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School Federation Governance: translation or transformation

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which being a member of a federation governing body impacts upon the governor identities of individuals. Using an ideographic case study based upon a single academy federation the investigation employs a framework for identity analysis to analyse qualitative in depth interviews with members of governing bodies within the federation. The data reveal Changing understandings around the term 'governor', the bifurcation of actual and perceived roles between the executive governing body and the advisory committees and important insights into governor succession planning. The study concludes that future research into governor identities is important in terms of both governor role performance and the maturation and development of federation systems of governance.

Responsive governing: governing in a changing climate.

Although school governance has been in existence for 600 years (Maclure, 1986) one of the most significant legislative changes to the role of school governors occurred as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act (Parliament., 1988). The principal impact of The Act on governance was the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS). This effectively devolved all responsibility for the budget and the management of school staff into the hands of governors. Some governing bodies opted to take this further, by adopting Grant Maintained status becoming the employers of staff with an extended decision making function. This resulted in a far greater impetus for schools to engage governors from the business community; an element reflected in Thody's 1994 study on school governors which revealed the development of a more skills-based approach to governance (*Thody &*

Punter, 2000). This skill-based quasi-professionalization of governors combined with increasing levels of school autonomy has since then provoked a substantial amount of role confusion, reflected in the 2011 House of Commons Education Committee report into the Role and Performance of Ofsted (Parliament, 2011b) (section 102):

Recent changes to governor roles have taken place against a background of some of the most substantial changes in the structure and system of education in England since The Second World War. Changes that whilst heralding increasing autonomies for public service organisations concomitantly engender far greater levels of regulatory control (see for further discussion Ranson, Arnott et al., 2005; Wallander, 2009). The 2010 White Paper and Academies Act followed swiftly by the 2011 Education Act, enhanced school autonomies encouraging more of them to convert to independent but state funded academies or free schools (DFE, 2010; Parliament, 2010, 2011a). These freedoms have been accompanied by a diminution in the role and support of Local Education Authorities leading to an increase in schools joining together to share administrative and pedagogical support services and implying profound shifts in the ways in which schools are led and managed (Higham & Hopkins, 2007).

Federations : structures and systems.

But sharing functions is not the only reason why schools have chosen to federate: recent reports from both England and The United States have demonstrated that where schools have federated improvements have been seen in teaching, learning and behaviour (Chapman, Muijs et al., 2011; Ofsted, 2011; Wohlstetter, Malloy et al., 2003). This trend is particularly marked in areas of high socio economic deprivation. The statutory context for federation in English schools was introduced by the Education Act 2002,(Parliament, 2002), which states that 'where any schools are federated they shall have a single governing body constituted under a single instrument of government. Since then the School Governance England Regulations removed the upper limit (previously five schools)(School Governance Federations Regulations 2007) allowing unlimited numbers of schools to federate. Chapman and colleagues identified a number of principle governance structures within school federations (although variations on these types exist too):

-Hard governance federation – in which a single governing body is shared by all schools. There may be individual advisory committees in each school but they will generally not have decision making powers.

-Soft governance federation – each school has its own governing body, but the federation has joint governance /strategic committee with delegated power(Chapman, Muijs, et al., 2011:appendix 01)

Although the different models all present new challenges for governors, the most substantial shifts in governing practice are engendered by the hard governance model. Within this model governors are faced with the challenges of carrying out the responsibilities of the governing body role alongside the challenges of governing all schools within the federation whilst also collaborating with any individual school advisory bodies (DFE, 2013). Whilst there is evidence that this model of leadership has substantial potential, (Chapman, Muijs, et al., 2011; Higham & Hopkins, 2007), recent work in this area also suggests considerable challenges inherent within this form of governing (DFE, 2013).

That there has been confusion over the role and function of governors is evident in the many and varied reports that have been produced within the last twenty years (Balarin, Brammer et al., 2008; James, Brammer et al., 2012). The reports discuss not only the function of school governing bodies but also the ways in which the governors themselves perceive their roles.

Governor role confusion is well articulated in Angela Thody's work which outlines three ways in which governors discursively position themselves: see Figure 1



Figure 1
(Thody, 1994:55).

