Primary school parent governors in a deprived South Wales community: how do their experiences contribute to our understanding of school governance?

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences of 10 parent governors whose schools were located in a disadvantaged South Wales valley community. The study took place during a programme of reform, where established practices were considered unable to meet the demands of contemporary governance. It exposes the absence of the parent voice in school leadership and accountability, the nature of this acquiescence and its implications from a practical and theoretical perspective of school governance as a collaborative undertaking.

The research used a mixed methods approach**.** Data collection employed a semi structured interview complemented by one open and one closed questionnaire. A thematic approach identified common patterns to address the research question:

How do the experiences of primary school parent governors in a deprived South Wales community contribute to our understanding of school governance?

Prior to taking office, the participants believed they would be at the heart of decision making and accountability. In office no participant played an active leadership role. Reasons for this centred on the imbalance in status, knowledge, and confidence inherent in the headteacher/ professional–governor/amateur relationship.

The research makes a theoretical and professional contribution which helps explain governor passivity. Presently many parent governors are stakeholders in name but not in practice. To address this requires a radical and structured approach so that Welsh school governance is inclusive, egalitarian and collegial.

Introduction

Policy is a course or principle of action adopted by an organisation, designed to achieve specific aims and regulate its members' behaviour (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002). It therefore plays a key role in the conduct of school governance (James et al., 2013). Before 1999 the Westminster government framed educational policy to be applied throughout England and Wales (Farrell and Law, 1999a). Devolution and the transfer of legislative powers gave Wales control over economic, health, environment and education affairs. Since 2009 however, Welsh education has been depicted as in a state of crisis due to poor performances on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).[1] For a newly enfranchised nation eager to prove its ability to determine its own future, this proved politically embarrassing.

To improve school standards the Welsh Government introduced a programme of reform. Individual school governing bodies were made responsible for raising standards within a market environment (Egan, 2017), underpinned by new forms of accountability and inspection by Estyn, the education and training inspectorate for Wales (Farrell, 2014). Further, governors were required to undergo training, be supported by the School Challenge Advisors, and be subject to local authority monitoring. These changes however, did not result in an equitable distribution of power with inclusive decision making. Rather, they strengthened the headteachers' executive and non–executive roles. The 2019 Welsh PISA results showed modest improvement, yet Wales remained the lowest performing nation in the UK (Welsh Government, 2019a).

Within this changing context this research sought to discover:
How do the experiences of primary school governors in a deprived South Wales community contribute to our understanding of school governance?

1 The PISA is a body which every 3 years evaluates seventy-nine government education departments by measuring 15-year-old school pupils' performance in the core subjects, mathematics, science, and reading.

Welsh Education

Education in the Welsh maintained sector is delivered through community schools where the building and land are owned, maintained and staffed by the local authority. Maintained school governing bodies have corporate status with a legal identity independent from its members and are legally responsible for the actions taken in its name by individuals or committees to which it has delegated certain functions. Corporate governance is a way of governing an organisation which is underpinned by a system of regulations and practices such as fairness, transparency and accountability which balance the interests of the school's stakeholders. Governors serve a four-year term from their date of appointment, meet a minimum of three times a year as a full body, where decisions are taken by a majority vote (Welsh Government, 2018a).

Welsh governing bodies are constituted on 'stakeholder' principles of pluralism and egalitarianism where the strengths of all members are recognised (Olmedo and Wilkins, 2016). Core members are parents, whose status as the largest single category of governor, is indicative of the importance the Welsh Government attaches to the parental voice. Other members are drawn from the school staff, local authority and the headteacher, who can opt to become a member of the governing body. The Welsh Government say all headteachers have elected to become a member of their board of governors. Thus, the governing body, with the headteacher as a member, is responsible for deciding the aims and objectives of the school, setting the strategic framework for achieving these and adopting appropriate policies. The headteacher's role includes formulating aims, objectives, policies and targets for the governing body, whom they are a member, to consider adopting. The headteacher therefore performs a unique governor – chief executive role which in practice is blurred and arbitrarily defined allowing them significant discretion in how they perform their dual roles (Earley, 2000).

The Chair of governors is *de facto* the 'chief executive' of the school (Farrell and Law, 1999b) formally charged with controlling meetings, ensuring that discussion is inclusive and securing consensus (Welsh Government, 2018a). The headteacher-Chair relationship is of crucial importance in how meetings are conducted (Young, 2017; Farrell and Law, 1999b). The position of Chair of governors and their relationship with the headteacher is pivotal in ensuring the governing body is effective in supporting and challenging the headteacher (Welsh

Government, 2018a; Balarin et al., 2008). For these reasons, in Wales the Chair must undergo training (Welsh Government, 2018a).

