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## Strategic leadership: board members in areas of high deprivation 'deliverology or systems approach?'

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**Title – Strategic leadership: board members in areas of high deprivation  
'deliverology or systems approach?'**

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Rapid and intense changes to the English education system, particularly since 2010 have created a quasi-market operating environment for schools. Research into other areas of the public services reveals that the ability of boards to create externally facing effective strategy, is vital for their survival and ongoing improvement, yet in education we know little about how school boards and the 300,000 volunteer board members within them understand, create and develop strategic direction for their schools. The paper explores board members' understandings of strategic leadership in multi-academy trusts in England and to what extent they follow a command and control or 'deliverology' approach based around targets, outputs, standards and budgetary control (Seddon 2003) and to what extent they take a systems approach-looking wider at their strategy in terms of the system in which it is located (Plesk, 2001). In so doing it explores how governor innovations in strategy have the potential to 'strengthen the ability of the systems to shoulder its own burden and to strengthen schools' ability to self-improve' (Hargreaves, 2010), by discussing (i) To what extent does governor understanding of strategy reflect a command and control or a systems approach? And (ii) What are the implications of this for governor development in the future? The paper concludes that a predominantly command and control approach to strategy may be stifling school development in this area.

## Introduction

The extent to which organisations are able to be strategic and high performing has been the subject of numerous investigations in the for profit sector and more recently across many areas of the public services. What actually constitutes 'strategy' and how it relates to performance is difficult to pin down. Equally, who does the strategizing, whether it is done by the leadership or, as many studies now reveal, it permeates the organization at every level and has exercised researchers and practitioners alike.

What is clear, from several studies is that organizations that take a proactive stance to strategy are very often successful (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). The role played by strategy in the English system of education has become increasingly important since The Education Reform Act of 1988, (Parliament. 1988), introduced the idea of education as a marketplace and placed the parent as 'consumer. Since then the ability of the board of board members and the senior leadership team to develop a strategic approach to school development has become central to the way in which schools and school boards are evaluated as well as a core element within successful school improvement (Ball and Junemann 2012, Chapman et al. 2010, Ofsted 2011b, a). In addition to this, collaborative school structures that have grown up since the New Labour Administration –academy chains, Multi academy trusts, cooperative schools and more informal collaborations, have presented new challenges for strategic oversight (Baxter 2016b). These challenges are not dissimilar to those faced by upscaling charter

management organisations in the US (Wohlstetter 2013, Farrell, Wohlstetter, and Smith 2012).

The idea of schools as semi- autonomous organizations, capable of effecting their own improvement, has been central to the thinking of a number of researchers and policy makers over the last thirty years (Harris and Chrispeels 2006, MacBeath 1999, McNamara et al. 2011). A core element within this has been the ways in which schools develop and implement strategies that are consistent with this aim (Goldstein and Woodhouse 2000, Mulford and Silins 2003, Hargreaves 2012). A good deal of research has also been invested in the ways in which schools in deprived areas can effect improvement in parallel to those in leafier suburbs (see for example Sun, Creemers, and de Jong 2007), and over the years a number of initiatives have been set in motion in order to drive improvement in these schools (see for example Matthews and Sammons 2005, Hargreaves 2012). In the present system of education in England, the ideal of the ‘self-improving school’ has been advocated by policy makers and researchers alike (albeit for different reasons). For policy makers it is the capstone of excellence in an ideologically market driven system of free schools and academies- schools that have financial and curricular freedom from Local Authority Control. For researchers it represents the ideal that schools are capable of driving their own improvement and the hope that should this be so then education may finally be (relatively) free from the type of incessant policy innovation and control that has characterised the system since the end of the post-war consensus in the late 1970s (Hatcher 1998, Creemers 2002, Ehren and Visscher 2008).

This focus on strategy and its implementation by senior leadership teams is not confined to education but has been central to government public service policy over the last 30 years (Mintzberg and Waters 1985a, Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006). One of the most influential policies in this area was articulated and implemented during the tenure of the New Labour Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair who developed two key organisations in order to promote improvement and drive strategy in UK public services: The first of these, the Audit Committee, whose remit was to report on the performance of all areas of public services; the second, The Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, was established to implement this policy (Barber 2008). The methods used by the latter have since received international recognition and in the context of education, have been rolled out internationally by the then Head of the Delivery Unit, Sir Michael Barber.

Since then the methods used by the delivery unit have been termed ‘Command and Control Methods’: however, as John Seddon points out, command and control thinking is not so much a model nor a method but rather, ‘a collection of ideas that solved different problems at different points in time- ideas that have solidified into norms’ (Seddon 2008:48). Since then these ways of thinking- which have often crystallised into rigid and inflexible methods- have been criticised in both for profit and not for profit sectors, as being too focused on, ‘specifications, regulations, targets and the like, which are actually making performance worse,’ (Seddon, 20008: V). Notwithstanding this, elements of command and control thinking have proved to be very attractive to government, not just in the UK but internationally and as such have come to permeate many discourses of strategy (see Barber, 2008). These ideas, exerting quasi-hegemonic influences that have been extremely influential in the ways that organisations, (including educational ones), think about and implement strategy. The systems of target driven results within the public services and education, the ‘deliverology,’ approach popularised by the ex-Head of The Delivery Unit- Sir Michael Barber, have, since been embraced and employed nationally and internationally, as a panacea

for what have been termed ‘falling standards in education’ (Barber, 2008). Yet many researchers argue that years of target setting and deliverology – have not in fact produced ‘better education’, nor have they produced ‘better public services’ (Boyne 2003a, Boyne and Chen 2007).

