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# What is governance? Projects, objects and analytics in education

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**ABSTRACT**

The term 'governance' is one of the most widely applied concepts in education policy and research. Yet its meaning has changed over space and time both analytically and normatively. This history is a complicated one marked by both shifts and continuations in the politics of language and the development of unique intellectual histories and conceptual and empirical turns in the field of education. In this paper we systematically delineate the different meanings ascribed to governance within education with a focus on its polyvalence as a political project, empirical object and research analytic. Specifically, we highlight the various complementarities and tensions flowing from this rich and evolving language. We conclude by calling for more education researchers to reflect on this complicated history and attendant language as part of their framings and interpretations of governance.

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## Introduction

The term governance is one of the most widely applied concepts in education. Rhetorically, it can be traced to the emergence of a 'modernising agenda' among mainly Western nations since the 1990s where the focus has been to locate public sector reform within a narrative of social change that celebrates public-private partnerships and private sector modelling of public sector organisation as user centred, equity driven or anti-monopolistic (Newman 2001; Vidler and Clarke 2005). At the heart of this narrative is the promotion of market mechanisms of choice, competition and performance culture as ancillaries to modernisation. This includes dismantling older political settlements, what might be called welfarist or socio-liberal paradigms of public sector organisation where 'citizens should enjoy a minimum level of rights (economic security, care, protection against various risks and so on)' (Johansson and Hvinden 2005, 106) and where traditional government structures act as the primary vehicles for public service delivery, monitoring or improvement. While this language of governance has been rearticulated within different countries to complement and develop existing policies and politics, from China (Su and Tsang 2023) to Latin America (Rivas and Sanchez 2022), it retains, despite

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these translations, a universal commitment to market prerogatives and actions that include remodelling public services as a function and measurement of cost, compliance or performance efficiency.

Transnational organisations like the World Bank (2013), for example, have emerged as enduring sites for the articulation of this language: they tacitly use governance in a strict normative and/or organisational sense to reference the internal, performance-driven operations and outputs of public services. In this framing, governance is located within a functionalist narrative where it serves as a kind of 'technical-instrumental practicality' for bringing about 'specific social arrangements' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 105). These arrangements include improved internal performance monitoring and reporting among public service workers, with the aim of producing highly contextualised albeit calculated information that is amenable to external statistical mapping, prediction or control. To take one example, the World Bank (2013) equates 'proper' institutional governance with improvements in the capacity of remote authorities like regulatory agencies to hold public services to account for specific policy aims and outcomes. The OECD (2019), on the other hand, while faithful to some elements of this functionalist narrative, link governance more widely to activities that aim to improve conditions for trust building and experimentation in service delivery, often through a strategic focus on downward or local accountability predicated on stakeholder involvement. Here governance can be linked to 'optimizing the administration of a state-run system' or increasing 'competition' or 'local participation' (Altrichter 2010, 153).

At the same time, governance has developed through a separate history and language that is more conceptually and descriptively diffuse. Within this model of active reception, empirical investigations are used to trace the uneven development of governance histories as complex formations continually adapting to contexts in which 'relations may change, new elements may enter, alliances may be broken, new conjunctions may be fostered' (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 126). Against any prescriptive or normative concern with 'fixing' meaning, these investigations document struggles *over* meaning owing to the complicated distribution/translation of governance across geopolitical space. Ozga and Roberts (2006, 1), for example, helpfully characterise policy as 'embedded' and 'travelling'. Policy is embedded to the extent it is anchored through national and local politics or specific path dependencies. At the same time, policy is always travelling as is unfolds across/within different geopolitical contexts and time-space constructs where it is borrowed, installed, resisted or combined (co-articulated) with existing programmes (see also Clarke et al. 2015). Similarly, governance can be understood as embedded/travelling since it is mobilised at different levels, sites and scales made possible by the discursive and material organisation of political-administrative structures like 'local governance', 'state governance' and 'European governance'.

But these governance arrangements are fragile precisely because they are undergirded by 'specific semiotic, social, institutional and spatiotemporal fixes' (Jessop and Sum 2016, 108) that require continuous work/practice to sustain them. And here is the crucial difference between normative and analytical or empirical approaches to governance. The former is motivated by an explicit interest, often political or economic in suturing meaning. In this framing, what might be called a model of passive reception, governance is tacitly used in a performative and organisational sense to bring about certain effects, be it improved efficiency, accountability, audit or performance. The latter, in contrast, has as

its focus the revisability of governance both as a conceptual framework for empirical investigations of reality *and* as a political project for achieving specific or not-yet-realised goals to be decided democratically. Here researchers of governance are particularly motivated by the ways in which multiple entities hold together and operate (or not) across multiple differences and contradictions to produce different possibilities and histories of governance.