Thody's study is useful as it focuses not only on governor function and efficacy, but also on the ways in which governors are motivated recruited and retained as volunteers. Although there is a body of literature which investigates volunteer motivation in third sector organisations (Esmond, Dunlop et al., 2004) and substantial research into the functioning of volunteer boards (Carver, 2006; Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2008), there is little work on what motivates and retains effective school governors and how they themselves perceive their role and efficacy within it. This study uses Thody's framework above to examine the ways in which governors within this federation case study perceive the challenges and opportunities inherent within their role.

Methodology

The literature review drew upon four principal areas of research: academic research into education governance over the past 10 years, Ofsted Thematic reports and school reports since 2009. The review also drew upon selected studies pertaining to the American Charter School Movement which specifically focus upon governing and research into the impact of school federations and the authors' work into professional and working identities (Baxter, 2011a, 2012a).

The research questions emanating from the literature review are:

-which elements of governor identity are evolving and changing within the federation system ?

-how do these changes impact on consultative bodies in relation to Executive Governing bodies?

-what implications do these elements have for the effective governance of school federations?

The study takes an idiographic case study approach (Gomm, Hammersley et al., 2000:132), characterised by an individualizing and interpretative nature and designed to aid deeper comprehension of the complexities inherent within a case. Idiographic studies have been used effectively across the field of identity research in order to provide the ontological depth required to investigate working identities (see

Baxter, 2011b; Baxter, 2012b). The study is based on a single site: a hard federation of four schools; one lower school (4-11) one upper school (13-18) and two middle schools (9-13) based in the south of England. The four schools are all situated within close geographical proximity to one another and all are below the national average on the Free School Meals indicator ¹. The schools form part of a hard federation (outlined earlier), established in 2009, in which a single executive board represents a single decision making body for the federation, whilst individual school consultative committees replace school governing bodies and have no decision making powers. The structure of the governance system mirrors Ranson and Crouch's accelerated development model of multi-level governance comprising a Federation Board and Advisory Councils for each school within the federation (Ranson and Crouch, 2009: 63).

The governing body reduced in number from twenty four members when the federation was initially formed, to the current structure which comprises an executive board consisting of eleven members which includes the four parent chairs from consultative bodies. The consultative bodies consist of between six and eight elected parent representatives. The sample included participants from: the executive decision making body; the advisory committees and those with a coordination role within the context of the governance of the federation and consists of five interviews each lasting approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

The pilot was approved by the university Human Ethics committee and the framework below used to analyse the data.

¹ Indicator of socio economic deprivation in England

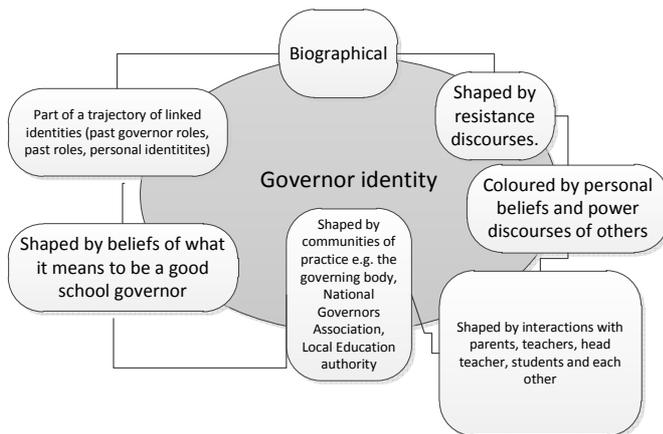


Figure 2
Framework for Governor Identity adapted from (Baxter, 2012a)

Within this, governor identity is seen to be part of a trajectory of interrelated identities (Beijaard, 2004), learned in order to make sense of the governing context in which the individuals find themselves. The identities are assumed to be coloured by the communities in which the individuals interact as governors (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and by the self-stories that individuals construct in relation to these communities. They are shaped by beliefs about what being a good governor means to them (governing ideology) (Baxter & Hult, 2012) and also by beliefs or hegemonies which they are enjoined to adopt by others (Foucault, 1980; Joseph, 2002).

Convergences and departures: Federation governor identities

At the time of writing this structure is still new and individuals are reflecting on very recent structures and procedures that are very much a work in progress. In addition, some individuals had been governors for some time whilst others had only just joined. For the purposes of this study and as reflected in Figure 1, both positions reflect important elements of the formation and evolution of governor identities.