The real and imagined limitations of command and control approaches have provoked a backlash in both public and private sector, amongst those who believed that the focus on processes ignored fundamental questions of productivity (discussed later in this paper). One of the first authors to refute efficiencies claimed by aficionados of command and control thinking was an American consultant, W. Edwards Deming, whose work led Japanese industry into new principles of management and revolutionised their quality and productivity (Edwards Deming 2000). Since then this new style of management or ‘systems thinking’ has reframed the ways in which organisations in both private and public sector think about strategy in relation to performance (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015, Heracleous and Jacobs 2012, Laine and Vaara 2007, Collarbone and West-Burnham 2008). In common with command and control ideas, systems thinking is not so much of a model, but a collection of ideas that have emerged as a counterpoise in response to the hegemony of command and control thinking. This set of ideas is characterised by the way in which they refute elements of command and control in the belief that this way of thinking focuses on the ‘wrong things’: targets, inspection, extrinsic rewards, and internal processes, failing in the meantime to fully consider important elements such as purpose and where organisations fit into the broader system. This paper outlines the key differences between command and control ideas and systems thinking. It then goes on to examine the extent to which these permeate school board members’ ideas on strategy. Using a well-known and developed conceptualisation of strategic approach, the paper employs a case study approach of three School federations all situated in areas of high socio economic deprivation. Using qualitative interviews with school board members, whose role it is to set strategic direction in collaboration with the executive team, the paper employs critical discourse analysis to examine to what extent board members think about strategy from a command and control, or systems thinking perspective. Drawing on the idea of strategy as strategic discourse, (Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö 2004, Carvalho 2005, Laine and Vaara 2007), the paper examines the implications of their thinking for school strategy in the complex system of English education today.

## A) Background

The English Education system has been subject to unprecedented levels of reform over the last 20 years, this has resulted in a hybrid state school system comprising; independent state schools (academies and free schools) and schools that continue to be maintained by Local Education Authorities (see Hopkins and Higham 2007). This is further complicated by a substantial increase in federations of schools, both soft federations, schools that have retained their own governing boards, and hard federations, schools which have adopted multi-level governance structures. In addition to this, more stringent levels of accountability introduced by the schools inspectorate (Ofsted-The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills), place great pressure on schools, and their boards to perform to exacting national and international standards based targets (Baxter 2016a). Targets are not a new phenomenon and have developed as a result of international impetus such as OECD’s PISA study, alongside political imperatives to respond to national and international emphasis on education as an economic driver (Ozga 2009).

Targets and performance measures given new primacy by the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit and The Audit Commission which continued the innovations implemented under the previous

Conservative Government's Citizen's Charter that aimed to make public services, more responsive, transparent in operation and competitive (Major 1991). This approach was originally predicated on governments' belief in economic monetarism. Introduced by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979 monetarist ideas were premised on the idea that public services would run better if based on a combination of market principles of competition; market responsiveness/agility; and a form of public choice theory (Buchanan 1984). However retro fitting this to the public sector was not straightforward; there were a number of factors that were 'inconveniently' preventing the grafting of private sector ideals onto an unresponsive public sector (Clarke 2007). If the public were to be positioned as consumers then they should be given the same rights as consumers and attributed with the same characteristics and motivations: self-interest; seeking value for money and making choices based on information-publically available and comparative (Clarke and Newman 1997, Clarke et al. 2007). This form of monetarism- Public choice theory-assumed that if the public in public services were to be attributed with characteristics associated with consumers, then staff working in public services: teachers, doctors and so on, must also be framed in a particular way. The post welfare consensus which existed up until the The Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979, previously framed public servants: As individuals working for the good of society, motivated by position not profit and, commensurate with their conditions of employment, as risk averse and in favour of slow gradual change. Public choice theory in contrast reframed as: slow; lacking in innovative capacity, producer interested and resistant to any change that may disturb their 'status quo' regardless of its effect on the service user (Boyne 1998).

The responsibility for monitoring and developing strategy for schools and groups of schools in England falls at the feet of the school board- a group of volunteers responsible for governing performance and strategic direction for schools or groups of schools. Since 2010 these boards have assumed more responsibility than ever before, as a result of high profile school failures; changes to accountability structures – largely through the reduction in power and responsibility of LEAs, and not least, more focus on their role as custodians of budgets that very often run into millions of pounds (see Baxter, 2016a). The key responsibilities for school board members under the current Ofsted, inspection framework are among other elements: to demonstrate an ambitious vision for the school, improve staff practice, teaching, learning and assessment thorough rigorous performance management and appropriate professional development provide learning programmes to meet statutory requirements as well as the needs and interests of children; actively promote British Values; Make sure that safeguarding arrangements meet all statutory and other government requirement promote children's welfare and prevent radicalisation and extremism (Ofsted 2015).

The emphasis on combining strategic vision with a monitoring and evaluation role is a tall order, and one that exercises boards across the public and voluntary sectors (Cornforth 2004, Spear, Cornforth, and Aiken 2009). It demands a particular mind-set alongside a set of skills that allow these two often contranitent elements to co-exist harmoniously and effectively within board focus. In areas of high socio economic deprivation the challenges are even greater, as attracting and keeping good teachers and board members who can work in these challenging situations has proved to be difficult (Francis 2011, James et al. 2011). Yet previous work reveals that these schools tend to have a strong sense of their place and purpose in the community and earlier research indicated that board members within these contexts are likely to think of strategy in terms of community needs, rather than focusing on internal or political drivers, a facet that has been revealed to be foremost in the mind-set of many governing boards (Baxter 2016a).

The school governor role in the development of strategy is reflected in the workings of the current English education system: a system largely driven by targets, performance measures and evaluation linked to attainment of government mandated targets (Ozga et al. 2013, Grek et al. 2013, Baxter and Ozga 2013, Ozga 2016). The hegemony of targets features across many countries within the OECD and has been heavily influenced by countrywide comparisons in the PISA report, which appears, in spite of numerous critique, to go from strength to strength (see for example the work of Grek 2009). These statistical methods largely deriving from the so called ‘science of deliverology’.

## **B) Design of paper**

This paper begins by examining the origins and differences between a systems approach and a deliverology approach. It moves on to a brief explanation of how strategy is conceptualised and used for analysis in this study. This leads into a discussion of the methodology underpinning the research. From there the paper discusses to what extent governor discourses on strategy in schools of high deprivation, represent command and control thinking and what the implications are for schools and governor development in the future.