## Focus

To help make sense of this complicated history, in this paper we systematically delineate the different meanings ascribed to governance within education with a focus on its polyvalence as a political project, empirical object and research analytic. Our focus is education literature on governance, specifically literature produced by researchers working within/across traditions of 'education policy sociology' (Ozga 1987) and 'critical policy sociology' (Gale 2001), among other traditions. While the term governance features as a dominant framing for education research across the globe, our focus here concerns a specific literature that addresses the conditions and consequences of education policy design and implementation or 'enactment' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). This is because said literature has made extensive use of governance as a useful analytic for situating theoretical and empirical investigations of education change both (inter-) nationally and globally, be it through the study of 'networks' (Hartong 2018), 'globalisation' (Sellar and Lingard 2013), 'datatification' (Williamson 2016) or 'expertocracy' (Grek 2013). Here the concept of governance has emerged as a significant interpretive and sensitising tool for contextualising empirical studies of the changes occurring at, and at the intersection of different meso, micro and macro levels, from the institutional and local to the national and global. The underpinning literature for our discussion was generated through searching keywords ('governance' and 'governing') across various search engines and academic journals that compliment said literature. We excluded some related keywords from our search, namely 'governmentality' and 'government', since these keywords, while overlapping with and productive of the language of governance, speak to some very specific theoretical and political traditions. Our review of said literature included: i) tracing the various meanings ascribed to governance; ii) mapping the different conceptual framings underpinning those constructions; and iii) documenting the various complementarities and tensions flowing from this rich and evolving language. In what follows we continue to document some of the explicit normative claims underpinning governance as a political project, as illustrated above, while also exploring the shifting meaning of governance, both analytically and empirically, resulting from changing geopolitics and empirical/conceptual turns since the 1980s and 1990s.

## Normative contests

During the 1980s and 1990s, political and social scientists turned their attention to empirical investigations of globalisation and its effects (Giddens 1990). The rapid pace of change made possible by new modes of translational capital accumulation, global competition and technologically driven social connectivity brought into focus new kinds of ontological insecurities and economic risks (Bauman 1998). The rise of global

corporations, supranational organisations and international political and economic unions, for example, meant that the empirical study of politics and authority could no longer rely on a single vantage point or isolated entity such as the 'nation state' or 'government'. Economic and cultural processes under globalisation, including the role of the nation state in the emerging global political economy, were instead studied as multi-causal and multi-dimensional in origin/influence (Beck 2000). It is here that the explanatory power of hierarchy was criticised for its inability to capture the operations and influence of new moral and epistemic communities and knowledge networks operating within emerging polycentric systems called 'networked governance' or 'heterarchical governance' (Olmedo 2014). During this time many national governments developed strategies for coping with the diversity and complexity flowing from processes. Conversely, these strategies can also be understood to contribute to the development of such processes. These strategies included devolving power away from traditional structures of government, typically derided by 'modernisers' as political perversions of market forces and incentives, and shifting it outwards and downwards towards communities, local organisations and parastatal organisations (inspection, credentialing and commissioning bodies) to perform the work of the state.

These strategies, described by Rhodes (1996, 652) as 'governing without government', represent a shift away from vertical structures of top-down government and a shift towards (and its displacement by) horizontal, flexible networks of bottom-up government, sometimes called the 'small state', 'small government' or 'devolved government'. In this context, the term governance signifies the shift from a centralised logic of structures to an autotelic or interactive logic of structures (Rhodes 1996). More specifically, it serves as a useful analytic for capturing the different ways in which non- and extra-state actors and organisations, such as communities, school boards and new intermediary organisations like charities and private companies, are activated to continue the work of 'government' albeit on the basis of some continued form of 'steering' by centralised authority (Rhodes 1996). That is to say, governance does not imply unconditional decentralisation but is contingent on actors adhering to certain rules and responsibilities mandated by others. This is because national governments and international organisations, while ostensibly committed to a programme of decentralisation, want to avoid what they call 'governance failure', namely the mishandling or abuse of financial and management powers by self-governing entities and/or their failure to engage in the kinds of data gathering, monitoring and reporting of organisational performance that satisfies the assessment needs of external authorities (Wilkins and Gobby 2022). On this description, 'good governance' can be tacitly linked to some very explicit strategies and solutions that emphasise risk mitigation, performance monitoring, financial probity, and output evaluation/control (World Bank 2013). Here good governance is mobilised in a very strict normative sense to reference universal claims to 'quality', 'standards' or 'effectiveness', usually framed by instrumentally narrow concerns that organisations are amenable to statistical mapping, intervention and even control by external authorities and evaluation bodies.