Analysis of the data uncovered challenges and opportunities for individuals operating within the Executive Board, Academy Local Group (ALG) and also those involved with coordinating and administering the groups. These are discussed in terms of key themes relating to the research questions.

Changing understandings around the term ‘governor’ and the bifurcation of actual and perceived roles between the executive governing body and the advisory committees.

Comment [J1]: Revised to reflect reviewer’s point 3

“I think the phrase governor is incredibly misleading for people, because the governing body is technically a board of directors.” (FB5)

The statement above reflects the division not only of responsibilities between executive and advisory bodies but an emergent sense of differing identity between the two. The tensions around the term ‘governor’ appearing in this statement, are creating challenges for the formation of governor identities, particularly for those in the local groups:

“Because I sit on one of the school’s area local groups so I’m not a full governor, I’m sort of a parent rep, so that’s my role within the federation.” (FB4)

Participants from the Executive also tended to see members of the local groups in a democratic sense, in this case differentiating their function from that of other governors:

“As a reconstituted governing body we have two headteachers, we have four parent reps and five co-opted governors.” (FB1)

The bifurcation of the term “parent governor” appears to mirror the bifurcation of responsibilities within the governing body: dividing them between the executive, or Thody’s ‘Resource allocator’ and the democratic function articulated via the term ‘parent rep’ (Thody, 1994). This division of responsibilities of identities is mirrored in the ways in which individuals described their motivations, beliefs and perceptions of their role in the local group creating a deontic representation of the new role: a role being developed partly by formal guidance and partly as a result of governor beliefs as to what the role should be; as one individual told us:

“I think really their [the ALG] primary focus is their individual school, because that’s what they’re passionate about, that’s what they see on a daily basis, they’re buying effectively to the consumer brand, they are not buying into the

corporate brand, although ultimately what we do want as parents is we want our children to do well as they move up “(FB4)

The element of the local emerged as important for both the local and executive groups, keying into Thody’s first discursive position in Figure 1. It also linked strongly to the ethical and the element of governing as an integral part of both personal and governing identities leading to motivation, passion and commitment:

“I’m very passionate about education and learning and passionate about making sure that when we communicate with our parents or pupils or staff that they understand what we’re about: where we are going and they buy into it, then we are motivated to go that extra mile.”(FP4)

This statement reflects not only deep commitment, but also a sense of shared purpose and the need to convince the parents to buy into that shared purpose. But whether this referred to the federation’s shared purpose or the individual school’s remains unclear. The research revealed that both local and executive groups believed it important for schools to retain elements of their own autonomy but for the executive group, this needed to be balanced with firm measures of control.

“The intention is that you have the local conversation, so you have things like issues around car parking that are debated, school uniform, times that schools start or finish...[[at the moment we haven’t actually passed any powers down to them, but... we brought in what we call a ‘dashboard’ which is a format of reporting that insures that we understand what’s going on in the school.” (FB1)

These elements of motivation and identity appeared as core elements to the idea of advisory committees as fertile training grounds for future members of the executive body, leading into the second core theme to emerge from the research.

Preparation and Succession planning: perceptions of the maturation of federation governance.

Comment [J2]: Revised to reflect reviewers point 3

“I think with any governing structure the key is also succession planning, and in some respects that’s where the local groups could be incredibly useful because you may have somebody that starts at a local level and that’s the

right level of engagement for them at that particular time, but they may well have a skill set, an interest to look a bit further down the line.” (FP3)

This insight into succession planning demonstrated the ways in which governor identities in the federation system can be used to “grow a governing body” (Ranson and Crouch, 2009: 64), in order to strengthen a learning community: building upon both social and cultural capital in order to evolve a mature federation governing body. A body which not only possesses skills and capabilities to govern at federation level but is able to bring local knowledge to bear on federation decisions. A particularly interesting element of this type of structure is the opportunity afforded to parent representatives to speak alongside head teachers in groups comprising no other genre of governor: a structure that does not currently exist in single school governing bodies. From an administrative point of view this respondent identified it as a potentially powerful communicative tool:

“It gives you a sounding board for reaching a broader range of stakeholders” (FB3)

This was also echoed a member of the local group:

“ Listening to the parent voice and feeding back to the school, the teachers and the federation governing body any feedback that we have” (FB4).