## **C) Strategy, command and control and systems thinking.**

It is widely acknowledged both in the public and private sectors that strategy is not an easy concept to pin down (Mintzberg and Waters 1985b) and there is often confusion, especially among school governing boards, on where the strategy ‘stops’ and operational areas ‘start’ (see Baxter, 2016, James, 2014). Mintzberg and Waters, in their extensive work on strategy within organisations draw an important distinction between leadership plans and intentions (intended strategy) and what the organisation actually does (realised strategy) (pp, 22). There is also a considerable literature which considers strategy rather than being a ‘top down’ activity, as an ‘all through,’ pursuit, in which middle management play an important part (Mintzberg and Waters 1985b, Platts 1993). A large body of research looks at the impact of strategically managing a public service organisation on the improvement of that organisation (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015:166, Boyne 2003b). Longitudinal research carried out by Andrews, Boyne, Law and Walker (2012), suggests that although there is some evidence that strategy makes a valuable contribution to the ways in which organisations function, they also warn of ‘the complexity of the causal chains linking different strategies to diverse dimensions of performance.’ (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006:146-148).

The whole idea of the self-improving school within a ‘self-improving system,’ is riddled with complexities, not only relating to the ways in which strategy and performance interlink, but equally in terms of the ways in which this strategy emerges from and is implemented by both discrete organisations, and, in the case of school federations at the multiple levels involved within the different tiers of federation. These elements are out of scope for this paper but should be considered valuable areas for future inquiry.

### **A systems approach**

According to Richmond (Richmond 1993) there are three distinct forms of systems: natural systems (including, for example human beings the planet); engineered systems (such as computers or cars) and human systems (such as education, health or the criminal justice system). This paper takes a critical approach in which the education system is viewed as a human system, it also adopts a critical approach to systems theory in which, ‘knowledge is the product of a cognitive relationship between persons operating on and within social and physical environments...where language is both a means of production and exchange,’

(Graham 1999:483). Within in this, drawing on Marxist ideas of political economy, (Marx 1970) both command and control ideas and systems thinking are polysemic terms that, ‘elude comprehensible definition precisely because of their all-encompassing objective [s], (pp, 484). In both cases, governments have embraced and espoused such terms rendering them core to the justification of myriad policy decisions (see section (D) for more information of how this was employed methodologically).

One of the many criticisms levelled at the command and control approach is that it merely shifts problems from one part of a system to another. This can mean that problems often go undetected because the individuals who remedied the initial issue are not the same as those who ‘inherit the new problem’ (Senge 2014:124)

In governing bodies who often lack any type of formal succession planning strategy , (Baxter and Wise 2013), this issue may well be compounded as historical knowledge is lost and rationale behind resolutions (why did we do it that way) may be difficult to comprehend by members of the governing body. According to Senge, this short termist approach will often result in ‘compensating feedback’

*‘Compensating feedback usually involves a ‘delay’, a time lag between the short-term benefit and the long-term disbenefit. [...] In complex human systems there are always many ways to make things look better in the short run. Only eventually does the compensating feedback come back to haunt you’ (Senge, 2006:124).*

It is this delay that can be problematic if a systemic approach is not taken. Considering issues in the linear way suggested by command and control approaches often leads to what has been termed ‘the policy paradox’ (Clarke 2008)- the resolution to the problem leads to different problems due to the lack of consideration of how the resolution fits within the whole system. Meadows (1982) also points to the problems of adopting short term solutions that fail to, ‘strengthen the ability of the system to shoulder its own burdens” (Meadows 1982:22), which very often address the symptoms and not the problem itself.

Seeing ‘whole elephants’ does not mean that every organizational issue can be understood only by looking at the entire organization. Some issues can be understood only by looking at how major functions such as manufacturing, marketing, and research interact; but there are other issues where critical systemic forces arise within a given functional area; and others where the dynamics of an entire industry must be considered. The key principle, called the ‘principle of the system boundary’, is that the interactions that must be examined are those most important to the issue at hand, regardless of parochial organizational boundaries’ (Senge, 2006:27).

Table one: Systems thinking versus command and control perspective in education (adapted from Seddon, 2008)

Education as Command and Control	Education as systems thinking	Systems Thinking	Area of influence.
Top down hierarchy	Leadership of school within community.	Outside-in system school viewed in relation to other schools and organisations within the broader system	Design of work
Functional specialisation and procedures	Student focused. Needs of the student.	Demand, value and flow	Attitude to pupils/parents
Contractual approach fulfilment of targets relating to particular areas.	What matters not externally/ politically	What matters?	Decision making

Education as Command and Control	Education as systems thinking	Systems Thinking	Area of influence.
	driven? Situated within school/s and context.		
Separated from everyday work. Targets set from above.	No limits attitude to performance. Not limited by externally imposed targets.	Integrated with work	Measurement , evaluation , inspection
Output, targets, standards: related to budget	Purpose driven, spending related to needs not externally imposed targets.	Capability, variation: related to purpose	Attitude to suppliers
Control budgets, manage people	Ethos primacy looking at effects of change on the whole school, group of schools, pupils.	Learn through action on the system	Management ethos
Extrinsic	Assumes that teachers do the job because they find that teaching pupils is satisfying. De motivated by targets and pay rewards based on imposed targets.	Intrinsic	Assumptions about motivation of staff.

Adopting systems thinking effectively translates thinking about strategic problems in terms of how they relate to the whole system; rather than just in isolation. Solving these problems constructively may involve a variety of approaches to systems thinking.

Seddon defines two different ways to think about systems: the first involves purposive thinking. This assumes that the system is driven by a particular overriding purpose; for example the health service has a purpose in the treatment and prevention of illness. Thinking of the system in this way involves looking for solutions that ensure that the system achieves its purpose (Seddon 2008). In contrast to this is what Seddon terms, purposeful thinking. This assumes that the system comprises systems of interest informed by a common purpose, for example, private education, public education and home schooling, all represent different interests as part of the wider purpose , ‘to educate students.’ In terms of this paper, this purposeful thinking applies more readily to the education system in England, in which many ‘systems of interest,’ collaborate and compete to fulfil the purpose of Education. This way of thinking of systems also has the advantage of considering systems thinking and systems strategizing as a learning activity in which strategies are developed and adopted as part of a constant feedback loop. This way of thinking is normally termed a ‘soft system approach.’ Table one reflects the ways in which the command and control approach contrasts with the systems approach; as can be seen within the table, systems thinking is not only a series of ideas, but equally an ontological approach to strategy, informed by particular ways of imagining the public services and conditioned by policy ideologies as well as those of strategy implementers (Trowler and Knight 2002, Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002, Palumbo and Calista 1990). The ontological approach is one that has been successfully interrogated using critical discourse analysis and is discussed more fully in section (f). As discussed earlier, systems thinking, was first applied within the private sector. But Seddon’s interest in applying this to the public sector led to the development of a systems model of public sector delivery, the Vanguard Lean Systems approach (Vanguard Method). This is outlined in figure one.