In England, for example, successive governments (Department for Education DfE 2013; Department for Education and Employment 1996; Department for Education and Skills DfES 2001, 2005) have couched the language of 'school governance' within a narrative of social change that emphasises new public management techniques

(Wilkins et al. 2024) to raise standards, improve quality and enhance (upward) accountability. Similar versions of school governance have been coopted and promoted by charities (NCSL 2012) and the school's inspectorate, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted 2001; 2011). In a discourse analytic sense, these descriptions of school governance are not only stipulative and iterative (capable of producing new meaning) but are also regulative (reflecting pragmatic attempts to delimit meaning). In the wider education policy literature, too, there are frequent references to improving 'effective governance' (Rowlands 2015, 1017) and strengthening 'governance quality' (Kwan and Li 2015, 319). Much of this language revolves around an implicit normative attachment to the modernisation thesis already described. Moreover, it omits something important about the site of governance as a dynamic and productive space in which problem representations (or ideological dilemmas) are negotiated through the provision of meaning and the possibilities of 'doing governance differently' in a practical-normative sense (Thomas 2022, 12). Ranson (2003, 474), for example, rejects corporate/performative framings of school governance in favour of democratic/inclusive ones: 'Governance needs to be a space responsive to the politics of difference . . . recognition . . . and the politics of presence so that the voice of the marginalized is brought into the centre'. Similarly, Gandin (2011, 236–246) points to 'alternatives to neoliberal governance' by describing the rise of deliberative settings in Porto Alegre, Brazil 'that involves active participation of the citizenry in the planning and monitoring, allowing for efficiency and public control at the same time'.

These efforts among education scholars to locate governance within epistemologies that are 'democratic' (Boyask 2015, 569), 'participatory' (Dahlbeck 2014, 164) or 'dialogic' (Hughes 2022, 253) allude to some unique struggles over meaning within the wider literature. Moreover, within the education literature specifically, there are diverging perspectives among education scholars on what is required to achieve these forms of governance. For Hatcher (2012, 23), democratic governance requires 'a pedagogic argument for the interdependence of school and community as the necessary condition for effective learning', thus foregrounding community-school relations as a lever for democratic processes. For Locatelli (2019, 106), on the other hand, the state is vital to 'ensuring that an effective democratic process is accomplished, and all actors take part in this process to an equal degree'. Similarly, Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) adopt a state-centric modality to argue for the importance of the regulatory power of the state to configurations of governance since networks 'do not have the capacity to perform many of the tasks required for governance and especially for democratic governance'.

Relatedly, there are conflicting perspectives among scholars on the major risks/benefits attached to governance. For Kooiman (2003) and others (Klijn 2012), governance gives rise to spaces that are plural and multivocal since they allow for greater forms of spontaneous interaction between citizens and service providers consensually engaged in community and trust building. As Kooiman (2003, 9) describes it, governance develops through the inter-subjective production of truths made possible by different actors engaging in strategic-rational use of selected 'images, instruments and actions' to arrive at mutually influencing sets of goals and interests. Adopting a deliberative-interactive approach, Kooiman (2003) emphasises the constitutive and enabling effects of communicative reasoning as the normative basis for governance. In this framing, governance is

celebrated by some as a corrective to the tyranny of hierarchies which includes the costs and constraints tied to the 'clunky command or instrumental contract relationships' (Davies and Spicer 2015, 226) that define relations between service providers and central government. Here top-down authority is criticised for limiting the capacity and incentives of organisations to self-innovate through more dynamic and sustainable forms of service delivery. Network governance therefore is 'considered a more efficient and democratic response to socio-economic coordination' (Milner, Browes, and Murphy 2020, 227). This utopian view of governance as community empowerment or user centred means that governance is also welcome by those who are critical of market models of welfare planning where provision is allocated through mechanisms of 'choice' and 'exit' (Gorad 1997). On this understanding, governance can be characterised as a response to the failure of state and market forms of welfare planning (Jessop 2000).