Young (2014) reported the existence of widespread oligarchy with an established system of core and peripheral members. The headteacher, Chair and a small number of active governors were responsible for making the important decisions; the peripheral governors endorsed them. For schools in disadvantaged communities the core–periphery dichotomy gains additional traction because the dominant core governors tend to be less representative in demographic terms of the local population (Dean et al., 2007). This can skew decision-making away from parent governors, who ordinarily have the closest relationship with the local community, thereby weakening the school–local community relationship (Young, 2017; James et al., 2010).

Boards of governors are diverse organisations, yet they frequently exhibit distinct characteristics (Levacic, 1995). 'Typology' refers to the study and classification of school governing bodies based on their characteristics such as the degree of inclusivity/exclusivity they exhibit. Creese and Earley's (1999) research produced four typologies of governance: 'abdicators', 'adversaries', 'supporters clubs', and 'partners.' 'Abdicators' were boards of governors where members were content to let the professional headteacher, whom they thought was doing a good job, make decisions. 'Partners' were characterised by their inclusivity in decision making where the governors and headteacher worked in partnership within a trusting and respectful relationship.

Ranson et al.'s (2005) research developed typologies based on the power relationship between the headteacher, Chair and governors in the process of decision making. Four distinct typologies were identified; these were governance as a 'deliberative forum,' 'a consultative sounding,' 'an executive board' and a 'governing body.' The 'deliberative forum' was led by a headteacher with an autocratic management style, who led discussions. In this scenario parent-governors felt they were unable to question or challenge the headteacher. Conversely, the 'governing body' typology had a strong headteacher providing strong leadership but, significantly, where the governing body took overarching responsibility for the conduct and strategic direction of the school.

Ranson et al. (2005), in a separate study sought to identify and understand differences in patterns of behaviour exhibited by different boards of governors in Welsh schools. The schools selected reflected a range

of socio–geographic contexts. This included 'rural,' 'industrial valley,' 'urban' and 'border' schools. The research reported 57% of the schools studied had typologies of governance which operated on 'consultative sounding' principles where the headteacher brought policies to the board to be endorsed. Less than 10% of the schools researched operated on 'governing bodies' principles where the governing body took overarching responsibility for the conduct and strategic direction of the school.

This brief overview shows that governing bodies differ significantly in the manner in which they operate and occupy a wide range of positions on the democratic/undemocratic, inclusive/exclusive spectrum.

Geographic setting

The geographic research focus was the south east Welsh valleys; Rhondda Cynon Taff, Merthyr Tydfil, and Blaenau Gwent. The local authority where the research was conducted is referred to by the pseudonym *Middleton Council*. Once dependent on coal mining and heavy industry, since 1945 these areas have experienced major de–population. Economically, they are among the poorest parts of Europe, with high levels of unemployment and welfare dependency (Adamson, 2008).

Between 2001 and 2018 the Welsh Government provided measures to help the 100 most deprived electoral divisions as identified by the Welsh Government Index of Multiple Deprivation (2018b). The WIMD is made up of eight separate domains of deprivation: income; employment; health; education; housing; access to services; environment; and community safety (Welsh Government, 2020). These 100 areas were designated *Communities First* and this research was conducted in these areas.

Poverty and educational attainment

There is no single definition of poverty. Settling on an appropriate measure by which individual schools and their pupils can be considered disadvantaged is contested. The UK government defines poverty as those with less than 60% of median income and the poverty line is defined as when a household's income falls below 60% of the average. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has a broader definition of poverty as when an individual's resources are insufficient to meet their minimum needs

(Goulden and D'Arcy, 2014). However, entitlement to Free School Meals (FSM) is a direct measure of family poverty and only pupils from families in receipt of state benefits, such as income support, jobseeker's allowance or child tax credits (if below 60% of national median income) are eligible (Strand, 2014).

In Wales 154,000 state school children live in poverty (The Children's Society, 2019). Around 113,000 of these children meet the eligibility criteria for FSM, meaning some 41,000 children living in poverty do not receive a free school meal. This situation is clouded, because not all of the children who meet the eligibility criteria receive a FSM every day. Around 28,000 of these children are not registered for FSM with their school, and, of those registered, around a further 22,000 each day do not eat the meal (The Children's Society, 2019). Therefore, of the 154,000 school children living in poverty in Wales, only 63,000 receive FSM.

This means that each day at least 91,000 children in poverty do not get FSM (The Bevan Foundation, 2018). The roll out of Universal Credit in 2013 exacerbated this situation, resulting in significant increases in child poverty (Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2021). Universal Credit replaced the three benefits cited above as conferring eligibility to FSM. However, as Universal Credit covers families both in and out of work, many thousands of children who are living in poverty miss out on receiving FSM (Bulman, 2017).

In 2016, 39% of the population of Middleton Council were identified as living in poverty compared with the Wales average of 22.7 % (Welsh Government, 2016a). In 2020, 8,651 pupils living in Middleton Council received FSM, the second highest of the 22 local authorities in Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a). (The FSM entitlement in schools in this research ranged from 30% to 40%.).