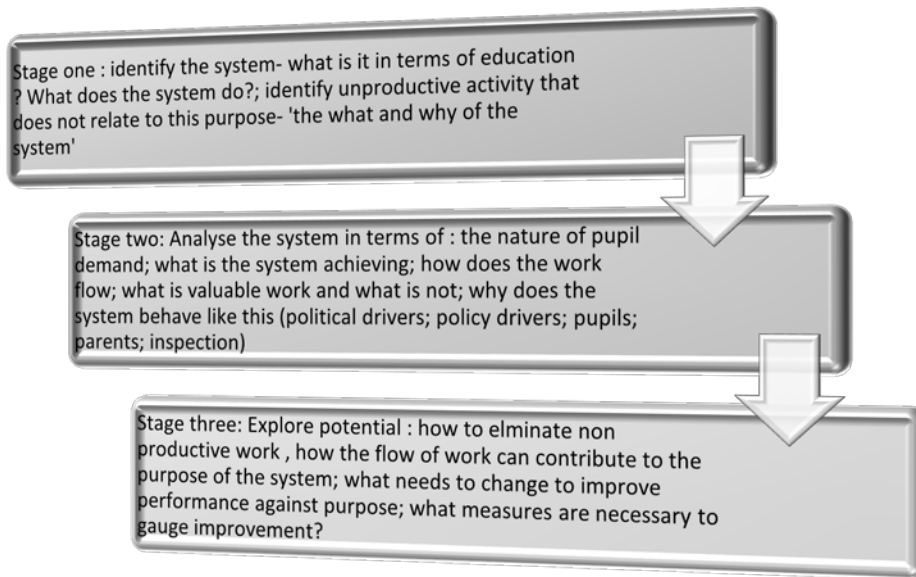


Figure 1 Vanguard Lean approach adapted from (Jackson, Johnston, & Seddon, 2008).

This approach aligns with a particular understanding of strategy which I explore in the next section of the paper.

#### Strategy and systems thinking

In order to be able to identify governor understandings of strategy it is first necessary to define what influences and processes are understood to be at work whilst individuals engage in the act of strategizing.

Research into the area of strategy is extensive and this paper does not attempt to go into detail in terms of the range and form of strategic models of strategy that have been developed, but looks to draw on the work of Mintzberg to identify the particular stages that he argues, make up the 'crafting of strategy,' (Mintzberg 1983:28). It is this 'crafting of strategy' that I move to discuss next.

As Mintzberg and colleagues point out,

*If the world of strategy is really as complex as implied by the cognitive school, and thus overwhelms the prescriptions of the design, planning and positioning schools, then how are strategists supposed to proceed ?[...] we propose they learn over time.(Mintzberg et al. 2005:176)*

This approach appropriates many of the principles of organisational learning and sense making that feature in Weik's work (Weik 2001), and that I discuss elsewhere (see Baxter, 2016). It assumes that strategy making is far from linear, but is conceptualized as a messy process informed by a constant cycle of learning and reflection, which Mintzberg et al liken to the process of policy making in government. They draw on Lindblom's description of policy making as, 'a never –ending process of successive steps in which "continual nibbling is a substitute for a good bite."' (Lindblom, 1968: 25-26 in Mintzberg et al, 2005:179).

Mintzberg makes the point that 'crafting strategy' is an iterative process that is part deliberate and part emergent (Mintzberg and Waters 1985a) whilst Johnson and Scholes (2006) identify three distinct stages to strategy as outlined in figure two.

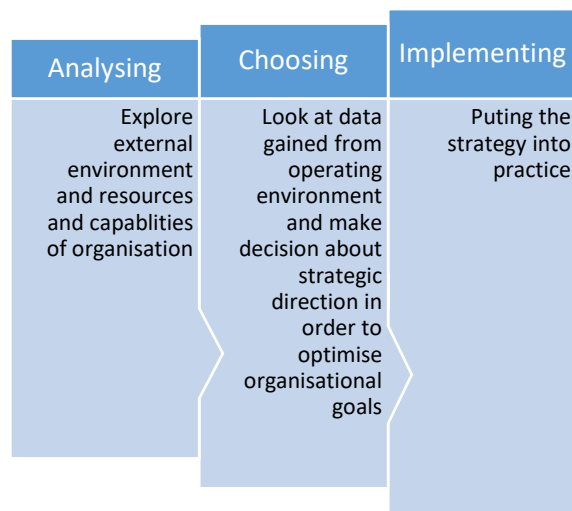


Figure 2 The strategy process – adapted from Johnson and Scholes (Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington 2006)

Criticisms of the Johnson and Scholes model are largely predicated on the fact that they present strategy as a linear process. In relation to this criticism, Mintzberg and Waters argue that strategy is an emergent phenomenon which is made up from continuously evolving organisational possessions.

A key aspect of any strategy is its potential to deliver improvement in performance. In private enterprises this normally means increased profit and more customers, in the public sector improvements are a little more nebulous to pin down. The relation between the two is discussed more fully in section (f).

Much research on strategy is predicated on models developed in the private sector (see for example: Porter 2008, Mintzberg and Waters 1985b, Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington 2006). But recent work into the not for profit and public sector has shown that the influence of New Public Management, and exposure to ‘models and thinking originally developed for the private sector,’ has resulted in approaches that have either been adapted to fit the public services, or have simply been ‘grafted onto it’ (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015:103). Evidence of this in the area of school governing and leadership are plentiful (see for example Baxter 2016a, Wilkins 2014). But where the focus within the private sector is largely on profit, ideas on strategy across the public sector centre around the idea of public value- a central tenet of public service reform and improvement based largely around the involvement of the public in forming and shaping public service strategy (Stoker 2006, Alford and Hughes 2008).