For Ball (2008, 748), on the other hand, these arrangements are dangerous precisely because they 'disable or disenfranchise or circumvent some of the established policy actors and agencies' who operate notionally within a democratic mandate. In some cases, policy networks and policy communities may actively work to exclude certain people deemed unfit to govern in ways considered 'professional' or efficient (Wilkins 2016). According to Davies (2012, 2698), 'governing networks may [therefore] be ensnared in the dialectics of hegemony domination' as they develop through the persistence rather than erasure of hierarchy. Against a postmodern view of governance as self-referential, autotelic and plural, Davies (2012) insists that governance persists through rule-bound hierarchies that uphold rather than undermine established forms of political and economic authority. In this sense, governance networks may sometimes perform the role of ancillaries to state power (Wilkins 2017b) where their main or secondary function is 'setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system's constituent institutions, instruments and markets' (Spotton 1999, 971). Furthermore, and against Kooiman's (2003) more enthusiastic accounts of governance as idealised interactive-deliberative models for social change, Bevir and Rhodes (2006) refute the idea that governance can be reduced to a communicative (Habermasian) model of action since this would imply that all social actors share the same capacity to translate their interests into pragmatic forms of social action that are agreeable or acceptable to all. Moreover, as Pierre and Guy Peters (2005) observe, the postmodern view of governance as generative of inclusive spaces for conflict resolution and bargaining appears to overestimate the capacity and desire of networks to self-govern effectively or fairly in the interests of others. Other scholars are critical of these trends which they equate with an 'erosion of public accountability' (Ranson 2003, 460) and 'deficit of democracy and democratic legitimacy' (Menashy 2016, 100) owing to the fact that participatory decision-making emerges in these contexts as tokenistic at best.

To the extent that different forms of 'problem representation' (Bacchi 1999) are not universally patterned but resolved contingently in specific contexts to accommodate specific relations of power and interest, governance too can be conceptualised as assemblages of heterogeneous elements that are uniquely (trans)local, mobile and networked (Wilkins et al. 2024). Governance, in this sense, is contestable and contingent (Bevir 2010). Thinking in this vein, we now turn our attention to documenting the various empirical and conceptual turns in education that, against any normative claim to fixing meaning, evidence the revisability of governance as a political formation and its

application as a potent analytic for mapping the changing and dispersed forms of authority influencing the organisation of contemporary education systems. Here we examine the different types of analytical and explanatory work made possible by the concept of governance as supplements to empirical investigations of education both nationally and globally.

## Empirical turns

Since the 1990s, around the time political and social scientists turned their attention to documenting and explaining the technological, economic and cultural effects of globalisation (Bauman 1998; Beck 2000; Giddens 1990), the term governance has been rearticulated within/across various academic disciplines to make possible new kinds of analyses and interpretations of a wide range of political, social and economic changes. This has in turn giving rise to a wide range of compounds:

> technocratic governance, financial governance, transnational governance, soft governance, hard governance, network governance, democratic governance, corporate governance, education governance, school governance, educational governance, therapeutic governance, global governance, international governance, intrastructural governance, multi-level governance, pluri-scalar governance, hierarchical governance, heterarchical governance, market governance, neoliberal governance, digital governance, philanthropic governance, meta-governance, governance by numbers, public governance, private governance, good governance, effective governance, community governance, stakeholder governance, self-governance, European governance, neurogovernance, local governance, psychological governance, pedagogic governance, collegial governance, higher education governance, epistemic governance, metrics governance, competitive governance, cooperative governance, collaborative governance, precision governance, research governance, centralised governance, decentralised governance, curriculum governance, mediatised governance, platform governance, welfare governance, mediative governance, regulative governance, participative governance, indigenous governance, bureaucratic governance, affective governance, academic governance, modernised governance, therapeutic governance, palliative governance, epistemological governance, inquisitive governance, urban governance, rural governance, neighbourhood governance, dialogic governance, discursive governance, competition governance, algorithmic governance, university governance, policy governance, comparative governance, state governance, syncretic governance, regulatory governance, and modern governance.

