution but also aligns with an increasingly compliance-driven system characterised by heightened expectations, accountability, and legal responsibility. However, Fino (2019) was not alone in highlighting concerns over paid governance. Forrest and Hill (2017) also consider the potential for governing body reductions justified on the basis of cost savings, although they acknowledge that their study did not identify any evidence of this occurring. Nevertheless, such considerations reflect the potential of broader professionalisation and corporatisation of governance, where efficiency, accountability, and cost-effectiveness increasingly shape the structure and operation of governing bodies.

In addition to addressing the increased responsibilities and time commitments associated with the role, paid governance has also been proposed as a means of improving the calibre of governance candidates and promoting a more professional standard of governance (Forrest and Hill, 2017; Forrest et al., 2023). For Sir Michael Wilshaw, the composition of the governing body should include former HMIs, local authority advisors, and headteachers (House of Commons, 2014). Wilkins (2015) also noted that the presence of 'skilled' governors gives a level of strength to a governing body. This belief is further reinforced by Ofsted (2016), who claimed that governing bodies could struggle to understand or use performance data, without certain professional skills. In contrast, Gann (2015) questions the assumption that a 'professional' governing body represents the ideal model of good governance, illustrating this concern through the example of Swindon Academy. Gann (2015) stresses that despite having a governing body with a number of highly established professionals, such as Sir Anthony Greener (former chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority); Mary Curnock Cook (Chief Executive of UCAS); Colin Fraser (retired Deputy Head of Marlborough College); Nic Allott (Marlborough's Director of Science); and Mike Godfrey (Chief Engineer at Honda), Swindon Academy nevertheless received a warning letter and an inspection judgement of 'Requires Improvement' from Ofsted (Dunn, 2013; Gann, 2015).

Additionally, questions arise as to whether the appointment of 'professional' governors is appropriate in maintaining a clear distinction between strategic and operational responsibilities (Balarin et al., 2008). Numerous studies have established that strategic and operational guidance is unclear, with some evidence of difficulties in distinguishing between the strategic (governance) and operational (SLT) aspects of governance (Hill and Lake, 2008; Balarin et al., 2008; Baxter, 2017). While the government has acknowledged