This paper, uses the framework in figure one to explore governor understandings of strategy as a discursive process. This framework allows for an exploration of command and control versus systems thinking approaches and ideas in governor understandings of strategy, rather than focusing on identifying particular strategic models. This framework, viewed through the prism of critical discourse analysis, is helpful in exploring what type of thinking board members are adopting in their ideas on formulating strategy. The discursive approach to strategy analysis is not new but has been adopted by a number of researchers investigating strategy in a number of different contexts. The discussion which follows investigates this as a method and explores this method in light of the research questions that have evolved from the literature in this area.

#### Strategy as discourse

As discussed earlier, command and control and systems ways of thinking are sets of ideas rather than models. They are discourses that have developed over a period of time and are based on economic, social and political ideas that have evolved in response to wider cultural and political drivers. Although interpretations of the term ‘discourse’ are many and varied,

this paper understands it as the normative assumptions about a particular element- in this case strategy-that are articulated through conversations (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This understanding of discourses is also underpinned by the Foucauldian understanding of discourse as power and what is considered to be ‘normal’ within the particular subject in question.

*Whoever determines what is “normal” will have the power to determine what is conversely “abnormal” (Foucault 1980:22)*

In the case of strategy this pertains to what board members think of as ‘normal’ when considering strategic approaches. It also links into the historical yet evanescent nature of discourse which is also present in Foucault’s writing, summarised in this quote from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

*As soon as one questions a unit, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of complex fields of discourse.’  
(Foucault 1969)*

This statement reflects the fact that the very nature of discourse is ephemeral, that often in questioning the particular statement made by the individual and the assumptions inherent within it, the individual may articulate the rationale behind the statement but that in the very articulation of this rationale the individual taps into any number of discourses that have, over time, led to the normative nature of the statement.

In adopting a critical approach to systems thinking (as described earlier) it is important to consider strategizing as it relates to underlying power structures within systems. CST assumes that within systems due to uneven power relations between individuals responsible for strategizing, responses to strategy creation will be influenced by which individuals’ contributions to strategizing are valued and which are not and begs the question of why some contributions to strategizing are more valued and therefore more influential than others. Flood, (Flood 1990), is at pains to point out that this is not a model but rather a, ‘sociological paradigm,’ (p, 51). In that when ‘one characterizes the position of another in terms of assumptions, beliefs, assertions, etc., one’s formulation of these as well as one’s perception of them are conditioned by one’s own assumption. (Ackoff 1988:22). Adoption of this approach demands a post-structuralist phenomenological approach focusing on the narrative of the individual as viewed through an ontological lens in which the individual narrativises their normative approach to strategy. Analysing these narratives via a critical perspective provides insight into what is considered and what considerations are valued over others. (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, Fairclough 2008, Wodak and Meyer 2009).

The discourse of strategy has been used in a number of studies to explore how individuals tasked with articulating and implementing strategy understand by the term (Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö 2004, Carvalho 2005, Mantere and Vaara 2008). These studies have employed a critical discourse approach (Wodak and Meyer 2001, Fairclough 2008), in order to study the micro processes and practices that make up strategies and strategic thinking. One of the most notable of these carried out by Vaara and colleagues, investigated the case of airline alliances as discursive constructions of strategy (Vaara, Kleyman et al., 2004). Their rationale in viewing strategy through this lens makes the point that there is often a lack of appreciation of the social aspects in strategizing when viewing organisations or managers as rational decision makers. They along with other researchers, make the point that the political aspects of strategizing are often neglected (see for example Mintzberg 1983, Pettigrew 1973).

Discourses as explained by Foucault and other thinkers since then are drawn from myriad elements. My previous work in this area explored influences on discourse and hegemonic beliefs from a critical realist perspective (see for example Baxter 2004, Baxter 2010, Baxter 2012, Baxter and Hult forthcoming, Baxter 2013a, Baxter 2013b).

School board members within ‘a systemless system.’

The system of volunteer school board members in England is fairly unique: Born out of a need for financial oversight of schools, the system of English school governing has been in existence for some 600 years. The Post War Education Act 1944 laid down the partnership between central and local government and outlined roles and responsibilities of board members and the division of responsibilities between LEAs and individual schools (Parliament, 1944). The Act changed the shape and form of governing bodies or boards, increasing their powers and specifically articulating their modus operandi. The system remained fairly static 1960s when the Labour Party, which had been out of office for a considerable time, decided to implement a project that would open up school governing to far more stakeholders than ever before. The changes gave rise to a report - The Taylor Report (1977), which recommended that schools should have far larger and participatory governing bodies than ever before, and that these bodies should consist of five main stakeholder representatives: the relevant LEA; parents; teachers; pupils; and the local community. The election of New Labour under Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997, heralded a rise in what has become known as ‘The Academies Project’, a move to improve inner city failing schools by ‘reinventing them’, as academies-independent state schools. The project intensified under the Coalition Government of 2010 and since then, the Conservative Government elected in 2015.

Although board members clearly have an important strategic role according to the School Governing’ Handbook ( section 1.3DfE 2015), it is not set out exactly how they should go about doing this. The only guidance offered by the booklet is that:

*The strategy should address the fundamental question of ‘where are we now?’, ‘where do we want to be?’ and ‘how are we going to get there?’ This includes the type of school which would offer the best opportunities for achieving future aims. (Section 1.3).*

Although it sets out that, ‘the strategy should include SMART targets and Key performance indicators (KPIs) there is no real guidance on what strategic approach should be used nor reference to any of the recognised strategic frameworks, used by other public service organisations. There is some mention of ‘ethos’ of the school, along with the importance of ensuring that, ‘the school’s ethos promotes the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (section 1.3).

This paper explores explores how governor innovations in strategy have the potential to ‘strengthen the ability of the systems to shoulder its own burden and to strengthen schools’ ability to self-improve’ (Hargreaves, 2010), by discussing (i) To what extent does governor understanding of strategy reflect a command and control or a systems approach? And (ii) What are the implications of this for governor development in the future?