Governance is also used to represent or stand in for various complex processes and relations where it has been described as an 'art' (Pataki 2015, 57), a 'mode' (Milner, Browes, and Murphy 2020, 228), a 'technology' (Papanastasiou 2012, 415), and a 'discourse' (Sifakakis et al. 2016, 37). Moreover, governance is typically imagined through various organisational and geographical typologies, such as:

(i) levels (direct, midway, at a distance);
(ii) sites (federal, state, regional, local, institutional, individual);
(iii) tiers (regional schools commissioner, school governing body, board of trustees, local government);
(iv) scales (hierarchy, market, network); and
(v) spaces/places (schools, hospitals, prisons).

The term governance has also been used to capture, or at the very least rearticulate using existing taxonomies and heuristics, a wide range of new spatial, epistemic and ontological dimensions or turns, including:

> governance traditions' (Madsen 2022, 183), 'governance structures' (Hatcher 2012, 40), 'governance relationships' (Boyask 2015, 577), 'governance systems' (Mincu and Davies 2021, 436), 'governance discourses' (Brunila and Nehring 2023, 13), 'governance practices' (Eldridge et al. 2018, 79), 'governance frameworks' (Souto-Otero and Beneito-Montagut 2016, 16), 'governance procedures' (Altrichter 2010, 152), 'governance technologies' (Paananen and Grieshaber 2022, 7), 'governance processes' (Ball 2009, 96), 'governance role[s]' (Blackmore et al. 2023, 7), 'governance spaces' (Edwards and Brehm 2015, 286), 'governance relations' (Madsen 2022, 191), 'governance models' (Menashy 2016, 115), 'governance instruments' (Paananen and Grieshaber 2022, 3), 'governance modes' (Sellar and Lingard 2013, 722), 'governance strategies' (Brunila and Nehring 2023, 4), 'governance project[s]' (Cooper 1997, 508), 'governance institutions' (Davies 2012, 2696), 'governance functions' (Karlsson 2002, 327), 'governance contexts' (Milner, Browes, and Murphy 2020, 229), 'governance tools' (Moos 2009, 398), 'governance device(s)' (Papanastasiou 2012, 420), and 'governance obligations. (Rowlands 2015, 1025)

Since the 1990s, the term governance has also served as a useful analytic for capturing something qualitatively and historically unique about the networked effect of human and non-human agents on the development of education policy design/enactment. Central to this education literature, what Madsen (2022, 183) refers to as the 'field of educational governance' and Pataki (2015, 59) labels 'governance educational research', is a strong connection to disciplines of organisation studies and political science and international relations (Prakash and Hart 1999; Rhodes 1996; Stoker 1998) where governance is used both analytically and empirically to document the sustainability and complexity of emerging networked forms of partnership and service delivery in polycentric systems of rule. This includes a focus on governance as technologies and strategies for producing the conditions of possibility for reimagining and governing education in new ways, typically at the intersection of national and global trends. Brunila and Nehring (2023), for example, observe the importance of transnational actors and projects to the development of travelling rationalities like datatification and metricisation or 'precision governance'. Zambeta (2019, 378), on the other hand, explores how educational transitions in Greece, specifically those focused on student dropout and early school leaving, are understood and managed through the provision of 'comparability' lenses which act as 'governance strategies mediating the global and the local'. These and other authors (see Grek 2013; Hartong 2018; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Williamson 2016) not only demonstrate the salience and capacity of governance as an analytic for tracing relations between human and non-human agents operating in complex, multiscalar education systems. More significantly, they draw on these empirical investigations to develop and refine the concept of governance.

The above studies of education are unique in that they challenge or circumvent normative understandings of governance where governance is used either as a shorthand for decentralisation or strategies to improved efficiency. Instead, governance is developed here as an analytical tool for improving empirical investigations of reality, and vice versa, empirical investigations are used to test the validity and application of governance as a concept. For example, education research shows that international bodies and philanthropic foundations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Bank Group, among other supranational organisations, engage in various private and charity finance initiatives to promote the use of global standards to compare levels of student attainment and school improvement across different countries. Such initiatives contribute significantly to the development of new global spaces of 'networked governance' or 'philanthropic governance' (Srivastava and Baur 2016), namely the expanded role of multilateral, transnational and non-governmental organisations in national policy making and the selling of 'policy solutions' to different national governments, especially those in developing countries (see Bartlett and Vavrus 2016; Bhanji 2016). Policy network approaches in particular have helped education scholars to document the role of governance to enabling partnerships and collaboration or 'inter-scalar interdependencies' (Ball 2009, 97) between multiple actors and organisations spanning different sectors and backgrounds. Avelar, Nikita and Ball (2018), for example, supplement policy network analysis with ethnography to show the role of governance to the emergence of new moral and epistemic communities and knowledge networks. Using similar analytics, Kabir (2021) documents the role of international organisations to higher education reforms in Bangladesh with a specific focus on how network governance enables coordination, bargaining and negotiation between national and international actors and organisations. In this framing, governance can be linked to a range of post-national dynamics and trends, be it Europeanisation, regionalisation or globalisation.