The link between poverty and pupil attainment is not deterministic (Balarin et al., 2008). Schools situated in areas of high socio-economic deprivation may achieve good standards of pupil achievement, while those in more prosperous areas may achieve relatively poor results. A significant body of evidence over the four nations of the UK however, highlight the long- and short-term relationship between poverty, deprivation and low pupil attainment (Thompson and Ivinson, 2020; Gorard and Siddiqui, 2019; Lingard and Mills, 2017).

Research into the long-term effects of living in poverty in Wales is stark. It includes high levels of chronic unemployment, high welfare

dependency, poor health and at school level, a notable and enduring gap in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children (Welsh Government, 2015). The Welsh Government recognise as the level of entitlement to FSM increases, the level of academic achievement tends to decrease (Welsh Government, 2019b).

The testing regime in Wales is designed to shield education from competition and the Welsh Government formally extol the virtues of educational cooperation. Primary and secondary schools do not publish performance indices from which 'league tables' can be compiled and comparisons made. Further, the effect of socio–economic disadvantage, which may affect attainment levels, are acknowledged. The overall Welsh Government approach to school standards is therefore designed to reflect capacity for improvement. This approach however, has been undermined by individual boards of governance, charged by the Welsh Government with raising standards both nationally and internationally on the PISA rankings (Welsh Government, 2018a). For the mechanism for improving standards *is* market based where schools *do* compete for pupils (Egan, 2017). Thus, the Welsh Government may envisage education as a nationally collaborative undertaking. However, market forces, where 70% of individual school budgets in Wales are based on pupil numbers (European Agency, 2021), has transformed schools into economic enterprises whose effectiveness has become largely defined in terms of attainment standards (Rees and Taylor, 2014).

Stakeholder governance, skills and knowledge

The last four decades has transformed the conduct of school governance (Egan, 2017). When parent representation was brought into school governing bodies under the 1980 Education Act, their value resided in their lay, non-specialist knowledge and their relationship with their local community (Young, 2017). The Education Reform Act (1988) freed schools to compete in the market for customers with parents treated as consumers with choice over where their children were educated. Schools were given control over their budgets and independence from local authority. Individual governing bodies were charged with driving up standards within a prescriptive National Curriculum.

The introduction of mandatory governor training in 2013 represented a movement towards a skills–based system. The Welsh Government

argued mandatory training was necessary because of the increased complexity of school governance, and to enable governors to discharge their responsibilities competently. Lack of research into mandatory training, other than Estyn reports, means we have a limited insight into its efficacy (Huyton, et al., 2018). However, it appears training tends to be narrow in breadth and focuses on understanding and interpreting school performance data with 'no scope for critical and creative thinking through discourse and reflection' (Huyton, et al., 2018, p. 201).

In 2016, three years after the introduction of mandatory governor training, the Welsh education minister published a consultation paper on the future structure and functions of school governance. A reconstituted 'stakeholder-plus model' was proposed. This included skilled governors, a new category of co-opted governors recruited specifically for their skills, and an increase in the number and category of parent governors so that appointed parent governors could work alongside elected parent colleagues (Welsh Government, 2016b).

In 2019 the Welsh Government published a summary of responses on the Reform of School Governance Framework (Welsh Government, 2019b). On the issue of governors recruited on the basis of their skills, the Welsh Government displayed a strength of purpose it had hitherto shied away from. It argued that skills must be the fundamental consideration when all categories of governor are appointed and governors could be coopted on this basis. What these skills were, the Welsh Government promised to clarify. (As of November 2022, the Welsh Government has not published guidelines on this matter.) Despite these developments, the Welsh Government maintains they do not represent a movement away from stakeholder governance (Welsh Government, 2019).

Reflecting on policy initiatives and educational change in Wales over the past several years, a number of inferences may be drawn. First, mandatory training, inspection by Estyn, monitoring by local authorities, and the work of the School Challenge Advisers has had limited success in raising attainment standards if judged on the PISA rankings. The Welsh Government appear to contend this deficit can be addressed by reconstituting school governance, moving it towards a skills model as in English academy schools. However, as the English experience shows, if governors are selected on the basis of business skills this will almost certainly weaken the role of the parent governor, recruited on the basis of their non-specialist knowledge, and their relationship with their local community (Connolly et al., 2017).

Leadership and accountability

The Welsh Government expect the governing body to play an active leadership and accountability role. This means taking a strategic role, setting aims and objectives, and holding the headteacher to account (Wales, 2018a).

Accountability is formally exercised through the *support/challenge* and the *critical friend* relationship (Welsh Government, 2018a). This means the governing body should be able to offer their support and advice to the headteacher, and be able to challenge them. This is characterised by a trusting, open relationship, built on respect, with the aim of achieving mutually shared goals (Swaffield and MacBeath, 2005). Such a relationship however, takes time to develop (Creese and Earley, 1999) and is likely to be compromised by the constant turnover of governors and the time necessary for them to become familiar with the procedures of governance. In deprived areas governor recruitment and retention has proved an enduring problem (Baxter, 2017; James, et al., 2011).