## D) Methodology

The sample for the research was deliberately drawn from multi academy trusts in areas of high deprivation. The rationale for this is founded in research that shows that board members in these areas tend to be very aware of the external contexts in which they are operating. A comparison between responses in these areas, and those in leafier suburbs presents as fertile ground for future research.

Drawing from the model in figure one the paper draws on 50 qualitative interviews with school board members from English schools in order to explore their understandings and articulations of strategy. Employing the critical discourse methods outlined in section e the paper identifies key themes in relation to board members' and strategizing.<sup>1</sup>

## E) Findings

The findings were broadly categorised in terms of the process of strategizing via the Vanguard Lean systems approach (figure one). Once this level of analysis had been carried out the findings were then examined in relation to the stages of systems thinking in order to evaluate evidence that board members were or were not taking a systems approach to strategizing. The extent to which they were adopting this approach is discussed in the final section of this paper.

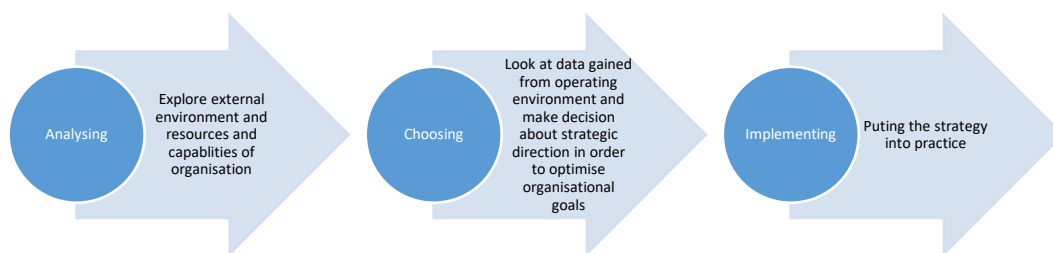


Figure 3

### Analysing

In relation to the analysing phase of strategizing evidence suggests that board members were reliant on the executive team to outline proposals for strategy, there was little evidence that board members were proactive in this respect. Reasons for this approach were largely evidenced in terms of time factors as this governor reports:

*Certainly we as a governing body haven't been terribly proactive in going out and finding that information and sharing it for ourselves. I think we would like to do more of that, but [...]to get through purely the essentials in*

<sup>1</sup> The data for this study was drawn from two projects : Governing their future (Centre for Citizenship Identities and Governance, The Open University UK and School Accountability: a comparative study of policy and practice across three types of secondary school – Wilkins A, 2012:

[http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/search/search-page.aspx?q=\\*&tab=grants&filters=on&pi\\_name=Dr%20Andrew%20Wilkins](http://www.researchcatalogue.esrc.ac.uk/search/search-page.aspx?q=*&tab=grants&filters=on&pi_name=Dr%20Andrew%20Wilkins) The author is grateful to the ESRC and the grant holder for permission to use secondary data.

*our meetings takes so long that actually then after two and a half hours of all of the stuff that we absolutely need to do and discuss and to get right. To then start adding on at that stage improving our practice and our process would be an efficiency gain, but there is no time. (School governor, multi academy trust, May 2015).*

The feeling amongst board members that schools did not approach the external climate in which their schools are placed in quite the same way as not for profits or profit making businesses, was reflected by a number of board members. These board members accounted for this in terms of perceiving that education is ‘different’ from other public services, almost seeing it as having some sort of unique status even with regard to other public services

*Only through a lot of experience of being there, when I started governing, both boards were not very strategically aware, the school I am at there was no strategic focus until a couple of years ago. I don't think the way governance has been put together, [in schools], it doesn't lend itself to strategic thinking. In business you are deciding what the strategy is going to be, you are going to conquer America [...] Schools are all doing the same thing aren't they? (Governor –June 2015)*

The feeling that school board members were not somehow equipped to tackle big strategic questions was paradoxically, often accompanied by a keen awareness of external drivers, such as rising pupil numbers or changes to financial resources, as this governor reports:

*I don't think that board members like me sit down with a blank sheet of paper and think what are we going to transform ourselves into do they , have we got a bulge in the school population ? (Governor –June 2015)*

Both quotations raise questions about the extent to which board members *recognise* when they are engaged in the processes of strategy formation. This appears to be partly down to elements that they feel drive the strategy process: elements such as inspection; financial constraints or new funds, such as The Pupil Premium<sup>2</sup>. As this governor reports:

*Linking value to the pupil premium is a difficult question – in recent times one aspect of governance we've been hot on is ensuring that the pupil premium is well spent and we have a good story for it afterwards – Fred over there is funded by the pupil premium. (Governor –June 2014)*

But even when drivers such as The Pupil Premium acted as triggers for strategy, there was still a feeling amongst board members that their strategizing was limited – or even a ‘box ticking’ activity; something that should be done for the benefit of school inspectors.

Look at data gained from operating environment and make decision about strategic direction in order to optimise organisational goals

If board members were uncomfortable with the idea of environmental scanning, they did not express the same reservations about concerns with their communities. This was particularly prevalent in the case of board members in areas of high deprivation, who had a particularly keen sense of how their schools (or collaborations of schools) were placed in terms of responding to needs within the community. In these cases board members, who in almost all

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<sup>2</sup> A fund introduced by the 2010 Coalition Government to be spent on raising educational standards of disadvantaged pupils.

cases were keenly aware of issues within communities, saw strategy in terms of responding to these needs, as this governor reports:

*Knowing the catchment area is key to working with those people. Also I am in [name of town], I don't know if you know [name of town] is incredibly diverse from an ethnic point of view, where the school is situated is on a boundary between quite a Muslim, Hindu and predominantly white area, so the three cultures are there, and it is mixed, 50% Asian and 50% white, and there is no way we could function without understanding the needs and wants of the community. (Governor–May 2015).*

*[You have to be able to] recruit accordingly and know your community, but I think it is on another level as well, isn't it? It is about understanding your school, it is about understanding your community and what that school brings to that community, making sure that the decisions that you make reflect the community and what they want. (Governor – May 2015).*