Viewed from a different albeit related perspective, the analytic of governance can be used to signify and mark out the expansion and consolidation of public-private partnerships, competition, comparison, performativity, corporatisation, commodification or market-marking, where formerly 'public' or 'state-owned' activities and spaces are supplemented (or in some cases supplanted entirely) by new organisational logics and patterned behaviours. Reflecting on the rise of datatification and metricisation as modalities of education improvement and development, Brunila and Nehring (2023, 7) highlight the importance of partnerships to these developments, 'partnerships between (trans) national governing bodies, state policy actors, for profit industries and scientific research bodies influence education governance through multiple channels'. In other words, digital artefacts and infrastructures can be viewed as enabling features of expanded governance: 'specific operations that have come to assist the governance of the educational (policy) field: some measures are prioritized over others, explicit points of action are propagated and/or discouraged' (Decuypere 2016, 852). At the same time, education research suggests that there are limits to global or networked governance, that is, the unidirectional flow of influence across spaces and territories, given the resilience of national structures and processes (Silova 2012) and the rise of nationalism, populism and anti-immigration and anti-globalisation sentiment (Peters 2017). In this sense, is it important to remain circumspect of any reified or homogeneous accounts of global/networked governance which fail to take account of the diverse rationalities or 'assumptive worlds' (Sellar and Lingard 2013, 715) through which governance effects are realised or not. In this critical vein, Kwok (2023, 17–19) makes a very useful distinction between 'total governance' and 'mis-governance'.

## Conceptual possibilities

Education literature has also been vital to developing a more nuanced understanding of governance as an important object *of* government (Wilkins and Gobby 2022). Here

'government' can be understood in Foucauldian sense to refer to 'modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people' (Foucault 1982, 790). This implies a significant shift in thinking about governance, from a model of passive reception where governance is tacitly promoted through a modernising agenda that accepts performativity or efficiency as the policy aim, to a model of active translation where governance represents the process of modelling or incentivising behaviour and/or reimagining new spaces and activities for governing. Consider how governance is 'softened' or 'hardened' to achieve particular forms of socio-political coordination. As Maggetti (2015, 252) demonstrates, '"Hard" governance in the EU is operated through rules that arise from treaties, directives and regulations, while "soft" governance involves the use of non-binding rules that are nevertheless expected to produce effects in practice'. Data infrastructures are also essential to these processes, according to Hartong (2018, 136), to 'producing, transferring and mediating governing as topological knowledge'. Governance is also softened to bring about the translation or embedding private sector logics in public sector organisations, what Cone and Brøgger (2020, 375) call 'soft privatisation'. In contrast to 'hard governance', which is used to reference instruments of regulation such as directives, benchmarks and standards, soft governance captures those indirect, subtle modes of steering designed to incentivise or compel certain behaviours through the 'dispersion and demonstration of concrete practices' (Decuypere 2016, 853).

Education literature has therefore contributed significantly to developing the concept of governance as a way to reference or index a mode of subjectivity, desire creation, fantasy object, epistemic orientation or psycho-affective condition or affect. According to Aarseth (2022, 600), 'The current techniques of governance by metrics assessment are particularly forceful because they blend the desire for positional competition with the desire for a secured self in a single "metrics desire"', what Madsen (2022, 185) calls 'affectively charged governance'. In this framing, governance suggests the transformation of human beings into subjects of freedom and responsibility bound to and informed by specific 'discursive influences' (Moos 2009, 404). In this sense, governance can be understood as something that exists 'out there', working from the outside-in, as well as internalised through the subject, working from the 'inside-out'. Brunila and Nehring (2023, 9), for example, reflect on the role and impact of psycho-behavioural sciences and attendant technologies of behavioural categorisation, predictions, calculations, distinctions and classifications on the organisation of higher education to outline how 'education systems have come to be deeply implicated in broader strategies of therapeutic governance that seek to structure individual subjectivities through the discourses and practices of mental health'. For governmentality scholars too, governance represents productive spaces and relations for the cultivation of particular modes of self-governing among citizens (Wilkins 2017a; Wilkins and Gobby 2022).