The Welsh Government attaches great importance to data handling competence as a means to secure accountability and improve performance (Wales Government, 2018a). The mandatory training programme should enable governors to:

> …*carry out their key roles of strategic planning, target setting, monitoring and evaluation and accountability* (Wales Assembly Government, 2013, p.10).

Governors, however, frequently lack clarity about what is involved in planning, monitoring and securing accountability (Balarin et al., 2008). This has often narrowed the role of primary school governors (Wilkins, 2016). When schools prioritise meeting targets and driving up standards, leadership and accountability is reduced to a monitoring role and formally endorsing proposals (Rees and Taylor, 2014).

Governance and management

Governing bodies are hierarchical and bureaucratic. The mechanics of educational leadership highlight the chain of command where accountability and decision making is exercised by those at the top of the organisation (Bush, 2011). Specifically, considerable power and

authority is invested in the position of the headteacher (Wales Government, 2018a). They uniquely play a 'governor' and 'chief executive' school leadership role. Their professional training means they will almost certainly possess greater educational knowledge than other governors. Further, their position of school leader is one of high status. Connolly et al. (2017) found governing bodies often experience difficulties in playing a meaningful leadership and accountability role with some governors complicit in their passivity. Significantly the attitudes and experiences governors bring with them will be central to how they play their role (Connolly and James, 2011), and the dominant members of an organisation have been shown to actively seek to preserve patterns of behaviour they believe have value (Yolles, 2019).

   To function in a competent manner, school governance requires expert educational knowledge. Ordinarily, in their role of governor, it is the headteacher who possesses this. Their role demands they are conversant with educational policy and the frequently revised body of regulations which adds to the complexity of school governance (Earley, 2013). Knowledge in school governance is an ambiguous and slippery concept and takes at least two forms, *educational* and *managerial* (Young, 2017). Educational knowledge is about the rules and regulations which regulate the conduct of governance. Managerial knowledge is that which enables policy to be implemented. Increasingly managerial knowledge has assumed the greater importance which has reduced the value of lay knowledge and the parental voice in decision making (Young, 2017).

   The relationship and distinction between educational and managerial knowledge and leadership are frequently blurred because of the ambiguous role of the headteacher. The degree of democracy exhibited in governance often depends on how the headteacher perceives their role (Earley, 2000). A headteacher resistant to inclusivity was found to be a powerful barrier to overcome (Earley, 2000). Research has shown that among the governing body's most difficult tasks is managing the headteacher (National Governance Association, 2019). However, the assumption the headteacher always seeks to dominate meetings, and governors always wish to play an active governor role, is less than realistic. Dean et al. (2007) for example, reported instances where governors believed they lacked the knowledge and competence to become active members and deferred to the headteacher; and some parent governors were overwhelmed by the prospect of playing a managerial role (Dean et al., 2007). Further, governors frequently rely on the headteacher for guidance and advice as

they possess superior educational knowledge (Yolles, 2019). In this respect individual governors may well have modest aspirations and self-limit their leadership role and are happier to offer support rather than challenging the headteacher (Dean et al., 2007).

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used. Data were collected, analysed and interpreted using quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods are able to gain a good understanding of the connections or contradictions between qualitative and quantitative data, and provide opportunities for participants to have a strong voice across the research (Shorten and Smith, 2017). A structured questionnaire was used to gather data of a factual nature. This sought data such as the age of the participants, the length of time they had been a parent governor in their school, the number of children they had in the school, and their employment status. A four-point continuous rating scale was used to measure the strength of their attitudes to matters of inclusivity, decision making, knowledge of their schools' Communities First status and deprivation in their school. This data was used in the results section to express participant's attitudes in numerical terms.

The structured questionnaire was complemented by a semi structured questionnaire which asked the participants questions about leadership and accountability; their relationship with their headteacher and other parents; the process of decision making; governor training; poverty and deprivation and their Communities First status. This data informed the areas explored in the semi structured interview, which was the main data collection instrument. Data were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach, which identified and reported patterns (themes) within descriptive qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

A non-probabilistic, purposive sampling strategy that incorporated an element of convenience sampling was used. Non- probabilistic sampling enables the research to select units from a population that they were interested in studying

(Wu Suen et al., 2014). In this research the participants were selected because they were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (school governance). Additionally, the participants had indicated that they were available and willing to talk about their experiences and opinions.

Purposive sampling is where subjects are selected with the expectation each participant will be available to provide unique and rich information of value to the study. The members of my sample, by virtue of being parent governors, all possessed a good level of understanding and knowledge about school governance. Further, the data collected came from participants who shared the same demographic characteristics; they were parent governors in schools located in former Communities First areas. The weakness of this sampling approach is that it is unlikely to be representative of the population being researched. Further, because the data tends to be more complex than that gathered from a random sample, inferences can be made only to the specific group being researched (Barratt et al., 2015).

Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment was aided by Middletown Council Governor Training and Support Team (GTSLT) who contacted all primary parent governors in 'Communities First' schools to ascertain if they might be interested in participating in the research. Of the 120 parent governors whom the GTSLT contacted, 17 (ten women and seven men) replied that they were interested in participating in the research and were happy for their contact details to be forwarded to me. From the 17 individuals who expressed interest in the study 10 were randomly selected. Two participants were governors in the same school. This resulted in nine primary, community schools where Welsh is taught as a second language only, being involved.

All respondents were interviewed once, and two were interviewed a second time to follow up responses which emerged during the transcription phase but were not explored at the time. Several participants were contacted by email to clarify or elaborate upon points raised during their interview. Permission was gained to audio record the interviews so a verbatim transcript of the interview could be made.

Results

Nine of the ten participants words are quoted; pseudonyms are used. These are:

Tony, Julie, Dai, Freddy, Lizzy, Eddie, Nancy, Niki and Owen.

Participant demographics

All participants were white and in paid employment. Eight worked full-time, two-part time (16 hours a week or less). Seven worked in the public sector, two in the private sector and one was self-employed. Seven participants were elected by other parents; three were 'elected' unopposed. Four were university graduates, two going to university several years after leaving school. This data is in line with the findings of (a) Balarin et al. (2008) who found most governors were in paid employment and around a third were graduates; and (b) Ranson et al. (2005) who found that governors were mainly white, middle-class, middle-income public/ community service workers. The average time the participants had been in post was two years and three months. This is in line with Holland (2017) who found the largest cohort in their study, 38%, had been in post for 1–4 years.

Perceptions of school governance before *taking office*

The interviews took place when all participants had completed their governor training. The participants were asked what they thought a parent governor's role entailed *before* they took office. Their responses showed that, at this time no participant had a clear idea what the role of school governor entailed. Typical of this is what Nancy said:

> *I didn't give it much thought really. I knew there were different types of governors, but that's all. At my first meeting I was taken aback by what went on and the responsibility of it all.*

[Nancy]

The words *leadership* and *accountability* were not used by any participant, but their responses suggested they recognised these were the sort of issues that the governing body dealt with. Freddy's comments about 'saying what you think' and 'questioning things' were, it was established, his way of describing the mechanisms of leadership and accountability.

> *Well, they* [governors] *should say what they think. It's important to question things you're not sure about…because if you don't, how can you make good decisions* [and] *that's the reason you're there.*

[Freddy]

Parent governors are elected by other parents or appointed by the governing body to represent the interests of parents (Welsh Government, 2018a). While parent governors can express their personal views during meetings it is expected such views would be representative of the interests of the parents at the school. Individual governors are expected to exercise their best judgement when contributing to the decision making of the governing body (Welsh Government, 2018a). However, all categories of governor including parents are representatives, not delegates with discretion to exercise personal judgement in decision making. <u>Seven</u> participants were unaware of this. They believed they primarily represented the interests of other parents and were accountable to them. This suggested that whatever the legal definition of their role is, they clearly had their own views which defined this relationship. This is evident from what Nancy and Niki said:

> *I thought I represented other parents because they elected me… to pass on their feelings to the governing body, and to keep them* [the parents] *informed about things.*

[Nancy]

> *The parents elected me so obviously I thought I would represent them, to make sure what we decided was what they wanted.*

[Niki]

Describing the qualities which they thought a 'good' governor possessed evoked a range of answers. This included being at the heart of governance; exercising independence of judgement and being involved in discussions where decisions were made on a collegiate basis. As the next section shows in office, the participants did none of these things.

Leadership

Despite constituted on stakeholder principles no participants played a significant leadership role. The reason for this centred on the headteachers' management style, authority, status and educational knowledge. Dai described his headteacher's autocratic management style:

> *She* [headteacher] *sees herself as the only leader, but it's a big job running a school, bigger than one person. … she puts things to us in a way that it looks like we are deciding things, but we don't.*

[Dai]

Educational knowledge and organisational authority are closely intertwined. The salaried professional headteacher possesses expert educational knowledge and authority (Bush, 2011). Owen spoke of how knowledge and authority manifested themselves in discussions:

> *He* [the headteacher] *has the knowledge and that's important. When someone knows more than you do it puts you on your guard.*
>
> [Owen]

Elaborating on this, Owen spoke about governors who worked in the school. They too, he said had significant educational knowledge however, they were unfailingly supportive of the headteacher. Owen recognised this may be due to good decision making by the headteacher. However, he thought that the headteacher's superior knowledge and authority as school leader was significant:

> *There are governors who work in the school* [teachers and support staff] *and they know a lot as well, but they are not going to disagree with him* [the headteacher] *- he is their boss. He could make things difficult for them. I don't know if they do* [support him] *because they think he is doing well or not but it doesn't matter because they do.*
>
> [Owen]

Farrell (2005) reported headteachers often contextualise their governor role as convincing the governing body of the value of their proposals. This is in accordance with the Welsh Government's guidance (Wales Government, 2018a). Such behaviour however, can be interpreted in different ways. Seven participants interpreted the headteacher's behaviour in convincing the governors of the value of their proposals as an expression of autocratic authority. This resulted in some participants saying they felt corralled into supporting the headteacher's proposals. Julie highlighted the difference between being involved in decision making and being called upon to support their headteachers through formally voting on a proposal:

> *…we are sort of led by the head and we go along with what he wants. Sometimes I think, 'OK, I voted for that but it wasn't like it was my decision, it was just that I voted for it.'*
>
> [Julie]

The headteacher–Chair relationship is of crucial importance to how meetings are conducted (Young, 2017; Farrell and Law, 1999b). The Chair

is formally charged with securing consensus and is *de facto* the *chief executive* of the school (Farrell and Law, 1999b). While bringing all governors into discussions is formally the Chair's responsibility, Young (2014) reported this role was usually performed by the headteacher. Seven participants in this study said the role and duties formally the responsibility of the Chair were performed by the headteacher. Describing the headteacher–Chair relationship three participants said they thought there was collusion between them and seven said it was the headteacher, not the Chair who controlled meetings. Freddy said this resulted in limiting discussions:

> *The head will say, 'Right we've discussed that, we'll go on to the next item.' The Chair says, 'Yes, item 2.' There's no disagreement and so we do.*
>
> [Freddy]

Organisations often become oligarchical where a small number of members dominate proceedings (Michels, 1915). Research into the conduct of school governance has reported similar findings where boards of governors divide into a small active core who were responsible for the decision making, and a larger, acquiescent group whose contribution was limited (Connolly et al., 2017; Farrell, 2014; Young, 2014; Dean et al., 2007). Eddie spoke about his reluctance to speak during meetings. He thought that this could be addressed if the Chair or headteacher encouraged governors to express their opinions and ask questions, but neither did so:

> *Most governors don't say much…sometimes I look around and see someone who wants to say something but is a bit reluctant…it's obvious, they're fidgeting and trying to make eye contact and then looking down at their papers.*
>
> [Eddie]

Julie expressed similar sentiments, but was clear who she thought bore most of the responsibility:

> *… to get the best out of everyone you've got to encourage them, not put anyone on the spot because that doesn't work…but encourage them. That depends on the head really, but he doesn't do it.*
>
> [Julie]

When asked to explain why she thought it was the headteacher's responsibility to encourage governors to contribute to discussions Julie said it was because the head controlled the meeting:

The head runs things so it's definitely up to him.

[Julie]

Loyalty, confidence and the responsibility of office

As new members, all participants said they would like to have been at the heart of school leadership. In office this changed. <u>Four</u> participants said the early phase of governance was crucial as there were few positive role models and this contributed to them playing a limited role which became institutionalised. This suggests the socialisation process of becoming a governor is a powerful, enduring force. Another reason for governor passivity was personal loyalty to the headteacher which Balarin et al. (2008) reported governors ranked higher than that of challenging them. Typical of this response was Dai who said:

She is a good head, she's hard working, she's in early and doesn't go home until late. I hear stories of heads in other schools and that makes me think we have got a good one… if there is something wrong, she'll sort it.

[Dai]

This research found however, that loyalty was conditional. It was dependent on what the participants thought was the headteacher's record of good management. This was defined in a number of ways, such as the headteacher putting in a long day in school; recognition of how difficult the job was, keeping the external overseeing agencies happy, and anecdotal stories about how headteachers in other schools were curt and off hand. Significantly, no participant spoke about their loyalty being dependent on pupil attainment standards.

I've got no problem with how she runs things because the school is doing well… she's got to keep everyone on board, the governors, the parents, the staff, the council and Cardiff [Welsh Government] *…it's an impossible job and I don't want to add to it.*

[Tony]

Mandatory training is designed to instil confidence so governors can question proposals, make informed decisions and perform the critical friend role (Wales Government, 2018a). Dean et al. (2007) reported that governors in deprived areas often lacked the capacity to perform this role.