Having board members that were working within the areas served by schools was often key to plans for expansion and other factors relating to land and premises, as this governor pointed out:

*[this particular governor is] a local farmer, he's on other governing bodies, he was incredibly crucial to us in working with the developers who are planning to develop some land next to the school, and as a group we were able to work together to have a clear strategy of how we wanted to deal with that. (Chair of Board, March, 2015)*

There was considerable evidence that board members were looking at new ways to evaluate their external environments, using focus groups, and businesses linked to their trusts in order to canvas opinion on strategic direction as this governor explains:

*we can look into that, it could be that community groups and things like that, you know, start to offer more and more, it's all based on this concept of reciprocity and mutualism, you know, what you are going to give, what you are going to get, so you might find more and more businesses as they've sort of, um, groups, as they work with the trust, sort of saying we'd like to offer this activity, it promote themselves, as well as providing activities for young people. The idea is not that it's our local authority, you know, that it's the boss of us, it's a brains trust, it's a strategic think tank, if you like, to help us solve, explore the issues that are facing us (Chair of Board April, 2015)*

A distinct sense of positioning was articulated via a number of governor statements ; the feeling that they needed to understand the original mission of the school in order to be able to understand how to grow in the future as this governor relates:

*[the strategy was all about] trying to provide some parameters in which decisions could be made and the expansion – that was the one were really thinking about because we haven't covered that – but we were also looking at previous statements we made about what we wanted the school to be and what we wanted it to look like (Governor, April 20124)*

Part of the struggle in setting strategy for the collaboration emanated from new understandings of the governor role, understandings that emanated from recent government policy and that may not have been in evidence when some longer standing board members were appointed. This was also articulated in the feeling of a number of board members that the executive was best placed to devise strategy and that the governor role was essentially limited due to lack of experience in education. The challenge of recognising the head's skill, ability and vision yet ensuring that the relationship between head and chair did not become too 'cosy,' was cited by some board members as a rationale for not becoming too drawn into the actual strategy formulation. This is reflected in the next section in terms of board members' feeling more comfortable with the monitoring of data that informs strategy along with knowledge around issues of operating capacity.

Look at data gained from operating environment and make decision about strategic direction in order to optimise organisational goals

There was little doubt that the findings from this study reflected that the operating environment was a major influence on formulating strategy for board members. This included policy innovations, local authority led policy and the influence of the inspectorate. Ofsted – the schools inspectorate, appears to exert a particularly strong influence on strategizing – both performative and reactionary. One of the positive effects of Ofsted's influence was the ways in which it often (inadvertently) brought schools together around training events, as this governor describes:

*Recently there was a cluster-based governor training on the Ofsted framework which was done at St Peter's Infant and Nursery in town, and governor colleagues went to that, the chair and vice-chair they decided it would be useful then to commission that training again for our own governing body, (Governor March, 2015).*

Operational constraints heavily influenced governor thinking in terms of strategy. How board members were going to respond to Ofsted inspector questions and how the school could move from one category (requires improvement for example), into another were questions that, almost without exception acted as drivers in terms of strategic action. However strategy that was driven by these factors tended almost solely to concentrate on internal capacity of schools to improve, rather than linking this to factors within the external operating climate of these organisations. This is perhaps unsurprising given the not inconsiderable power of the inspectorate to close down 'failing' schools. Unfortunately this operational emphasis may well be contributing to governor confusion around operational and strategic matters. This is discussed more fully in the next section.

The focus on regulation also revealed that in certain cases board members felt it safer to adopt a risk averse approach, as this governor explains:

*[When inspectors visit the school] You worry that you'll, by saying the wrong thing or not being challenging enough at something that you are going to really let the school down. And that's why it's the actual process, the actual process itself is so unsatisfying because you think, "Oh my God, it could all fall apart on me saying something silly," although it can't, that's how you feel! (Governor Feb 2015).*

The pressure of inspection and possibly the ways in which strategy is framed by the inspectorate were leading factors in the ways that board members conceptualised strategy.



Board members were fixated by the need to resolve problems, ‘firefighting,’ and seemed to concentrate less on being assertive and directive where strategy is concerned.

*And he [the inspector] said, “Well you should know,” and I said, “But I don’t know if I haven’t been told to ask it,” you know, it’s that’s kind of, that’s fine if someone tells you to look for it, but if you don’t know that’s there, then how do you know it’s there? And it’s them sort of worries about it. (Chair of Board May 2015).*

This worry relating to inspection appeared to infuse governor narratives on strategy, raising questions in terms of how agentive they feel within what should be an area of considerable agency for board members. The constraints that they clearly feel in terms of accountability are reflected in this governor’s account of how the board acts as a mediator between strategic vision of the head and chair of board:

*“Although they’ve got the vision and the idea of the route of how they are gonna get there sometimes I think it just needs other people to sit back and say well hang on a minute, what if this happens? Because I know you’ve seen it, and that’s the direct route, but you’ve got to think of some of the things that maybe haven’t been considered and just make sure that these things don’t crop up. So that’s the support role we give to the head and the chair. (Chair of Board, May 2014)*

The monitoring role is (rightly) a central part of the board’s function, and interestingly several board members on trust boards saw new structures of governance as sophisticated networks of ‘checks and balances operating in a stratified system as this governor explains:

*[The Trust], at that level, will take the overview, take the big decisions. It’s likely to have subcommittees for special subjects, [...] and then there will be, or there is, a local governing body for each of the three current academies which will be responsible for much more the day to day running of the individual schools, attainment, targets, how they are doing against attainment targets, they will deal with problems such as exclusions if they ever need to have any. They will operate within a budget allocated to them by the board, so within that they can make decisions, but if they want to spend more ever then they have to go to the board to have that kind of discussion. (Governor, May – 2014)*

This delegation of strategy to the senior management /governing team is not unusual in terms of private and not for profit organisations, and in cases where information leading to strategic decisions is harvested in a coherent way, this Organisation of the strategic function can pay off. Timewise, it makes sense that opinions and data are gathered at local level and used to inform strategic choice. However the decision making processes from there on in are less clear, and due to lack of decision making powers, it leaves representatives from local groups ‘out on limb’ when it comes to decisions about their school’s future. Some schools in the study have dealt with this by ensuring that chairs of local groups are also members of the trust board.