Complementing this literature is a view of governance as a regime for the transfer and management of new responsibilities, a form of 'soft power' designed to elicit 'people in to take part in processes of mediation, brokering and "translation", and embedding self-governance and steering at a distance though these processes and relations' (Grek 2013, 696). Within this analytical turn, governance also emerges as a site of remote control or discipline directed at summoning particular behaviours and modes of self-creation. Here 'policy aims are achieved through the apparently autonomous actions of agents, but

actions which are heavily steered by various control mechanisms' (Gillies 2011, 208), what Kikert (1991) describes as 'steering-at-a-distance'. These steering-at-a-distance mechanisms may include 'audits, performance indicators, global rankings and bibliometric assessment methods' (Aarseth 2022, 589) and emerge as 'discipling powers' to promote the 'self-regulatory "conduct of conduct" of accountability to national standards' (Webb, Becerra, and Sepulveda 2022, 10). These innovations in applied theory have even led education scholars to claim that governance has expanded, shifted or mutated into 'new' forms:

(i) 'new governance' (Brunila and Nehring 2023, 2), referring to the shift from hierarchical, institution and state-bound governance projects to globally dispersed, interconnected, personally tailored or 'precise' governance;
(ii) 'new forms of governance' (Aarseth 2022, 589-590), referring to the rise of 'audits, performance indicators, global rankings and bibliometric assessment methods';
(iii) 'a new system of governance' (Karlsson 2002, 327), referring to the shift from 'nationalisation' to 'provincialisation';
(iv) 'new governance structures' (Kwan and Li 2015, 324), referring to the shift from 'school management committee' to 'incorporated management committee';
(v) 'a new form of governance' (Lawn 2003, 331), referring to the shift from the 'institutional' to the 'individual'; and
(vi) 'new relations of governance' (Lewis 2020, 488), referring to the shift from 'systems-level diagnosis' to more 'local', 'practice-led' diagnosis mediated by feedback loops generated by user input and data generation.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have systematically delineated some of the different meanings ascribed to governance in education with a focus on its polyvalence as a political project, empirical object and research analytic. As our analysis shows, the meaning of governance reflects a complicated history marked by both shifts and continuations in the politics of language and the development of unique intellectual histories and conceptual and empirical turns in the field of education. Our main motivation for writing this paper was twofold. First, we wanted to document how the meaning of governance is continually stretched and adapted in ways that make it appear, at least to us, as a detached signifier. The main risk here being that governance is extended unproblematically to other contexts and territories or spaces where it is used as a cookie-cutter typification or explanation for a wide variety of economic, social and political changes. And second, in response to these concerns, we wanted to offer up a set of starting points or orienting positions by which interested researchers, teachers and students might navigate this complicated history. Our account of this is history is admittedly a provisional and partial one based on selective literature, but it captures some of the unique struggles over meaning flowing from the language of governance. Here we have drawn on a specific field of literature produced by researchers working within/across traditions of 'education policy sociology' (Ozga 1987) and 'critical policy sociology' (Gale 2001), among other traditions, to better understand how governance is mobilised, at least within this specific literature, as an

interpretive and sensitising tool for contextualising empirical studies of education change.

We want to conclude this paper by calling for more education researchers to reflect on this complicated history and attendant language as part of their framings and interpretations of governance. We consider this important analytical and historical work as the meanings ascribed to governance seem infinite and infinitely dissoluble to the point where governance risks becoming another container model of social change like globalisation or neoliberalism (see Barnett 2005; Castree 2006). Governance, in other words, may suffer from the same abstract multifacetness that Clarke (2008, 135) attributes to descriptions of neoliberalism: 'omnipresence (treated as a universal or global phenomenon) and omnipotence (identified as the cause of a wide variety of social, political and economic changes)'. At the same time, we are not making any authoritative claim to how governance should be understood or (re)purposed for specific ends. We are not concerned with limiting the conditions of possibility through which governance can or should be understood in a normative or practical sense (see also Wilkins and Olmedo 2018). Nor are we claiming that there is a privileged method or approach to studying governance empirically or conceptually. As we demonstrate in this paper, there are a variety of analytical approaches and traditions, each with their own epistemological and ontological commitments, that make possible and defy different kinds of conceptual and political work, all of which serve as important vantage points through which to evidence trends in governance as well as develop and refine the concept of governance.

## Disclosure statement

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

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