These strong feelings that local group members have about their democratic representative roles is important to their role purpose: although the representative role was articulated by members of the executive they tended to speak in terms of the school and its direction rather than school in terms of the community (although this may have been implicit). When this was voiced, the word community tended to appear in terms of a teaching and learning community rather than community in the wider sense. The word local tended to be used differently by members of the executive: in this instance it is used to describe the atmosphere of a local group when compared to the executive:

“It’s very much more local, it’s much more comfortable.....it’s much more relaxed.”(FB2)

Whilst acknowledging the lack of decision-making power may well be problematic in the future, there was also an awareness that through the relatively autonomous nature of the local bodies (all parents together), the lack of formal power may well be compensated for in terms of a potent sense of democratic power alluding to the sense of active citizenship described by Wilkins in his work on active parenting (Wilkins, 2009:237) and keying into Thody's third discursive understanding:

However concerns around the lack of power, rendering Advisory Groups on a continuum somewhere between understandings one and three on Figure 1, appeared to challenge normative understandings of the word 'governor', and imply that clarification of the value of advisory groups may need to be made more explicit in order to attract new members, as one governor articulated:

"That's part of the problem we've had with recruiting new parent reps to the ALG that they don't really understand fully what the ALG is there to do "(FB5)

What implications do these elements have for the effective governing of school federations?

Changing understandings and to some degree tensions around the term 'governor' and the bifurcation of actual and perceived roles between the executive governing body and the advisory committee 'governor' reveal the shifting notions of what it means to be a school governor within a federation context. As the data reveal, this has implications for the ways in which governors are recruited, as well as highlighting differing implications around roles within the advisory committees compared with those within the executive governing body. Thody's three discursive perceptions of governor roles proved useful in differentiating skills based understandings from those relating to community representation and indicated the ways in which the governor responsibilities appeared to be split between community representation and skills based management according to whether members were involved in the executive committee or local school advisory bodies. The study revealed a certain degree of confusion in relation to these roles, particularly at the governor recruitment stage.

The data also revealed questions around not only the function and terms of reference of the advisory body, highlighting the need for not only a clarification of this role in order to recruit and retain governors, but also a re-evaluation of the value of the role; one which appeared to be taking on a perceptually secondary status compared to executive board functions; a concerning factor particularly if advisory bodies are to be thought of as a prime element in community engagement.

But although this federation is fairly new there are already indications that the lack of decision making powers for local groups are opening up discursive constructions of governance that lie outside of the traditional; this is particularly evident in the opportunity that parent governors now have to meet with school leaders free from the need to spend meeting time on discussions around finance and other matters that now fall under the executive function. Whilst there is a danger that local groups may well be marginalised in terms of the wider decisions that affect teaching and learning, there also appears to be a greater opportunity for parents to exert power through their chair (who will normally be a member of the executive), whilst also developing strong democratic representative governor identities that work in favour of both local community and ethnic interest groups.

In terms of the second theme arising from the data :preparation and succession planning; the study revealed the potential of this model of governance for succession planning, governor skills development and the value of knowledge gained through participation in advisory groups. As federations grow larger and more geographically dispersed, and it becomes increasingly important for executive boards to appreciate particular cultural contexts of the schools within their federation, and the idea of developing executive board members who have an understanding of both local and wider federation level concerns, represents an important step forward in an area which has exercised governing bodies for some time (Brehony, 1994). In terms of the responsibilities of governors, their accountability efficacy in the governance and governing of education this is an important finding.

At a time of great change in the educational structures and governing of education in England this research reveals important insights into the ways in which federation governor identities, practices and perceptions are evolving. It also illuminates some of the underlying motivations and reasons why governors, despite the challenges and time commitment, still wish to do this work. Finally in an era of increasing

regulatory control and governor responsibilities, the study highlights that whilst skills and training are important, it is equally as important to research why these individuals volunteer and what motivates them to continue in these challenging roles, John Carver articulates:

“Members of volunteer boards interrupt their personal and occupational lives to support something in which they believe; they arrive at the table with dreams, they have vision and values. In many cases their fervently held beliefs and sincere desire to make a difference impel them to board membership in the first place. (Carver, 2006:xiii).”

Comment [J3]: Revised in light of reviewer comment 4.

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