Putting the strategy into practice

When it comes to putting strategy into practice boards appeared to take more of an active role: aligning materials, staffing and financial resources with the ‘vision’ once it has been decided upon appeared to be a function that boards felt more comfortable with. This was all the more so in skills based boards where various ‘specialists’ – accountants, human resource personnel and those from the legal profession, are able to offer their considered opinion on the viability of strategy, given the extent to which resources are available to support it. Governor skills audits appeared to have empowered some chairs in terms of their knowledge of skill sets available within the governing body, making them confident of their ability to monitor ongoing strategic directions via the school development plan. Harvesting the information necessary to put strategy into practice, appeared to be a developing area, particularly in multi academy trusts where communication systems were still developing. A number of board members saw ongoing training as being vital for board members in to be armed with information about context, as well as to exchange information with other board members from the same area. However the downside of this was apparent in terms of the marketised environment as this board members explains:

*[When board members get together during training] is going to be some reticence, because there is a market really in schools that says why should we share our experience with our competitors? We made people redundant because we lost pupil numbers, we didn't have the funding anymore, so why should we give away some of the knowledge that we have gained to help us improve, to somebody that is competing for the same pupils? And I think that could be very ... I could accept the argument that that can push up standards, but it does create these little tiny silos of practice that isn't being shared or discussed (Governor, April, 2014).*

However, one of the biggest challenges to putting strategy into practice appeared to be in keeping pace with government legislation around schools and education. The rapid changes led to feelings of uncertainty about what was possible and what not. These feelings appeared to go hand in hand with a reticence to innovate and a risk averseness engendered by what they perceived to be a punitive (and often arbitrary) accountability regime which appeared to be turning what is essentially a volunteer occupation, into a high stakes , high risk occupation.

## F) Discussion and conclusions

This paper explores explored how governor innovations in strategy have the potential to ‘strengthen the ability of the systems to shoulder its own burden and to strengthen schools’ ability to self-improve’ (Hargreaves, 2010), by discussing (i) To what extent does governor understanding of strategy reflect a command and control or a systems approach? And (ii) The implications of this for governor development in the future.

The first phase of analysis according to the Vanguard Lean approach (Jackson, Johnston, and Seddon, 2008), revealed that there were a number of ‘sticking points’ in terms of board members’ capacity to identify unproductive activity that does not relate to the system purpose. Few board members mentioned specific strategy days or opportunities to sit down and think about their strategy in terms of the wider system. Many appeared to be caught up in policy evaluation and day to day monitoring of budgets: all elements that appeared to cut into time that could have been spent discussing the wider context of their organisations.

In terms of stage two of the model, governors appeared to be much more confident and well equipped in their approach: innovations such as the Pupil Premium- money dedicated to closing the achievement gap between deprived pupils and their cohorts (DFE 2012), appeared instrumental in offering them something tangible upon which to focus their efforts. However

in terms of a more general analysis of the system and why particular policy drivers were affecting and effecting changes to their organisations, there was little evidence that this was discussed openly. This does not mean that individual board members did not consider it, and the critical discourse analysis did reveal a number of ways in which they were questioning the aims behind seemingly irrelevant or irrational policies. Within this, inspection proved to be a very strong driver of the ways in which they believed policies to have been conceived of, this supports much of my own and others' previous research into governor accountabilities (Wilkins 2014, Baxter 2016c, Baxter 2016a).

In terms of stage three of The Vanguard Lean Systems Approach, although there was ample evidence of board monitoring of policies and finances that contribute to strategy, there was little evidence that they benchmarked this in terms of the system as a whole- dealing with this in terms of the entire school grouping offered up sufficient demands in terms of collation and integration of information

As the findings of this study revealed, many board members although they aspire to a systems approach, feel ill equipped to operationalise this in their handling of strategy. This appears to be founded in the belief that either they lack the knowledge necessary for this work, or they are more comfortable with monitoring and evaluating strategy that is developed by the head and senior leadership team. Governors in this study for the most part did have a deep and committed relationship with communities in which their schools were located. Yet in spite of this, they still appeared to lack confidence in terms of translating this knowledge into setting the strategic direction of the school.

The considerable evidence that governors were working towards translating this knowledge into strategically relevant data was illustrated by the ways in which they were looking to new ways to engage with parents; using focus groups and community groups to inform their knowledge and provide tangible evidence to inform strategy.

The critical discourse analytic approach used within the study was useful in determining whether board members were drawing on discourses associated with command and control approaches, or whether they were taking the wider systems view of their strategic work. The study revealed that although in many cases they appeared keen to learn about their work in relation to the wider system, they appeared to be conditioned to thinking in command and control ways about their particular remit. This is an important insight for future board development and implies that there is a need for development that places boards and their members in the wider political and socio cultural contexts of their work. Investigation of sub themes arising as part of the coding process, revealed training events to be largely focused on particular areas of monitoring work, for example: budgets, safeguarding, counter extremism, behaviour.

This is also supported by governor interpretations of what strategy is. As section (g) reflected, even governors that appeared comfortable with strategy within their own professional lives often appeared at sea when interpreting this in terms of a public service/schools context. Analysis of documentation relating to inspection processes was instrumental in identifying expectations of board understandings of strategy. These documents were peppered with command and control terminology which concomitantly appeared in board member narratives. Again this points to the need for inspection processes to reflect a systems approach, if indeed this is the way that both government and inspectorate wish to see the system develop and improve, as evidence from policy documents, press releases and media reports suggest they do (Baxter 2016a)

In spite of a plethora of research investigating board approaches to strategy in the private and not-for profit sector, there is little in terms of education. This may well be due to the speed at which the current wave of marketization has occurred: According to the DfE since 2010 over four thousand academies opened in England - almost 20 times as many as there were in May

2010, when all 203 academies were sponsored secondary schools of these 87% of academies support other schools in some way (DfE 2014). It is clear from this case study that this area is becoming increasingly important as one for research if the notion of a self-improving education system is ever to maximise its potential and come fully to fruition.

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