<u>Three</u> participants said their governor training had increased their knowledge but their lack of confidence had negatively impacted on how they conducted their governor role. Lizzy said:

> *We all know what leadership is … us being involved, planning for the future, and making decisions, but it's not like that. There are discussions* [but] *they don't open things up. The head makes a case… we sort of talk about it…but we don't really.*

[Lizzy]

Explaining why she went along with this Lizzy was clear

> *I am not very confident. I would find it hard to challenge anyone, but definitely not the head.*

<u>Eight</u> participants said that they had not fully appreciated the responsibility of governance prior to taking up office. Their experiences of governance subsequently affected how they thought about school leadership and their part in it. Julie spoke about her part in appointing a new teacher and the fear of making a bad decision:

> *… the one* [candidate] *who got the job was the one he* [the headteacher] *wanted. If I had wanted another one* [candidate] *and it turned out they were a dead loss I wouldn't want to explain to the parents I had made a bad decision and their kids suffered …* [and] *you could not blame the head for that.*

[Julie]

Accountability

The participants were asked what meaning they attached to being held to account. They responded to this in terms of 'watching over the school budget; making sure that things were done by the book' and 'finding out if the head has done what they said they would.' However, no participant said they did these things. Several reasons were offered to explain this.

Knowledge and confidence

<u>No</u> participants held their headteacher to account. A range of reasons were given to explain this. One was lack of knowledge in a frequently changing

legislative and curriculum landscape. For example, from 1999 to late 2020 the Welsh Government introduced three distinct phases of reform: Devolution and divergence from England (1999 to 2010); PISA and the age of accountability (2010– 2015); and the Curriculum for Wales and a culture of collaboration (2015 to the present) (Evans, 2022). Currently school governance is regulated by documentation which extends over three hundred pages (Wales, 2018a). Seven participants said they had insufficient knowledge to hold their headteacher to account. As Tony said:

> *I don't know what I'm supposed to hold him* [the head] *to account for, so how can I?*
>
> [Tony]

Participants spoke about the headteacher's extensive range of responsibilities and the knowledge necessary to execute them. In comparison the participants' knowledge was limited which proved incapacitating. However, Lizzy was sympathetic. She felt that the exigencies of headship had taken a toll on her headteacher's well–being:

> *He is responsible for a million things I don't even know about. It's when someone mentions something you haven't thought about you think, 'that too?' It's no wonder he looks knackered.*
>
> [Lizzy]

Eight participants spoke of the consequences of their relative lack of educational knowledge vis-à-vis the headteacher. This disparity, in conjunction with the participants' lack of confidence, contributed to a professional/amateur dichotomy. Nancy's account showed that a combination of deference and lack of educational knowledge put her on the back foot which impeded securing headteacher accountability:

> *… it wouldn't be right saying* [to the head] *'I'd like you to explain to us why you want to do that because I'm not sure.' It would be like you thought they weren't up to it.*
>
> [Nancy]

Likewise, Tony said his lack of educational knowledge compared with the headteacher contributed to his lack of engagement:

… things are being discussed…the head talks a bit then the Chair says, 'Is that alright with everyone?' I look at my papers and it's about some policy, and I don't know much about it, so I nod.

[Tony]

All participants said their governor training stressed the importance of securing accountability. However, a 'good' school was frequently judged on pupil attainment and the report issued by Estyn, the Wales schools' inspectorate (Rees and Taylor, 2015). In this context <u>seven</u> of the participants appeared to have delegated the oversight of school standards to the Schools' Inspectorate. Following an inspection, the governing body is required to draw up an action plan to address the school's shortcomings (Estyn, 2017). Freddy and Eddie said this was done solely by the headteacher:

There were things they [the inspectors] *criticised us for…he* [the headteacher] *didn't say how we were going to address them, he said he would sort it out and he did.*

[Freddy]

Eddie made similar comments but he felt the headteacher possessed the necessary skills and knowledge and was best placed to write the report:

We had an action plan to write up… we [the governors] *didn't have any input…[but] I thought that was fair enough because before you can sort things you have to know what caused them and the head is best placed to do that.*

[Eddie]

Two participants said because they had not contributed to making decisions, they felt they had no responsibility for securing accountability which operated beyond their authority. Freddy said:

I don't think I can be held responsible [accountable] *because I have not had much to do with* [making] *decisions anyway.*

[Freddy]

This response showed that when governors are divorced from the process of leadership their peripheral status can weaken the principles of collective responsibility for decisions taken by the governing body and thereby undermine the principles of stakeholder governance. In Freddy's case, his contribution to governance little more than attending meetings.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several important themes emerged from this research which will now be discussed.

Given the socio-economic demography of the research site the employment status of the participants (all being in employment) was unexpected. The common characteristic of the participants and the parents they represented was their children attended schools where a high percentage of pupils were eligible for FSM. In this respect the research explored the experiences of middle-class parent governors in deprived schools. This raises the question of how representative were the participants in this study of the population of parent governors in Communities First schools in Middleton Council, and what conclusions can be drawn. It is likely that those who volunteered to take part were among the most articulate and confident of the 120 approached. Research to explore this issue could help identify the factors which promoted or impeded individuals from putting themselves forward for office. If the majority of parent governors in deprived schools *were*, like the participants in this study, in paid employment, this would suggest that parents who were unemployed or on benefits were significantly less likely to (a) put their name forward for office, or (b) if they did, were less likely to be elected.

Before taking office, all participants said they had little idea of what the role of school governor involved. However, all expected to play a substantial leadership and accountability role where meetings would be inclusive and decisions made in a collegial manner. These expectations were unmet. The early phase of governance appeared crucial in this process because it was associated with long term patterns of passive behaviour from which the participants were unable to extricate themselves. In this respect the socialisation process of becoming a governor appeared particularly significant.

Participant acquiescence was embedded in a wide framework. The main factors were the headteachers' autocratic management style, their status, authority, and their superior educational and management knowledge. The frequently revised regulations and fresh school initiatives contributed to several participants' increased dependence on the headteacher for guidance and expert knowledge. This contributed to a process of professional closure.

A number of participants said that their acquiescence was conditional upon their school continuing to perform well. This was divorced from pupil standards of attainment which, in this context, appeared relatively unimportant. Of greater significance was the recognition of the difficulty of the headteacher's job and the need to 'keep' the Welsh Government and local authority 'happy'. It is unclear whether the participants who expressed these views would withdraw their support for the headteacher if these conditions were not met.

The mandatory training was a positive experience in that it informed the participants' understanding of the expectations and responsibilities associated with school governance. This knowledge, however, was insufficient for the participants to play an active governor role *per se*. This created a source of tension which stemmed from the participants being aware of the inclusive role they should play, while recognising that their behaviour fell far short of this.

Data handling competence is vital if the headteacher is to be made accountable for their actions. Four participants, commenting on the data handling element of their governor training, said that it did not help them develop these skills. This made them more, not less dependent on the headteacher for interpretation of data. The participants who said they did benefit from this aspect of training however, lacked the confidence to put this knowledge into practice.

Two of the participants said they were not accountable for governing body decisions because they played no part in the decision-making process. If governors take no responsibility for the decision their board of governors makes, stakeholder governance is both devalued and dysfunctional.

Governing bodies *must* have parent representation and these members *must* vote to formalise decision making. The participants in this research therefore functioned in a 'coercive democracy.' The avenues of democratic participation were open; the parent governors could initiate discussions, contribute to them, ask questions, request information and challenge the headteacher. However, there were roadblocks which prevented this. They were therefore, at the same time, an integral part of school governance while occupying the hinterland of irrelevancy. This then raises the question as to why the participants would continue being a governor. On the basis of how they contextualised their governor role, three schemas were identified.

First, was the view that a passive parent governor role was an adjunct to that of the dominant headteacher. Justification for playing this role was based on the school being well run, and the headteacher bore most responsibility for this. This was embedded in a framework of superior/inferior educational knowledge. Here the participants continued their tenure of governorship on the basis of the legal requirement to have parent representation on boards of governance and decisions requiring formal ratification. This group I describe as 'compliant participants'.

Second, some participants recognised the disconnection between theory and practice. They knew that they should play a central role in governance but did not, and resolved to extricate themselves at the earliest time. Over the course of the research only one of the ten participants resigned. This was due to a fractious relationship with their headteacher. However, others said they would carry on until their term expired and then not to seek reelection. This group recognised that they played no part in decision making and accordingly believed there was no moral imperative for them to oversee accountability. This group were content to play a minor role and, put limits on their agency. I describe this group as 'resigned participants'.

Third, some participants felt that they retained the potential to play an active role. This was justified on the basis that with the passage of time, acquisition of greater knowledge, greater confidence and experience might facilitate this. These were the newer members. I describe these as 'optimistic participants'.

The issue of parent governors remaining in post despite playing no substantial leadership and accountability role must be seen within the wider context of recruitment and retention. This has proved an enduring problem which has worsened over recent years (Holland, 2017), becoming critical in schools with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage (Baxter, 2017; James, et al, 2011). Significantly, three of the participants in this research were asked by their headteacher to become a parent governor after a total lack of response from the parent population, and were 'elected' unopposed.

To conclude, this research identified the conditions which contributed to the absence of the parent voice in school governance in nine schools in one local authority, which may be replicated elsewhere in Wales. The Welsh Government appear to argue a skills-based model can simultaneously improve school attainment with strong parental engagement supported by the headteacher, the Challenge Adviser and

Estyn (Welsh Government, 2019b). As of November 2022, the Welsh Government have not identified the skills which they consider are desirable for governors to possess; although before being appointed to the committees of the governing body, governors are asked to complete a skills audit. However, the more substantial findings are about conditions of confidence, inadequacy of knowledge and deference within a professional–amateur relationship where engagement is stultified by the Chair-headteacher relationship. This contributed to the process of professional closure where dominant members exerted their authority and limited the agency of other members. While the conditions which contribute to professional closure are amenable to identification, the changes necessary to establish the conditions where the principles of stakeholder school governance thrive, require a deliberate, concerted, and structured programme of reform.

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